

The Demolition of U.S. Global Power

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The superhighway to disaster is already being paved.

From Donald Trump's first days in office, news of the damage to America's international stature has come hard and fast. As if guided by some malign design, the new president seemed to identify the key pillars that have supported U.S. global power for the past 70 years and set out to topple each of them in turn. By degrading NATO, alienating Asian allies, cancelling trade treaties, and slashing critical scientific research, the Trump White House is already in the process of demolishing the delicately balanced architecture that has sustained Washington's world leadership since the end of World War II. However unwittingly, Trump is ensuring the accelerated collapse of American global hegemony.

Stunned by his succession of foreign policy blunders, commentators -- left and right, domestic and foreign -- have raised their voices in a veritable chorus of criticism. A Los Angeles Times editorial typically called him "so unpredictable, so reckless, so petulant, so full of blind self-regard, so untethered to reality" that he threatened to "weaken this country's moral standing in the world" and "imperil the planet" through his "appalling" policy choices. "He's a sucker who's shrinking U.S. influence in [Asia] and helping make China great again," wrote New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman after surveying the damage to the country's Asian alliances from the president's "decision to tear up the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade deal in his first week in office."

The international press has been no less harsh. Reeling from Trump's denunciation of South Korea's free-trade agreement as "horrible" and his bizarre claim that the country had once been "a part of China," Seoul's leading newspaper, Chosun Ilbo, expressed the "shock, betrayal, and anger many South Koreans have felt." Assessing his first 100 days in office, Britain's venerable Observer commented: "Trump's crudely intimidatory, violent, know-nothing approach to sensitive international issues has encircled the globe from Moscow to the Middle East to Beijing, plunging foes and allies alike into a dark vortex of expanding strategic instability."

For an American president to virtually walk out of his grand inaugural celebrations into such a hailstorm of criticism is beyond extraordinary. Having more or less exhausted their lexicon of condemnatory rhetoric, the usual crew of commentators is now struggling to understand how an American president could be quite so willfully self-destructive.

Britain's Suez Crisis

Blitzed by an incessant stream of bizarre tweets and White House conspiracy theories, observers worldwide seem to have concluded that Donald Trump is a president like no other, that the situation he's creating is without parallel, and that his foreign policy is already a disaster without precedent. After rummaging around in history's capacious closet for some old suit that might fit him, analysts have failed to find any antecedent or analogue to adequately explain him.

Yet just 60 years ago, a crisis in the ever-volatile Middle East overseen by a bumbling, mistake-prone British leader helped create a great power debacle that offers insight into the Trumpian moment, a

glimpse into possible futures, and a sense of the kind of decline that could lie in the imperial future of the United States.

In the early 1950s, Britain's international position had many parallels with America's today. After a difficult postwar recovery from the devastation of World War II, that country was enjoying robust employment, lucrative international investments, and the prestige of the pound sterling's stature as the world's reserve currency. Thanks to a careful withdrawal from its far-flung, global empire and its close alliance with Washington, London still enjoyed a sense of international influence exceptional for a small island nation of just 50 million people. On balance, Britain seemed poised for many more years of world leadership with all the accompanying economic rewards and perks.

Then came the Suez crisis. After a decade of giving up one colony after another, the accumulated stress of imperial retreat pushed British conservatives into a disastrous military intervention to reclaim Egypt's Suez Canal. This, in turn, caused a "deep moral crisis in London" and what one British diplomat would term the "dying convulsion of British imperialism." In a clear instance of what historians call "micro-militarism" -- that is, a bold military strike designed to recover fading imperial influence -- Britain joined France and Israel in a misbegotten military invasion of Egypt that transformed slow imperial retreat into a precipitous collapse.

Just as the Panama Canal had once been a shining example for Americans of their nation's global prowess, so British conservatives treasured the Suez Canal as a vital lifeline that tied their small island to its sprawling empire in Asia and Africa. A few years after the canal's grand opening in 1869, London did the deal of the century, scooping up Egypt's shares in it for a bargain basement price of £4 million. Then, in 1882, Britain consolidated its control over the canal through a military occupation of Egypt, reducing that ancient land to little more than an informal colony.

