

The Great Unraveling: The crisis of the post-war geopolitical order

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Less than a week after US President Donald Trump returned to the United States from his overseas tour of the Middle East and Europe, it is clear that a shift in world politics with vast implications is underway. Global relationships and institutions that for decades set the framework for international economy and public life are rapidly unraveling.

The rising threat of trade war and the resurgence of the military ambitions of all the imperialist powers are signs of the advanced state of collapse of the international institutions created after the United States emerged from World War II as the dominant imperialist power.

This collapse is the product of processes that have matured over decades. In 1991, when the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union deprived the NATO alliance of a common enemy, tensions between the imperialist powers were already surging. As US strategists declared a “unipolar moment,” in which the disappearance of the Soviet Union eliminated any immediate military rival, they aimed to use this military advantage to counterbalance the declining economic position of the United States.

A 1992 Pentagon strategy paper asserted that Washington had to convince “potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture,” and to “discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order.”

A quarter century later, this policy has failed. It led to a series of imperialist wars and interventions by the NATO powers, led by the United States, that shattered Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and other countries. While costing millions of lives, destroying entire societies, and creating the greatest refugee crisis since World War II, these acts of militarism have produced debacles and failed to reverse US imperialism’s fortunes. Now, a new stage of the crisis has been reached: The United States’ imperialist rivals are preparing direct, far-reaching challenges to US imperialism’s global primacy.

Trump’s attempts at the G7 and NATO summits to secure better economic terms for the United States from Europe have backfired. He had blamed the Europeans for “not paying what they should be paying” for military spending in the NATO alliance, and denounced Germany as “terrible,” adding, “We

will stop” German car exports to the US. Europe’s response was not sympathy and financial aid, however, but a series of actions indicating that the continental European powers are preparing for a political and military break with America.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, speaking at a Munich beer tent rally Sunday, referred to both Trump’s performance at the summits and Britain’s vote to exit the European Union (EU): “The times when we could fully rely on others are to some extent over—I experienced that in the last few days. We Europeans must really take our destiny into our own hands.” Going forward, she added, “we have to fight for our own future ourselves.”

Events in Europe over the past week confirmed that Merkel’s statement reflected a deep crisis in the NATO military alliance founded in 1949 between America and Europe. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel declared that under Trump, Washington had cast itself outside the “Western community of values.” He added that this signaled “a shift in global power relations.”

Then newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron, a close ally of Berlin, invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to a high-profile summit at Versailles. Standing next to Putin in a joint press conference, Macron criticized all the main US-EU foreign interventions in recent years. He called for an end to the conflict in Ukraine provoked by the 2014 US- and German-backed coup in Kiev, called for closer economic and intelligence cooperation with Russia and even floated the possibility of re-opening France’s embassy in Damascus, Syria.

Also this week, a new EU military headquarters in Brussels went into operation. Britain, which had blocked it in line with US fears that the EU would become a rival to NATO, could no longer veto it due to its exit from the EU.

Among US foreign policy strategists, it is widely acknowledged that these events mark a historic setback for Washington. “Every American administration since 1945 has tried to work closely with Germany and NATO,” Jacob Heilbrunn wrote in *The National Interest*, but America under Trump is “pushing Merkel to create a German superpower.”

Heilbrunn added, “Now that France has elected Emanuel Macron president, Merkel is moving to fashion a Franco-German axis that will pursue a common economic and military

path. This will signal a significant diminution in American prestige and influence abroad. Imagine, for example, that Merkel decided to defy Trump's push for sanctions and isolating Iran by establishing trade ties with North Korea, including selling it weapons."

These tensions are not simply the product of the extreme nationalist policies of the current occupant of the White House, however. Indeed, as the Democratic Party relentlessly demonizes Russia and accuses it of subverting American democracy, it is ever clearer that a victory of Hillary Clinton in last year's US presidential election would not have resolved the conflicts with Europe. Rather, the tensions are rooted in deep contradictions between the interests of the major imperialist powers, which twice in the last century led to world war.

This is underscored by the escalating rivalries between the imperialist powers in Asia. Last month, as China inaugurated its so-called Belt and Road Initiative—designed to build a web of energy and transport infrastructure integrating China, the Middle East, and Europe—Washington was reduced to a role on the sidelines, as China and the EU developed their ties. The response of Japan and India, Washington's allies in its "pivot to Asia" aimed at isolating China, is not, however, fundamentally friendlier to US imperialist interests than that of the EU powers.

Last week, Tokyo and New Delhi released a "vision document" for an "Asia Africa Growth Corridor," aiming to present an alternative to China's Belt and Road that would develop India as a production-chain hub and military counterweight to China. The goal of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his supporters in the ultra-nationalist Nippon Kaigi organization is not only to outstrip China, but also to rearm Japan and supplant America as Asia's dominant power.

Abe, whose government is pushing aggressively for the elimination of the constitutional ban on Japanese overseas wars imposed after its defeat in World War II, has repeatedly declared that an Indo-Japanese alliance has "the most potential" of any "in the world."

The events surrounding Trump's trip to Europe reflect a crisis not only of American imperialism, but of the entire world capitalist system. None of Washington's rivals—neither the EU, despised at home for its austerity policies, nor the economically moribund, right-wing regime in Japan, nor the post-Maoist capitalist oligarchy in China—offer a progressive alternative.

Anyone who asserted that a coalition of these powers will emerge to stabilize world capitalism, and block the emergence of large-scale trade war and military conflict, would be placing heavy bets against history. As Trump demands trade war against Germany, Berlin and Tokyo re-militarize their foreign policy, and a new French president comes to power who supports restoring the draft, everything indicates that the ruling elites are tobogganing eyes closed towards a new global conflagration on the same—or an even greater—scale as the world wars of the last century.

The force that will emerge as the alternative to the collapse of bourgeois politics is the international working class. It is being driven into action by intolerable conditions of life, mass unemployment, and social misery after decades of austerity and war. And as corporations like Amazon and Apple, with vast workforces spread over dozens of countries, predominate in a globalized world economy, the working class is increasingly conscious of its character as an international class, whose interests are fundamentally separate and opposed to those of the financial aristocracies that rule in every country.

The collapse of international capitalist relations goes hand in hand with the discrediting of the various social democratic and liberal parties and trade union bureaucracies that emerged to contain the class struggle in the post-World War II era. The surprise vote for Brexit, the election of Trump and the disintegration of France's two-party system in the recent presidential election testify to the collapse of the old ruling establishments. A global eruption of the class struggle is being prepared.

The crisis that has emerged has vindicated the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) insistence that the Stalinists' dissolution of the Soviet Union did not signify the end of the struggle of the international working class for socialism. Capitalism had not overcome the fundamental conflicts identified by the great Marxists of the 20th century—the contradictions between global economy and the nation-state system, and between socialized economic production and the private appropriation of profit—that led to war and to social revolution.

The way forward for the working class is revolutionary struggle on an internationalist and socialist program in the tradition of the October Revolution a century ago. Workers cannot support the militarist policies of any of the contending imperialist powers. The necessary response to the deepening crisis of global capitalism is the unification of the working class in struggle against imperialism through the building of a world socialist anti-war movement.



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