

American Empire -- Almost a Complete Replication of the Fall of Ancient Rome

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How to Build a Wall and Lose an Empire

As 2017 ended with billionaires toasting their tax cuts and energy executives cheering their unfettered access to federal lands as well as [coastal waters](#), there was one sector of the American elite that did not share in the champagne celebration: Washington's corps of foreign policy experts. Across the political spectrum, many of them felt a deep foreboding for the country's global future under the leadership of President Donald Trump.

In a year-end jeremiad, for instance, conservative CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria [blasted](#) the "Trump administration's foolish and self-defeating decision to abdicate the United States' global influence -- something that has taken more than 70 years to build." The great "global story of our times," he continued, is that "the creator, upholder, and enforcer of the existing international system is withdrawing into self-centered isolation," opening a power vacuum that will be filled by illiberal powers like China, Russia, and Turkey.

The editors of the New York Times [remarked ruefully](#) that the president's "boastfulness and belligerence and tendency to self-aggrandizement are not only costing America worldwide support, but also isolating it." Discarding the polite bipartisanship of Washington's top diplomats, Obama's former national security adviser, Susan Rice, [ripped](#) Trump for dumping "principled leadership -- the foundation of American foreign policy since World War II" -- for an "America first" stance that will only "embolden rivals and weaken ourselves."

Yet no matter how sharp or sweeping, such criticism can't begin to take in the full scope of the damage the Trump White House is inflicting on the system of global power Washington built and carefully maintained over those 70 years. Indeed, American leaders have been on top of the world for so long that they no longer remember how they got there. Few among Washington's foreign policy elite seem to fully grasp the complex system that made U.S. global power what it now is, particularly its all-important geopolitical foundations. As Trump travels the globe, tweeting and trashing away, he's inadvertently showing us the essential structure of that power, the same way a devastating wildfire leaves the steel beams of a ruined building standing starkly above the smoking rubble.

The Architecture of American Global Power

The architecture of the world order that Washington built after World War II was not only formidable but, as Trump is teaching us almost daily, surprisingly fragile. At its core, that global system rested upon a delicate duality: an idealistic community of sovereign nations equal under the rule of international law joined tensely, even tenuously, to an American imperium grounded in the realpolitik of its military and economic power. In concrete terms, think of this duality as the State Department versus the Pentagon.

At the end of World War II, the United States invested its prestige in forming an international

community that would promote peace and shared prosperity through permanent institutions, including the United Nations (1945), the International Monetary Fund (1945), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1947), the predecessor to the World Trade Organization. To govern such a world order through the rule of law, Washington also helped establish the International Court of Justice at The Hague and would later promote both human rights and women's rights.

On the realpolitik side of that duality, Washington constructed a [four-tier apparatus](#) -- military, diplomatic, economic, and clandestine -- to grimly advance its own global dominion. At its core was an unmatched military that (thanks to [hundreds of overseas bases](#)) circled the globe, the most formidable nuclear arsenal on the planet, massive air and naval forces, and an unparalleled array of client armies. In addition, to maintain its military superiority, the Pentagon massively promoted scientific research, producing incessant innovation that would lead, among so many other things, to the world's first system of global telecommunications satellites, which effectively added space to its apparatus for exercising global power.

Complementing all this steel was the salve of an active worldwide diplomatic corps, working to promote close bilateral ties with allies like Australia and Britain and multilateral alliances like NATO, SEATO, and the Organization of American States. In the process, it distributed economic aid to nations new and old. Protected by such global hegemony and helped by multilateral trade pacts hammered out in Washington, America's multinational corporations competed profitably in international markets throughout the Cold War.

Adding another dimension to its global power was a [clandestine](#) fourth tier that involved global surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA) and covert operations on five continents by the Central Intelligence Agency. In this way, with remarkable regularity and across vast expanses of the globe, Washington [manipulated elections](#) and promoted coups to insure that whoever led a country on our side of the Iron Curtain would remain part of a reliable set of subordinate elites, friendly to and subservient to the U.S.