As late as 1950, in fact, Britain still maintained 80,000 soldiers and a string of military bases astride the canal. The bulk of its oil and gasoline, produced at the enormous Abadan refinery in the Persian Gulf, transited through Suez, fueling its navy, its domestic transportation system, and much of its industry.

After British troops completed a negotiated withdrawal from Suez in 1955, the charismatic nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser asserted Egypt's neutrality in the Cold War by purchasing Soviet bloc arms, raising eyebrows in Washington. In July 1956, after the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower had in response reneged on its promise to finance construction of the Aswan High Dam on the Upper Nile, Nasser sought alternative financing for this critical infrastructure by nationalizing the Suez Canal. In doing so, he electrified the Arab world and elevated himself to the top rank of world leaders.

Although British ships still passed freely through the canal and Washington insisted on a diplomatic resolution of the conflict, Britain's conservative leadership reacted with irrational outrage. Behind a smokescreen of sham diplomacy designed to deceive Washington, their closest ally, the British foreign secretary met secretly with the prime ministers of France and Israel near Paris to work out an elaborately deceptive two-stage invasion of Egypt by 250,000 allied troops, backed by 500 aircraft and 130 warships. Its aim, of course, was to secure the canal.

On October 29, 1956, the Israeli army led by the dashing General Moshe Dayan swept across the Sinai Peninsula, destroying Egyptian tanks and bringing his troops to within 10 miles of the canal. Using this fighting as a pretext for an intervention to restore peace, Anglo-French amphibious and airborne forces quickly joined the attack, backed by a devastating bombardment from six aircraft carriers that destroyed the Egyptian air force, including over a hundred of its new MiG jet fighters.

As Egypt's military collapsed with some 3,000 of its troops killed and 30,000 captured, Nasser deployed a defense brilliant in its simplicity by scuttling dozens of rusting cargo ships filled with rocks and concrete at the entrance to the Suez Canal. In this way, he closed Europe's oil lifeline to the Persian Gulf.

Simultaneously, U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, backed by Washington, imposed a cease-fire after just nine days of war, stopping the Anglo-French attack far short of capturing the entire canal. President Eisenhower's blunt refusal to back his allies with either oil or money and the threat of condemnation before the U.N. soon forced Britain into a humiliating withdrawal. With its finances collapsing from the invasion's soaring costs, the British government could not maintain the pound's official exchange rate, degrading its stature as a global reserve currency.

The author of this extraordinary debacle was Sir Anthony Eden, a problematic prime minister whose career offers some striking parallels with Donald Trump's. Born into privilege as the son of a landholder, Eden enjoyed a good education at a private school and an elite university. After inheriting a substantial fortune from his father, he entered politics as a conservative, using his political connections to dabble in finance. Chafing under Winston Churchill's postwar leadership of the Conservative Party, Eden, who styled himself a rebel against hidebound institutions, used incessant infighting and his handsome head of hair to push the great man aside and become prime minister in 1955.

When Nasser nationalized the canal, Eden erupted with egotism, bluster, and outrage. "What's all this nonsense about isolating Nasser," Eden berated his foreign affairs minister. "I want him destroyed, can't you understand? I want him murdered, and if you and the Foreign Office don't agree, then you'd better come to the cabinet and explain why." Convinced that Britain was still the globe's great power, Eden rejected sound advice that he consult fully with Washington, the country's closest ally. As his bold intervention plunged toward diplomatic disaster, the prime minister became focused on manipulating the British media, in the process confusing favorable domestic coverage with international support.

When Washington demanded a ceasefire as the price of a billion-dollar bailout for a British economy unable to sustain such a costly war, Eden's bluster quickly crumbled and he denied his troops a certain victory, arousing a storm of protest in Parliament. Humiliated by the forced withdrawal, Eden compensated psychologically by ordering MI-6, Britain's equivalent of the CIA, to launch its second ill-fated assassination attempt on Nasser. Since its chief local agent was actually a double-agent loyal to Nasser, Egyptian security had, however, already rounded up the British operatives and the weapons delivered for the contract killers proved duds.

Confronted with a barrage of angry questions in Parliament about his collusion with the Israelis, Eden lied repeatedly, swearing that there was no "foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt." Protesters denounced him as "too stupid to be a prime minister," opposition members of parliament laughed openly when he appeared before Parliament, and his own foreign affairs minister damned him as "an enraged elephant charging senselessly at... imaginary enemies."

