Chapter 12

Reflections on US Imperialism at Home and Abroad

The world political economy is a mosaic of cross currents: domestic decay and elite enrichment, new sources for greater profits and deepening political disenchchantment, declining living standards for many and extravagant luxury for a few, military losses in some regions with imperial recovery in others. There are claims of a unipolar, a multi-polar and even a non-polar configuration of world power. Where, when, to what extent and under what contingencies do these claims have validity?

Busts come and go, but let us talk of ‘beneficiaries’. Those who cause crashes, reap the greatest rewards while their victims have no say. The swindle economy and the criminalized state prosper by promoting the perversion of culture and literacy. 'Investigative journalism', or peephole reportage, is all the rage. The world of power spins out of control. As they decline, the leading powers declare that ‘it’s our rule or everyone’s ruin!’

Global Configurations of Power Relations

Power is a relationship between and among classes, states and military and ideological institutions. Any configuration of power is contingent on past and present struggles reflecting shifting correlations of forces. Structures and physical resources, concentrations of wealth, arms and the media matter greatly; they set the framework in which the principle power wielders are embedded. But strategies for retaining or gaining power depend on securing alliances, engaging in wars and negotiating peace. Above all, world power depends on the strength of domestic foundations. This requires a dynamic productive economy, an independent state free from prejudicial foreign entanglements and a leading class capable of harnessing global resources to ‘buy off’ domestic consent.

To examine the position of the United States in the global configuration of power it is necessary to analyse its changing economic and political relations on two levels: by region and by sphere of power. History does not move in a linear pattern or according to recurring cycles: military and political defeats in some regions may be accompanied by significant victories in others. Economic decline in some spheres and regions may be compensated by sharp advances in other economic sectors and regions.
In the final analysis, it is not a question of ‘keeping a scorecard’ or adding wins and subtracting losses, but translating regional and sectorial outcomes into an understanding of the direction and emerging structures of the global power configuration. We start by examining the legacy of recent wars on the global economic, military and political power of the United States.

**Sustaining the US Empire: Defeats, Retreat, Advances and Victories**

The dominant view of most critical analysts is that over the past decade US empire building has suffered a series of military defeats, experienced economic decline, and now faces severe competition and the prospect of further military losses. The evidence cited is impressive. The US was forced to withdraw troops from Iraq, after an extremely costly decade-long military occupation, leaving in place a regime more closely allied to Iran, the US regional adversary. The Iraq war depleted the economy, deprived American corporations of oil wealth, greatly enlarged Washington’s budget and trade deficits and reduced the living standards of US citizens. The Afghanistan war had a similar outcome, with high external costs, military retreat, fragile clients, domestic disaffection and no short or medium term transfers of wealth (imperial pilage) to the US Treasury or private corporations. The Libyan war led to the total destruction of a modern, oil-rich economy in North Africa, the total dissolution of state and civil society and the emergence of armed tribal, fundamentalist militias opposed to US and EU client regimes in North and sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. Instead of continuing to profit from lucrative oil and gas agreements with the conciliatory Gadhafi regime, Washington decided on ‘regime change’, engaging in a war that ruined Libya and destroyed any viable central state. The current Syrian ‘proxy war’ has strengthened radical Islamist warlords, destroyed Damascus’ economy and added massive refugee pressure to the already uprooted millions from wars in Iraq and Libya. US imperial wars have resulted in economic losses, regional political instability and military gains for Islamist adversaries.

Latin America has overwhelmingly rejected US efforts to overthrow the Venezuelan government. The entire world—except for Israel and Washington—rejects the blockade of Cuba. Regional integration organizations, which exclude the US, have proliferated. US trade shares have declined, as Asia is replacing the US in the Latin American market.

In Asia, China deepens and extends its economic links with all the key countries, while the US ‘pivot’ is mostly an effort at military base encirclement involving Japan, Australia and the Philippines. In other words, China is more