In ways that to this day few observers fully appreciate, this massive apparatus of global power also rested on [geopolitical foundations](#) of extraordinary strength. As Oxford historian John Darwin [explained](#) in his sweeping history of Eurasian empires over the past 600 years, Washington achieved its "colossal Imperium... on an unprecedented scale" by becoming the first power in history to control the strategic axial points "at both ends of Eurasia" through its military bases and mutual security pacts.

While Washington defended its European axial point through NATO, its position in the east was secured by four mutual defense pacts running down the Pacific littoral from Japan and South Korea through the Philippines to Australia. All of this was, in turn, tied together by successive arcs of steel that ringed the vast Eurasian continent -- strategic bombers, ballistic missiles, and massive naval fleets in the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Pacific. In the latest addition to this apparatus, the U.S. has built a string of [60 drone bases](#) around the Eurasian landmass from Sicily to Guam.

The Dynamics of Decline

In the decade before Donald Trump entered the Oval Office, there were already signs that this awesome apparatus was on a long-term trajectory of decline, even if the key figures in a Washington shrouded in imperial hubris preferred to ignore that reality. Not only has the new president's maladroit diplomacy accelerated this trend, but it has illuminated it in striking ways.

Over the past half-century, the American share of the global economy has, for instance, [fallen](#) from

40% in 1960 to 22% in 2014 to just 15% in 2017 (as measured by the realistic [index](#) of purchasing power parity). Many experts now [agree](#) that China will surpass the U.S., in absolute terms, as the world's number one economy within a decade.

As its global economic dominance fades, its clandestine instruments of power have been visibly weakening as well. The NSA's worldwide surveillance of a remarkable array of foreign leaders, as well as millions of the inhabitants of their countries, was once a relatively cost-effective instrument for the exercise of global power. Now, thanks in part to Edward Snowden's revelations about the agency's snooping and the anger of targeted allies, the political costs have risen sharply. Similarly, during the Cold War, the CIA manipulated dozens of major elections worldwide. Now, the situation has been reversed with Russia using its sophisticated cyberwarfare capabilities to interfere in the 2016 American presidential campaign -- a clear sign of Washington's waning global power.

Most striking of all, Washington now faces the first sustained challenge to its geopolitical position in Eurasia. By opting to begin constructing a "[new silk road](#)," a trillion-dollar infrastructure of railroads and oil pipelines across that vast continent, and preparing to build naval bases in the Arabian and South China seas, Beijing is mounting a sustained campaign to undercut Washington's long dominance over Eurasia.

Fortress America

During just 12 months in office, Donald Trump has accelerated this decline by damaging almost all the key components in the intricate architecture of American global power.

If all great empires require skilled leadership at their epicenter to maintain what is always a fragile global equilibrium, then the Trump administration has failed spectacularly. As the State Department is [eviscerated](#) and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson discredited, Trump has -- uniquely for an American president -- taken sole control of foreign policy (with the generals he appointed to key civilian posts in tow).

How, then, do those who have been in close contact with him in this period assess his intellectual ability to adapt to such a daunting role?

Although since his election campaign Trump has repeatedly bragged about his excellent education at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School as a qualification for office, he started there in the late 1960s thinking he already knew everything about business, prompting his marketing professor, who taught for more than 30 years, to brand him "the [dumbest](#) goddam student I ever had." That brash unwillingness to learn carried into the presidential campaign. As political consultant Sam Nunberg, sent to tutor the candidate on the Constitution, [reported](#), "I got as far as the Fourth Amendment before... his eyes are rolling back in his head."

As Michael Wolff has recounted in his bestselling new book on the Trump White House, *Fire and Fury*, a few months later, at the close of a phone conversation with the president-elect about the complexities of the H-1B visa program for skilled immigrants, media mogul Rupert Murdoch hung up and [said](#), "What a fucking idiot." And last July, as no one is likely to forget, after a top-secret Pentagon briefing for the White House principals on worldwide military operations, Secretary of State Tillerson seconded that view by privately labeling the president a "[fucking moron](#)."