Just weeks after the last British soldier left Egypt, Eden, discredited and disgraced, was forced to resign after only 21 months in office. Led into this unimaginably misbegotten operation by his delusions of omnipotence, he left the once-mighty British lion a toothless circus animal that would henceforth roll over whenever Washington cracked the whip.

Trump's Demolition Job

Despite the obvious differences in their economic circumstances, there remain some telling resonances between Britain's postwar politics and America's troubles today. Both of these fading global hegemonies suffered a slow erosion of economic power in a fast-changing world, producing severe social tensions and stunted political leaders. Britain's Conservative Party leadership had declined from the skilled diplomacy of Disraeli, Salisbury, and Churchill to Eden's bluster and blunder. Similarly, the Republican Party has descended from the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and George H.W. Bush to a field of 17 primary candidates in 2016 who promised to resolve an infinitely complex crisis in the Middle East through a set of incendiary policies that included making desert sands glow from carpet-bombing and forcing terrorists to capitulate through torture. Confronted with daunting international challenges, the voters of both countries supported appealing but unstable leaders whose delusions of omnipotence inclined them to military misadventures.

Like British citizens of the 1950s, most Americans today do not fully grasp the fragility of their status as "the leader of the free world." Indeed, Washington has been standing astride the globe as a superpower for so long that most of its leaders have almost no understanding of the delicate design of their country's global power built so carefully by two post-World War II presidents.

Under Democratic President Harry Truman, Congress created the key instruments for Washington's emerging national security state and its future global dominion by passing the National Security Act of 1947 that established the Air Force, the CIA, and two new executive agencies, the Defense Department and the National Security Council. To rebuild a devastated, war-torn Europe, Washington launched the Marshall Plan and then turned such thinking into a worldwide aid program through the U.S. Agency for International Development meant to embed American power globally and support pro-American elites across the planet. Under Truman as well, U.S. diplomats forged the NATO alliance (which Washington would dominate until the Trump moment), advanced European unity, and signed a parallel string of mutual-defense treaties with key Asian allies along the Pacific littoral, making Washington the first power in two millennia to control both "axial ends" of the strategic Eurasian continent.

During the 1950s, Republican President Dwight Eisenhower deployed this national security apparatus to secure Washington's global dominion with a nuclear triad (bombers, ballistic missiles, and submarines), a chain of military bases that ringed Eurasia, and a staggering number of highly militarized covert operations to assure the ascent of loyal allies worldwide. Above all, he oversaw the integration of the latest in scientific and technological research into the Pentagon's weapons procurement system through the forging of the famed "military-industrial complex" (against which he would end up warning Americans as he left office in 1961). All this, in turn, fostered an aura of American power so formidable that Washington could re-order significant parts of the world almost at will, enforcing peace, setting the international agenda, and toppling governments on four continents.

While it's reasonable to argue that Washington had by then become history's greatest global power, its hegemony, like that of all the world empires that preceded it, remained surprisingly fragile. Skilled leadership was required to maintain the system's balance of diplomacy, military power, economic strength, and technological innovation.

By the time President Trump took his oath of office, negative, long-term trends had already started to limit the influence of any American leader on the world stage. These included a declining share of the global economy, an erosion of U.S. technological primacy, an inability to apply its overwhelming military power in a way that achieved expected policy goals on an ever more recalcitrant planet, and a generation of increasingly independent national leaders, whether in Europe, Asia, or Latin

America.

Apart from such adverse trends, Washington's global power rested on such strategic fundamentals that its leaders might still have managed carefully enough to maintain a reasonable semblance of American hegemony: notably, the NATO alliance and Asian mutual-security treaties at the strategic antipodes of Eurasia, trade treaties that reinforced such alliances, scientific research to sustain its military's technological edge, and leadership on international issues like climate change.

