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GEOPOLITICS OF CONFUSION HOW LONG CAN THIS LAST?



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ENDING AMERICA'S WAR OF CHOICE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Jeffrey Sachs

THE UNITED STATES of America has long viewed itself as an exceptional nation, even as God's New Israel, sent to redeem the world. This view has bipartisan support, with deep roots in the country's history, culture, and religious traditions. Recent paeans to American exceptionalism include Ronald Reagan's description of America as "the shining city on the hill," and Madeleine Albright's as the "indispensable nation." Reagan was harking back to Puritan leader John Winthrop, who quoted Jesus (Matthew 5:14) in declaring the colonial settlements as "a city upon the hill," with the world's eyes upon it. American exceptionalism has been called the nation's civic religion.

One part of American exceptionalism is relentless war, causing historian Harry S. Stout to declare that "the norm of American national life is war." He

counts more than 280 "military interventions and nuclear standoffs on every corner of the globe," plus 29 wars with the country's indigenous peoples.

Another related part of the tradition of exceptionalism has been to find divine purpose in war—to put, as Stout said, "America's faith in the institution of war as a divine instrument and sacred mandate to be exercised around the world."

American imperialism has always existed hand-in-hand with American exceptionalism. Since the idea of manifest destiny took hold in the nineteenth century, the United States has looked to expand its presence and influence not just from shore to shore across North America, but to nations around the world. By viewing America as an empire—and by "empire"

Jeffrey D. Sachs is University Professor and Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, as well as Director of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. You may follow him on Twitter @JeffDSachs.



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Can the mission ever be accomplished?

I mean a state that uses force to impose its direct or indirect rule over another country—we understand that America's current conflicts in the Middle East are not wars of necessity, but imperial wars of choice.

IMPERIALISM'S LATECOMER

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the American empire is that it was a latecomer to imperial rule. While the European powers, especially Britain and France, were building their far-flung overseas empires in the nineteenth century, the United States was still engaged in its genocidal wars against Native Americans and its Civil

War. America's overseas empire building began almost like clockwork in the 1890s, once the United States finally stretched from coast to coast, thereby "closing the frontier" in North America. The next step for America was overseas.

As a latecomer empire, the United States repeatedly found itself taking up the imperial mantle from a former European imperial power. President William McKinley took America to war against Spain in 1898, grabbing Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines. It did so in the name of supporting local freedom fighters against the Spanish Empire, only to betray those freedom

fighters immediately by installing American-backed regimes (in Cuba) or direct rule (in Puerto Rico and the Philippines). McKinley annexed Hawaii that same year, against the wishes of most native Hawaiians.

From 1898 until the end of World War II, America had few prospects for expanding its imperial reach, since the British and French empires were still expanding, most notably after World War I into the Middle East. But World War II bled Europe dry. Though Britain was a victor of the

war, and France was liberated, neither country had the economic, financial, military, or political wherewithal to retain their overseas empires, especially since freedom movements in their colonies were engaged in terrorism and guerilla warfare to gain independence. Britain and France peacefully granted independence to some of their colonies, but in other cases fought bloody wars against independence movements (as the French did in Algeria and Vietnam), yet almost always lost in the end.

THE INDIRECT APPROACH

After World War II, the United States asserted global leadership, including through indirect rule.

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Empires are most visible when they rule directly through conquest and annexation, such as in the American conquests of Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet empires also rule indirectly,

when they use force, covert or overt, to depose a government they deem hostile and replace it with a government of their design, and that they intend to be under their control. Indirect rule—and regime change especially—has been the more typical American approach. There are dozens of cases in which the CIA or American

military has overthrown governments in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, with the aim of imposing indirect rule.

America's postwar empire-building coincided with the onset of the Cold War. More often than not, America justified its overseas wars and CIA-led coups as necessary to defend itself and its allies against the Soviet Union. American leaders shunned the language of empire and direct rule. Yet the simple fact is that the United States very often had its own narrow interests at heart: oil wealth in the Middle East (such as Iran, 1953); valuable farmlands and industry in Latin America (such as Guatemala,

1954); and American military bases across the world.