"It's worse than you can imagine. An idiot surrounded by clowns," one White House aide [wrote](#) in an email, according to Wolff. "Trump won't read anything; not one-page memos, not the brief policy papers; nothing. He gets up half-way through meetings with world leaders because he is bored."

White House Deputy Chief of Staff Katie Walsh [claimed](#) that dealing with the president was “like trying to figure out what a child wants.”

Those qualities of mind are amply evident in the administration’s recent National Security Strategy report, a vacuous document that wavers between the misguided and the delusional. “When I came into office,” Trump (or at least whoever was impersonating him) [writes darkly](#) in a personal preface, “rogue regimes were developing nuclear weapons... to threaten the entire planet. Radical Islamist terror groups were flourishing... Rival powers were aggressively undermining American interests around the globe... Unfair burden-sharing with our allies and inadequate investment in our own defense had invited danger.”

In just 12 short months, however, the president -- so “his” preface indicates -- had singlehandedly saved the country from almost certain destruction. “We are rallying the world against the rogue regime in North Korea and... the dictatorship in Iran, which those determined to pursue a flawed nuclear deal had neglected,” that preface continues in a typically Trumpian celebration of self. “We have renewed our friendships in the Middle East... to help drive out terrorists and extremists... America’s allies are now contributing more to our common defense, strengthening even our strongest alliances... We are making historic investments in the United States military.”

Reflecting his administration’s well-documented difficulties with the truth, almost every one of those statements is either inaccurate, incomplete, or irrelevant. Setting aside such details, the document itself reflects the way the president (and his generals) have abandoned decades of confident leadership of the international community and are now trying to retreat from “an extraordinarily dangerous world” into a veritable Festung America behind concrete walls and tariff barriers -- in some eerie way conceptually reminiscent of the Atlantic Wall of beachfront bunkers Hitler’s Third Reich constructed for its failed Festung Europa (Fortress Europe). But beyond such an obviously myopic foreign policy agenda, there are vast areas, largely overlooked in Trump’s strategy, that remain critical for the overall maintenance of American global power.

All you have to do is note headlines in the daily media over the past year to grasp that Washington’s world dominion is crumbling, thanks to the sorts of cascading setbacks that often accompany imperial decline. Consider the first seven days of December, when the New York Times reported (without connecting the dots) that nation after nation was pulling away from Washington. First, there was Egypt, a country which had received \$70 billion in U.S. aid over the previous 40 years and was now [opening its military bases](#) to Russian jet fighters; then, despite President Obama’s assiduous courtship of the country, Myanmar was evidently moving ever [closer to Beijing](#); meanwhile, Australia, America’s stalwart ally for the last 100 years, was reported to be [adapting its diplomacy](#), however reluctantly, to accommodate China’s increasingly dominant power in Asia; and finally, there was the foreign minister of Germany, that American bastion in Europe since 1945, pointing oh-so-publicly to a widening divide with Washington on key policy issues and insisting that clashes will be inevitable and relations “will never be the same.”

And that’s just to scratch the surface of one week’s news without even touching on the kinds of ruptures with allies regularly being ignited or emphasized by the president’s daily tweets. Just three examples from many will do: President Peña Nieto’s cancelation of a state visit after a tweet that Mexico had to pay for Trump’s prospective “big, fat, beautiful wall” on the border between the two countries; [outrage](#) from British leaders sparked by the president’s retweet of racist anti-Muslim videos posted on a Twitter account by the deputy leader of a neo-Nazi political group in that country, followed by his rebuke of British Prime Minister Theresa May for criticizing him over it; or his New Year’s Day [blast](#) accusing Pakistan of “nothing but lies & deceit” as a prelude to cutting off U.S. aid to that country. Considering all the diplomatic damage, you could say that Trump is tweeting while

Rome burns.

Since there are only 40 to 50 nations with enough wealth to play even a regional, much less a global role on this planet of ours, alienating or losing allies at such a rate could soon leave Washington largely friendless -- something President Trump found out in December when he defied numerous U.N. resolutions by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The White House soon got a 14-1 reprimand from the Security Council, with close allies like the Germans and the French voting against Washington. This came after U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley had ominously warned that "the U.S. will be taking names" to punish countries that dared vote against it and Trump had threatened to cut aid to those that did. The General Assembly promptly voted 128 to 9 (with 35 abstentions), to condemn the recognition -- eloquent testimony to Washington's waning international influence.