In just five short months, however, the Trump White House has done a remarkable job of demolishing these very pillars of U.S. global power. During his first overseas trip in May 2017, President Trump chastised stone-faced NATO leaders for failure to pay their "fair share" into the military part of the alliance and refused to affirm its core principle of collective defense. Ignoring the pleas of these close allies, he then forfeited America's historic diplomatic leadership by announcing Washington's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord with all the drama of a reality television show. After watching his striking repudiation of Washington's role as world leader, German Chancellor Angela Merkel told voters in her country that "we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans."

Along the strategic Pacific littoral, Trump cancelled the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact on taking office and gratuitously alienated allies by cutting short a courtesy phone call to Australia's prime minister and insulting South Korea to the point where its new president won office, in part, on a platform of "say no" to America. When President Moon Jae-in visited Washington in June, determined to heal the breach between the two countries, he was, as the New York Times reported, blindsided by "the harshness of Mr. Trump's critique of South Korea on trade."

Just days after Trump dismissed Moon's suggestion that the two countries engage in actual diplomatic negotiations with Pyongyang, North Korea successfully test-fired a ballistic missile potentially capable of reaching Alaska or possibly Hawaii with a nuclear warhead (though experts believe Pyongyang may still be years away from effectively fitting such a warhead to the missile). It was an act that made those same negotiations Washington's only viable option -- apart from a second Korean War, which would potentially devastate both the region and the U.S. position as the preeminent international leader.

In other words, after 70 years of global dominion, America's geopolitical command of the axial ends of Eurasia -- the central pillars of its world power -- seems to be crumbling in a matter of months.

Instead of the diplomacy of presidents past, Trump and his advisers, especially his military men, have reacted to his first modest foreign crises as well as the everyday power questions of empire with outbursts akin to Anthony Eden's. Since January, the White House has erupted in sudden displays of raw military power that included a drone blitz of unprecedented intensity in Yemen to destroy what the president called a "network of lawless savages," the bombardment of a Syrian air base with 59 Tomahawk missiles, and the detonation of the world's largest non-nuclear bomb on a terrorist refuge in eastern Afghanistan.

While reveling in the use of such weaponry, Trump, by slashing federal funding for critical scientific research, is already demolishing the foundations for the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower's successors, Republican and Democratic alike, so sedulously maintained for the last half-century. While China is ramping up its scientific research across the board, Trump has proposed what the American Association for Advancement of Science called "deep cuts to numerous research agencies" that will mean the eventual loss of the country's technological edge. In the emerging field of artificial intelligence that will soon drive space warfare and cyber-warfare, the White House wants

to reduce the 2018 budget for this critical research at the National Science Foundation to a paltry \$175 million, even as Beijing is launching “a new multi-billion-dollar initiative” linked to building “military robots.”

A Future Debacle in the Greater Middle East

With a president who shares Sir Anthony Eden’s penchant for bravura, self-delusion, and impulsiveness, the U.S. seems primed for a twenty-first-century Suez of its own, a debacle in the Greater Middle East (or possibly elsewhere). From the disastrous expedition that ancient Athens sent to Sicily in 413 BCE to Britain’s invasion of Suez in 1956, embattled empires throughout the ages have often suffered an arrogance that drives them to plunge ever deeper into military misadventures until defeat becomes debacle, a misuse of armed force known technically among historians as micro-militarism. With the hubris that has marked empires over the millennia, the Trump administration is, for instance, now committed to extending indefinitely Washington’s failing war of pacification in Afghanistan with a new mini-surge of U.S. troops (and air power) in that classic “graveyard of empires.”

So irrational, so unpredictable is such micro-militarism that even the most fanciful of scenarios can be outpaced by actual events, as was true at Suez. With the U.S. military stretched thin from North Africa to South Korea, with no lasting successes in its post-9/11 wars, and with tensions rising from the Persian Gulf and Syria to the South China Sea and the Koreas, the possibilities for a disastrous military crisis abroad seem almost unending. So let me pick just one possible scenario for a future Trumpian military misadventure in the Greater Middle East. (I’m sure you’ll think of other candidates immediately.)