Columbia University Historian John Coatsworth has carefully documented an astounding 41 occasions of United States-led regime change in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1898 and 2004, a pattern that was later extended to Africa, Europe, Southeast Asia, and, more recently, the Middle East. The episodes on Coatsworth's list are violent, extra-constitutional overthrows of Latin American governments

by the United States through a variety of means, including wars, coups, assassinations, electoral manipulation, acts of provocation, manufactured protests, and mass unrest.

The United States often talked itself into fighting the earlier imperial wars of others. Vietnam is the most notorious case in point. Following World War II, Vietnamese nationalists under Ho Chi Minh battled French imperial rule to establish an independent Vietnam. When the Vietnamese defeated the French in a key battle in 1954, and France decided to withdraw, the United States stepped in to fight against the Vietnamese independence fighters—a costly and bloody war that lasted until the American withdrawal of 1975. By that point,

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more than one million Vietnamese had died at American hands and more than 50,000 American soldiers had lost their lives for no reason. The United States' war-making also spread disastrously to neighboring Laos and Cambodia.

In the Middle East, the United States also took up the preceding wars of imperial Britain and France. America's

motives were essentially the same: to secure Mideast oil and to project military power in Western Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean. In

1953, the CIA teamed up with Britain's MI6 to overthrow the elected government of Iran in order to secure Iran's oil for the UK and United States (another instance of indirect rule). Yet this was Britain's last imperial hurrah in the region, since the United States took the lead from that point onward. With an imperial nostalgia, however, the British and French have often been keen to fight alongside the United States, most notably in Libya in 2011, and recently in Syria.

While there are select examples of war ushering in peace—America's shining nobility in World War II and its positive, though flawed, role in the Korean War—we should not let this obscure the more typical disastrous consequences of America's many wars

of choice, when the United States went to war for terrible reasons and ended up causing havoc at home and abroad.

Until the recent wars in the Middle East, the most costly and deadly blunder was President Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1964, carried out by Johnson mainly to protect himself against right-wing charges that he was "weak on communism."

Empires trapped in regional wars can choose to fight on or, more wisely, to acknowledge that the imperial adventure is both futile and self-destructive. British King George III was wise to give up in 1781: fighting the Americans was not worth the effort, even if it was possible militarily. The United States was wise to finally give up the war in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in 1975. America's decision to cut its losses saved not only Southeast Asia, but the United States as well.

The United States was similarly wise to curtail its CIA-led coups throughout Latin America after the disastrous "Contra wars" of the mid-1980s. America's withdrawal from Latin America served as a prelude to inter-state peace in the region, though

grimly violent gang warfare linked to transnational drug-trafficking aimed at the American market still roils in many Latin American countries.

IMPERIAL VISION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the Arab oil boycott of the early 1970s and the oil supply disruptions after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the United States has ensnared

itself in a perpetual, indeed expanding Middle East war. The 1980 Carter Doctrine declared that the United States would defend its vital interests in the Gulf by force if necessary.

To examine the political histories of Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and

Israel-Palestine after 1950, and especially after 1980, is to observe the United States engaged in the intrigues, wars, CIA-led coups, and military overthrows that had previously been the handiwork of Britain and France during earlier decades. The CIA has toppled governments in the Middle East on countless occasions, and it has been trying to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria since 2011.

President Jimmy Carter sent the CIA into Afghanistan in 1979 in order to en-

tice the Soviet Union into a violent conflict in Afghanistan, one that eventually bled the Soviet Union of morale, lives, and finances. Yet the CIA-led operations in Afghanistan proved to be the origin of long-lasting violent jihadism throughout the Middle East. George W. Bush again took America to war in Afghanistan against the Taliban-led government in 2001, and then against Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003, following a remarkably naïve neoconservative game plan to rid the greater Middle East of all regimes hostile to American interests. The American imperial vision for the Middle East has proved to be a fantasy, and the American-led violence came to naught—worse than naught—in terms of U.S. interests.

The imperial vision became especially reckless at the end of the Cold War, when American neoconservatives judged that America had become the sole superpower in a unipolar world. Since 1992, the United States has fought several devastating wars—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere—without achieving the political outcomes sought by the United States.