Next, let's consider the "historic investments" in a central pillar in the architecture of American global power, the U.S. military, mentioned in Trump's National Security Strategy. Don't be distracted by the proposed whopping 10% increase in the Pentagon budget to fund new aircraft and warships, much of which will go directly into the [pockets of giant defense contractors](#). Focus instead on what once would have been inconceivable in Washington: that the proposed Trump budget would [slash funding](#) for basic research in strategic areas like "artificial intelligence" likely to become critical for automated weapons systems within a decade.

In effect, the president and his team, distracted by visions of shimmering ships and shiny planes (with their predictable staggering future cost overruns), are ready to ditch the basics of global dominion: the relentless scientific research that has long been the cutting edge of U.S. military supremacy. And by expanding the Pentagon while slashing the State Department, Trump is also destabilizing that delicate duality of U.S. power by skewing foreign policy ever more toward costly military solutions (that have proved anything but actual solutions).

Starting on the campaign trail in 2016, Trump has also hammered away at another pillar of American power, attacking the system of global commerce and multilateral trade pacts that have long advantaged the country's transnational corporations. Not only did he cancel the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which promised to direct 40% of world trade away from China and toward the United States, but he's threatened to void the free-trade pact with South Korea and has been so insistent on recrafting NAFTA to serve his "America first" agenda that ongoing negotiations may well fail.

The Crumbling U.S. Geopolitical Position

As serious as all that might be, Trump revealed the deepest damage he was capable of doing to the geopolitical foundations of the country's global power in two key moments on his trips to Europe and Asia last year. In both places, he signaled his willingness to deliver hammer blows to Washington's position at those strategic axial ends of Eurasia.

During a visit to NATO's new headquarters in Brussels in May, he [chastised](#) European allies, whose leaders reportedly listened "stone-faced," for failing to pay their "fair share" of the military costs of the alliance and, while he was at it, refused to reaffirm NATO's core principle of collective defense. Despite later attempts to ameliorate the damage, that sent shudders across Europe and for good reason. It signaled the end of more than three-quarters of a century of unchallenged, unquestioned American supremacy there.

Then, at an Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Vietnam in November, the president launched "a [tirade](#)" against multilateral trade agreements and insisted that he would always "put

America first.” It was as if, in an Asia in which China was rising fast, he were again announcing that Washington’s post-World War II supremacy was an artifact of history. Appropriately enough, at that same meeting, the remaining 11 Trans-Pacific partners, led by Japan and Canada, announced major progress in finalizing the TPP agreement he had so symbolically rejected -- and did so without the United States. “The U.S. has lost its leadership role,” [commented](#) Jayant Menon, an economist at the Asian Development Bank. “And China is quickly replacing it.”

Under Trump, in fact, Washington’s close relations with three key Pacific allies continue to weaken in visible ways. During a courtesy phone call upon taking office, Trump gratuitously [insulted Australia’s prime minister](#), an act that only highlighted that country’s mounting alienation from the U.S. and a growing inclination to shift its primary strategic alliance toward China. In recent polls when asked what country they preferred as a primary ally, 43% of all Australians [chose China](#) -- a once-unimaginable transformation that Trump’s version of diplomacy is only reinforcing.

In the Philippines, the inauguration of President Rodrigo Duterte in June 2016 brought a sudden shift in the country’s foreign policy, ending Manila’s opposition to Beijing’s bases in the South China Sea. Despite an aggressive courtship by Trump and a certain temperamental affinity between the two leaders, Duterte has continued to scale down the joint military maneuvers with the U.S. that were an annual event for his country and has refused to reconsider his decisive tilt toward Beijing. That realignment was already evident in a leaked transcript of an April phone call between the two presidents in which Duterte insisted that the resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue should rest solely with China.