It’s the late spring of 2020, the start of the traditional Afghan fighting season, and a U.S. garrison in the city of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan is unexpectedly overrun by an ad hoc alliance of Taliban and Islamic State guerrillas. While U.S. aircraft are grounded in a blinding sand storm, the militants summarily execute their American captives, filming the gruesome event for immediate upload on the Internet. Speaking to an international television audience, President Trump thunders against “disgusting Muslim murderers” and swears he will “make the desert sands run red with their blood.” In fulfillment of that promise, an angry American theater commander sends B-1 bombers and F-35 fighters to demolish whole neighborhoods of Kandahar believed to be under Taliban control. In an aerial coup de grâce, AC-130-U “Spooky” gunships then rake the rubble with devastating cannon fire. The civilian casualties are beyond counting.

Soon, mullahs are preaching jihad from mosques across Afghanistan and far beyond. Afghan Army units, long trained by American forces to turn the tide of the war, begin to desert en masse. In isolated posts across the country, clusters of Afghan soldiers open fire on their American advisers in what are termed “insider” or “green-on-blue” attacks. Meanwhile, Taliban fighters launch a series of assaults on scattered U.S. garrisons elsewhere in the country, suddenly sending American casualties soaring. In scenes reminiscent of Saigon in 1975, U.S. helicopters rescue American soldiers and civilians from rooftops not just in Kandahar, but in several other provincial capitals and even Kabul.

Meanwhile, angry over the massive civilian casualties in Afghanistan, the anti-Muslim diatribes tweeted almost daily from the Oval Office, and years of depressed energy prices, OPEC’s leaders impose a harsh new oil embargo aimed at the United States and its allies. With refineries running dry in Europe and Asia, the world economy trembling at the brink of recession, and gas prices soaring, Washington flails about for a solution. The first call is to NATO, but the alliance is near collapse after four years of President Trump’s erratic behavior. Even the British, alienated by his inattention to their concerns, rebuff his appeals for support.

Facing an uncertain reelection in November 2020, the Trump White House makes its move, sending Marines and Special Operations forces to seize oil ports in the Persian Gulf. Flying from the Fifth Fleet's base in Bahrain, Navy Seals and Army Rangers occupy the Ras Tanura refinery in Saudi Arabia, the ninth largest in the world; Kuwait's main oil port at Shuaiba; and Iraq's at Um Qasr.

Simultaneously, the light carrier USS Iwo Jima steams south at the head of a task force that launches helicopters carrying 6,000 Special Operations forces tasked with seizing the al-Ruwais refinery in Abu Dhabi, the world's fourth largest, and the megaport at Jebel Ali in Dubai, a 20-square-mile complex so massive that the Americans can only occupy its oil facilities. When Teheran vehemently protests the U.S. escalation in the Persian Gulf and hints at retaliation, Defense Secretary James Mattis, reviving a plan from his days as CENTCOM commander, orders preemptive Tomahawk missile strikes on Iran's flagship oil refinery at Abadan.

From its first hours, the operation goes badly wrong. The troops seem lost inside the unmapped mazes of pipes that honeycomb the oil ports. Meanwhile, refinery staff prove stubbornly uncooperative, sensing that the occupation will be short-lived and disastrous. On day three, Iranian Revolutionary Guard commandos, who have been training for this moment since the breakdown of the 2015 nuclear accord with the U.S., storm ashore at the Kuwaiti and Emirate refineries with remote-controlled charges. Unable to use their superior firepower in such a volatile environment, American troops are reduced to firing futile bursts at the departing speed boats as oil storage tanks and gas pipes explode spectacularly.

Three days later, as the USS Gerald Ford approaches an Iranian island, more than 100 speedboats suddenly appear, swarming the carrier in a practiced pattern of high-speed crisscrosses. Every time lethal bursts from the carrier's MK-38 chain guns rip through the lead boats, others emerge from the flames coming closer and closer. Concealed by clouds of smoke, one finally reaches an undefended spot beneath the conning tower near enough for a Revolutionary guardsman to attach a magnetic charge to the hull with a fateful click. There is a deafening roar and a gaping hole erupts at the waterline of the first aircraft carrier to be crippled in battle since World War II. As things go from bad to worse, the Pentagon is finally forced to accept that a debacle is underway and withdraws its capital ships from the Persian Gulf.

As black clouds billow skyward from the Gulf's oil ports and diplomats rise at the U.N. to bitterly denounce American actions, commentators worldwide reach back to the 1956 debacle that marked the end of imperial Britain to brand this "America's Suez." The empire has been trumped.

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