The link of these wars to the end of the Cold War is not incidental. Former NATO Commander Wesley Clark has spelled out the linkage in several books and interviews. After the first Gulf War in 1990, General Clark dropped into

the Pentagon to see Paul Wolfowitz, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy at the time. Wolfowitz told Clark that "we did learn one thing that's very important" from the Gulf War:

With the end of the Cold War, we can now use our military with impunity. The Soviets won't come in to block us. And we've got five, maybe 10, years to clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes like Iraq and Syria before the next superpower emerges to challenge us. [...] We could have a little more time, but no one really knows.

Here again was the American agenda of exceptionalism, now in the hands of a new generation of hardliners (Wolfowitz, his boss Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and others). America would "clean up" the Middle East through violent regime change. In truth, it was the old imperial playbook, yet in an especially treacherous part of the world and with an extra dimension of hubris and incompetence to boot.

The issue is not whether an imperial army can defeat a local one. It usually can, just as the United States did quickly in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The issue is whether it gains anything by so doing. Following such a "victory," the imperial power faces unending heavy costs in terms of policing, political instability, guerilla war, and terrorist blowback. And there are also countless bloody cases where the United

States and local allies tried and failed to overthrow a government and instead fomented a prolonged war. The ongoing war in Syria is a case in point.

INTERVENTIONS IN SYRIA AND LIBYA

The American covert intervention in Syria in support of a rebellion against Bashar al-Assad was ostensibly carried out on humanitarian grounds, following Assad's violent repression of protests in early 2011. U.S. President Barack Obama signed what is called a "Presidential Finding" in 2012, calling on the CIA to cooperate covertly with Saudi Arabia and others to overthrow the Syrian regime in an operation code-named Timber Sycamore.

Yet we also know from WikiLeaks and other sources that American strategists were looking for a way to topple Assad for years prior to 2011, hoping that economic instability and IMF-backed austerity would do the job. The United States and Saudi Arabia wanted Assad out because of Iran's backing of the regime. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan wanted Assad to go to make room for a Sunni-led government. When the Arab Spring erupted in early 2011, the Obama Administration seized on it as an opportunity to push Assad out the door, by violent conflict if necessary.

When Assad showed his staying power in 2011, Obama ordered the CIA to coordinate efforts with Saudi Arabia and Turkey to defeat the regime through a support for anti-regime fighters on the ground, including jihadist mercenaries backed by Saudi Arabia. In that way, the quick exit of Assad once dreamed of by American strategists turned into a full-blown regional war, with the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and Iran all competing for power through proxy fighters, including many jihadist groups. With backing from Iran and Russia, Assad could not be removed.

The American imperial vision for the Middle East has proved to be a fantasy.

The American-led intervention in Libya in 2011 was also ostensibly for humanitarian purposes: to protect civilian populations against Muammar Gaddafi, according to a UN Security Council resolution. Yet NATO's real purpose went far beyond protecting civilians, for it aimed at nothing less than regime change. And while Gaddafi was eventually toppled and murdered, his removal required a NATO-led war over several months and, as in Syria, with the civilian suffering horrific harms for years afterward.

Whether the United States-led overthrows have succeeded or failed, the long-term consequences have almost always been violence, instability, and the mass suffering of locals.

THE HABITUATION TRAP

The United States is now ensnared in a perpetual, indeed expanding, Middle East war, with drones and air strikes increasingly replacing ground troops. In the past, American ground troops committed atrocities, such as My Lai in Vietnam, that were seared into the national conscience. Now we have drone strikes and bombing runs (as in Syria and Yemen), most of the killings are out of sight and beyond the media's reach. In any event, the American public is now completely accustomed to war. The American destruction of hospitals, wedding parties, or prayer meetings with dozens or hundreds of civilian casualties hardly registers a moment's notice.

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The mainstream media have proved no match for the American security state. It is not even clear if the mainstream media are trying. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have utterly failed to track, investigate, and report on covert American operations throughout the Middle East. They have persistently treated the Syrian War as an internal conflict. Indeed, the prevailing meme is that, for good or ill, Obama decided not to get involved. This, of course, is preposterous. Obama sent in the CIA and actively supported America's local

allies—notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—in anti-Assad operations and an escalation of the violence.