It is, however, on the Korean peninsula that Trump’s limitations as a global leader have been most evident. In two uncoordinated, ill-informed initiatives -- denigrating the Korean War-era U.S. alliance with South Korea and demanding total nuclear disarmament by the North -- Trump fostered a diplomatic dynamic that has allowed Beijing, Pyongyang, and even Seoul to outmaneuver Washington.

During his presidential campaign and first months in office, Trump repeatedly insulted South Korea, demeaning its culture and demanding a billion dollars for installing an American missile defense system. No one should then have been surprised when Moon Jae-in won that country’s presidency last year on a “say no” to America platform and on promises to reopen direct negotiations with the North Korea of Kim Jong-un. Then, during a state visit to Washington last June, the new South Korean leader was blindsided when Trump called the free-trade agreement between their two countries “not fair to the American worker” and blasted Moon’s proposal for negotiating with Pyongyang.

Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un oversaw 16 rocket tests in 2017 that left his country with missiles that could potentially deliver a nuclear weapon to Honolulu, Seattle, or even by year’s end New York and Washington, while testing its first hydrogen bomb. Convinced that North Korea “seeks the capability to kill millions of Americans,” Trump became obsessed with curtailing Pyongyang’s nuclear program by any means, even threatening last August to unleash on that country “fire and fury like the world has never seen.”

Within days, however, then-White House strategist Steve Bannon exposed the empty bluster of all of this by telling the press, “There’s no military solution until somebody solves the part of the equation that... ten million people in Seoul don’t die in the first 30 minutes from conventional weapons.” So the threats failed and Trump flailed, repeatedly trash-tweeting Kim Jong-un as “little Rocket Man” and bragging that his own “nuclear button” is “[much bigger](#)” than the North Korean leader’s. These 12 months of bizarre, destabilizing presidential twists and tweets, almost without precedent in the

annals of modern diplomacy, have pushed Seoul toward direct talks with Pyongyang -- excluding Washington and weakening what had been a rock-solid alliance.

In the war of nerves with North Korea over its missile tests, Trump's strategy of triangulation with China (that is, Washington nudges Beijing, Beijing shoves Pyongyang) has already inflicted a major, unrecognized defeat on American power in the Pacific. For the last six months, to encourage Beijing to pressure Pyongyang, the White House has suspended the "freedom of navigation" patrols that challenge Beijing's spurious claims to territorial control over the South China Sea, effectively conceding this strategic waterway to China.

In a deft bit of dissimulation, Beijing has made a show of cooperation with Washington by expressing "grave concerns" over Pyongyang's missile tests and imposing nominal sanctions, while playing a longer, smarter strategic hand. In the process, it has been working to curtail joint American-South Korean military maneuvers and neutralize the U.S. Navy in what China considers its home waters.

In this diplomatic edition of *The Art of the Deal*, Beijing is trumping Washington.

Taking Down the Empire

Quite understandably, many Americans have focused on the damage Trump's first months in office have done domestically, from [opening](#) pristine wilderness areas and offshore waters to oil and natural gas drilling to threatening access to medical care, skewing the progressive tax code to favor the rich, cancelling net neutrality, and voiding environmental protections of every sort. Most if not all of these regressive policies can, however, be repaired or reversed if the Democrats ever take control of Congress and the White House.

Trump's strikingly inept version of one-man diplomacy in the context of America's ongoing global decline is an altogether different matter. World leadership lost is never readily recovered, particularly when rival powers are prepared to fill the void. As Trump undercuts the U.S. strategic position at the axial ends of Eurasia, China is pressing relentlessly to displace the United States and dominate that vast continent with what New York Times correspondent Edward Wong [calls](#) "a blunt counterpoint... synonymous with brute strength, bribery and browbeating."

In just one extraordinary year, Trump has destabilized the delicate duality that has long been the foundation for U.S. foreign policy: favoring war over diplomacy, the Pentagon over the State Department, and narrow national interest over international leadership. But in a globalizing world interconnected by trade, the Internet, and the rapid proliferation of nuclear-armed missiles, walls won't work. There can be no Fortress America.

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