

The Fifteenth Newsletter (2018): Trump World



The picture above is from Vienna. The wall drawing was done by the artist Tabby. It captures – in essence – the way in which a considerable section of the world’s population sees the US President Donald Trump. But Trump is not solely responsible for what appears to be the irrational policy of the United States. Why, for instance, did Trump set in motion a tariff policy against close US allies such as Canada, Europe and Mexico as well as China on the same day? Why not go after China – which Trump has indicated is an adversary on trade – and then tackle the others in sequence? Why attempt to scuttle the dynamic towards peace in the Korean Peninsula and in Iran at the same time? There seems to be an elementary lack of strategic thinking from the White House.

Such a verdict, however, is limited. It does not see how weakened the United States has become in terms of its ability to set a global agenda and get its subordinate allies to follow along. From 1991, the US drove a set of policies through a raft of institutions. This process should be known as US-led globalisation. Over the past decade, the ability of the United States to drive this agenda has faded. It can bomb a country to smithereens, but it cannot necessarily force the countries of the world to conform to its policy direction. The Koreas and Iran are not going to be isolated because the US says so. Even India will continue to trade with Iran. Other poles have emerged, with other agendas.

At the office of *Newslick* in Delhi, I sat down with Prasanth to talk about some of these issues. You can

watch our twenty-minute discussion [here](#). Recently, in the Washington Post, the historian Anne Applebaum **draws** the same conclusions, but from a different outlook. Applebaum is a liberal. She would like to see the US continue to manage the world order. But that is not possible, she suggests. A multipolar world has arrived. Trump, she says, has ‘accelerated its arrival’. This idea of Trump as an accelerant is an important and useful one. It moves away from the narrow view that this incoherence from the White House is personal. It is rather a reflection of major changes afoot in the international order.

China has offered its own view on the world order, with a new set of institutions and entanglements that include the Belt and Road Project as well as the String of Pearls Project. Chinese-led globalisation is certainly not a frontal challenge to the United States, but it has certainly indicated that the status quo set up after 1991 will not be unchallenged. Russia, on the other hand, is on a different footing. Its assertions in Syria and Ukraine are purely defensive – largely to protect its two warm water ports. It would be an error to see Russia as a genuine ‘threat’ to US power projections.

That the United States cannot so easily move an agenda should not be taken to mean that the United States is no longer a major player in international affairs. The US has the most powerful military in the world. This military has a reach across the entire planet. War to try and re-establish authority is a possible future. So too are harsh policies enacted against the decent hopes of people for a better life. Trump’s vicious anti-immigrant policies – mirrored in parts of Europe – are an indication of this use of force to set an agenda (you can read about these policies [here](#)). As Rome shivered from the cold winds of its collapsing empire, Virgil offered this reminder of the supposed destiny of his fellow Romans, ‘To impose the works and ways of peace, to spare the vanquished and to overthrow the haughty by means of war’. War as an antidote to the collapse of authority is a genuine worry.



Aerial port quarter view of the Forrestal Class, Aircraft Carrier USS SARATOGA (CV 60) tied up at the British

Naval Base at Diego Garcia. The ship stopped at the British Protectorate during her 1987 deployment. Visible on the flight deck as F-14A Tomcats, A-6E Intruders and E-2B Hawkeye aircraft.

In the 1970s, there was every hope that more and more of the world might be brought out from under the dark night of nuclear war – experienced directly by Japan – and from the constant tension of the Cold War. The Non-Aligned Movement, which represented the majority of the world’s people, called for the Indian Ocean – at the very least – to be designated as a Zone of Peace. They had their eye on the US naval base in Diego Garcia, from which the United States prosecuted its war on Vietnam and would later bomb Iraq. That base remains intact, the people of the island long displaced (the picture above is of a part of that base, the ocean around it spectacularly beautiful).

No longer are the Europeans and the Americans the only ones in the Indian Ocean. Now, these splendid waters are littered with war ships of one kind or another. They come under the pretext of anti-piracy, but they come as part of a tense new battle that has taken hold in Asia – a contest between China and India along the waterways from Singapore to Suez. This week, I have written two reports about the attempts to block China’s trade routes through the Straits of Malacca and into Europe and Africa as well as about the attempt by India to forge its own naval arrangements along the sea lanes that run south of the subcontinent. The first article in *The Hindu*, written with Françoise Vergès of Réunion Island, is about the Indian base at Agalega island (Mauritius), while the second article in *Alternet* is about the Indian base at Sabang island (Indonesia). The second article ends with a warning about the dangers of war that arise from the creation of these bases and the threats implied by them.



War and the waste of resources to prepare for war leads – as several international agencies now admit – to hunger. This is evident in South Sudan and in Yemen and has been evident for years in the Great Lakes region of Africa. It is also true that climate change has put pressure on certain parts of the world, areas desiccated and so with resources under pressure – places such as the Darfur region of Sudan. At the release of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation’s *Global Report on*

Food Crises, the WFP's director David Beasley said, 'The consequences of conflict and climate change are stark: millions of more people severely, even desperately, hungry'.

But conflict and climate change are not the main drivers of hunger. The UN agencies do a very important job in cataloguing the numbers of hunger, but their analysis frequently leaves out what lies beneath the surface: a system of private property that denies the poor access to food and produces the everyday reality of acute hunger. If you have no money, you cannot eat. That is the plain truth. Half of India's population is hungry. This is not because of war or climate change, but it is because of income inequality. As economic inequality increases, hunger increases (please read this short **column** at *Newslick* on hunger).

The picture above is from Jharkhand (India). It was taken last year. An 11-year-old girl – Santoshi – died of starvation in the town of Simdega because her family was denied food rations by the government. Governments around the world have begun to shrivel the allocation of food to the very poor. The Indian government – mesmerised by technology and its capacity for surveillance – forced the population to get Aadhaar cards for identification purposes. The family of Santoshi found it difficult to link their ration cards to their Aadhaar cards. It was this that meant that they could not procure food. Santoshi died because her family did not have enough money and because the government failed to provide them with emergency rations.

Such is the state of our world.

Warmly, Vijay.