The United States is trapped in the Middle East by its own pseudo-intellectual constructions. During the Vietnam War, the "domino theory" claimed that if America withdrew from Vietnam, communism would sweep Asia. The new domino theory is that if the United States were to stop fighting in the Middle East, Islamic terrorists such as ISIS would soon be at our doorstep.

The truth is almost the opposite. ISIS is a ragtag army of perhaps 30,000 troops in a region in which the large nations—including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey—have standing armies that are vastly larger and better equipped.

I have argued for years that the regional powers could easily drive ISIS out of the territories it held in Syria and Iraq if they chose to do so. Indeed, this proved to be the case in 2017, when both Iraq and Syria re-took ISIS territory. The American military presence in the Middle East is actually the main recruiting tool for ISIS and other terrorist groups: young people stream into Syria and Iraq to fight the imperial enemy.

TERRORISM AS CONSEQUENCE

Terrorism is a frequent consequence of imperial wars and imperial rule. Local populations are unable to defeat the imperial powers, so they instead impose high costs through terror. Consider the terrorism used by Jewish settlers against the British Empire and local Palestinians in their fight for Israel's independence and territory; or Vietnamese terrorism used against the French and United States in Vietnam's long war for independence; or American terrorism, for that matter, that independence fighters used against the British in America's war of independence.

This is, of course, not to condone terrorism. Indeed, my point rather is to condemn imperial rule and imperial pretensions, and to argue instead for diplomatic solutions rather than imperial oppression, or war and the terror that comes in its wake. Imperial rulers—whether the British in pre-independence America; the Americans in Cuba and the Philippines after 1898; the French and Americans in Vietnam; and the United States in the Middle East in recent decades—foment violent reactions that destroy peace, prosperity, good governance, and hope. The real solutions to these

conflicts lie in diplomacy and political justice on the ground.

So, while America's current logic compels it to continue fighting to avoid the spread of terrorism, it would be much more secure by avoiding imperial wars of choice in the first place. If one doubts that they are "of choice," consider that in the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War, the Afghanistan War in 1979, and the recent Mideast wars, the United States attacked the other countries first, not in self-defense, as in World War II.

The sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor in 1898, most likely caused by an onboard explosion in the ship's coal bunkers, became a cause for war when the sinking was attributed to Spain. Lyndon Johnson expanded the war in Vietnam on the pretext that North Vietnam had attacked the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin, but Johnson knew that the claim was false. Nor had Saddam, Assad, or Khadafy attacked the United States. The claim that Gaddafi was about to commit genocide against his people was propaganda. In the case of Iraq, the American pretext was of course Saddam's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction.

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DISASTROUS AND ILLEGAL

Since the birth of the United Nations in 1945, such wars of choice have been against international law. The UN Charter allows for wars of self-defense and military actions agreed upon by the UN Security Council. The UN Security Council may approve military interventions to protect the civilian populations from the crimes of their own government under the doctrine of "Responsibility to Protect." No country can go it alone other than in self-defense.

Many Americans dismiss the UN Security Council on the grounds that Russia will veto every needed action. Yet this is absolutely not the case. Russia and China indeed agreed to a military intervention in Libya in 2011 with the aim of protecting Libya's civilian population. But then NATO used that Security Council resolution as a pretext to actually topple Gaddafi, not merely to protect the civilian population.

Russia and China also recently teamed up with the United States to achieve the nuclear agreement with Iran, to adopt the Paris Climate Agreement, and to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals. Diplomacy is feasible; getting one's way all the time is not.

There is a good reason the wars I am criticizing are illegal: they have been disasters, one after the next. In the Spanish-American war, the United States gained an empire and fertile farmland in Cuba, but also dec-

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ades of political instability there and in the Philippines, eventually resulting in Philippine independence and an anti-American revolution in Cuba. In World War I, the American intervention turned the tide toward the victory of France and the United

Kingdom over Germany and the Ottoman Empire, only to be followed by a disastrous peace settlement, instability in Europe and the Middle East, and the rise of Hitler in the ensuing chaos 15 years later. In Vietnam, the war led to 55,000 Americans dead, one million or more Vietnamese killed, genocide in neighboring Cambodia, destabilization of the American economy, and, eventually, the complete withdrawal of the United States.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the regimes were quickly defeated by American-led forces, but peace and stability proved elusive. All of these countries have been wracked by continuing war, terrorism, and U.S. military engagement. And in Syria, the United States was not even successful

in toppling Assad—this failure led to the entry of ISIS into Syria.

It is not so hard to rev up the American public to fight a war, even a horribly misguided one, if the government claims falsely that the United States is under attack or is acting in the service of some grand humanitarian cause. Yet these have been the pretexts, not the reasons, for the wars of choice.

There is one foreign policy goal that matters above all the others at this stage, and that is to keep the United States out of a new war, whether in Syria, Iran, North Korea, or elsewhere. In 2017 alone, U.S. President Donald Trump struck Syria with Tomahawk missiles, bombed Afghanistan with the most powerful nonnuclear bomb in the American arsenal, and sent an armada toward nuclear-armed North Korea. We could easily find ourselves in a rapidly escalating war, one that could pit the United States directly against nuclear-armed countries like China, North Korea, Russia, or even Pakistan.

Such a war, if it turned nuclear and global, could end the world. Even a nonnuclear war could end democracy in the United States, or the United

States as a unified nation. Who thought the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan would end the Soviet Union itself?

Which of the belligerents at the start of World War I foresaw the catastrophic end of four giant empires—Hohen-

zollern (Germany), Romanov (Russia), Ottoman, and Hapsburg—as a result of the war?

REMEDIAL PROPOSALS

There are actions the United States should undertake to prevent new wars and covert

engagements. As a first step, the CIA should be drastically restructured, to be solely an intelligence agency rather than an unaccountable secret army of the president. When the CIA was created in 1947, it was given the two very different roles of intelligence and covert operations. U.S. President Harry S. Truman was alarmed about this dual role, and time has proved him right.

The CIA has been a vital success when it provides key intelligence, but an unmitigated disaster when it serves as the president's secret army. We need to end the military functions of the CIA, yet Trump has recently expanded the CIA's war-making powers by giving the agency the authority to target drone strikes without Pentagon approval.

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Second, it is vital for the U.S. Congress to reestablish decisionmaking over war and peace. That is its constitutional role, indeed perhaps its most important constitutional role as a bulwark of democratic government. Yet Congress has almost completely abandoned this responsibility.

When Trump brandishes the sword toward North Korea, or drops bombs on Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Congress is mute, neither investigating nor granting nor revoking any legislative authority for such actions. This is Congress's greatest dereliction of duty. Congress needs to wake up before Trump launches an impetuous and potentially calamitous war against nuclear-armed North Korea.

Third, it is essential to break the secrecy over American foreign policymaking. Most urgently at this stage, we need an independent inquest into America's involvement in Syria, in order for the public to understand how we arrived at the current morass. Since Congress is unlikely to undertake this, and since the executive branch would of course never do so, the responsibility lies with civil society, especially academia and other policy experts, to coalesce around an information gathering and reporting function.

Fourth, we need to return urgently to global diplomacy within the UN Security Council. Trump's recent abrogation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran is just the latest American abuse of the UN Security Council. The JCPOA is not a bilateral treaty that Donald Trump can willfully abrogate. It was endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2231, making the JCPOA part of international law backed by the UN Charter.

And finally, the United States must also get out of those conflicts in which it is already involved. This means an immediate end to its fighting across the Middle East and a turn to UN-based diplomacy for real solutions and security. The Turks, Arabs, and Persians have lived together for around 2,500 years, and as organized states for a millennium or more. The United States has meddled unsuccessfully in the region for a mere 65 years. America's unhelpful military interventions have failed badly and are sure to continue failing. It is time to let the locals sort out their own problems, without them being inflamed by external powers, and supported by the good offices of the United Nations, including peacekeeping and peace-building efforts. ●