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The Empire Demands Tribute

Donald Trump and the Imperialism of Decline

INTRODUCTION: IMPERIALISM WITHOUT APOLOGY

Donald Trump did not create the crisis of United States imperialism. He emerged from it, understood some of its symptoms with the vulgar intuition of a property dealer, and offered the US ruling class a method to manage its relative decline. His language is coarse because the reality he describes is coarse. Countries are assets or liabilities; allies are clients who have not paid their bills; waterways are tollbooths; minerals are prizes beneath other peoples' soil; tariffs are instruments of punishment; and military protection is a service for which payment is due. Trump strips imperialism of its diplomatic costume. Where liberal internationalism spoke of common values and a rules-based order, Trump asks who owns the port, who controls the mineral, who pays for the base, and what tribute can be extracted from access to the US market.

The contemporary world is passing through a profound transition. The institutions built after the Second World War remain largely intact, but the material foundations beneath them have changed. The United States continues to dominate global finance, military power, technological standards, communications systems, and international institutions, yet it no longer possesses the uncontested productive supremacy that once gave solidity to its command. The productive centre of gravity has moved towards Asia. China has become the world's largest manufacturing power, while countries across the Global South account for a growing share of trade, output, investment, and technological capacity. Production has become more geographically dispersed, but financial, monetary, military, and informational power remains concentrated in the old North Atlantic bloc.

This contradiction defines the present conjuncture. The United States retains extraordinary coercive power while its capacity to lead the world economy through productive superiority has diminished. It remains the issuer of the dominant reserve currency (the dollar), the centre of global capital markets, the headquarters of powerful technology firms, and the command centre of a military system that spans the planet. But it cannot simply outproduce China, offer the Global South a credible development path, or restore the industrial monopoly it enjoyed after 1945. What appears as a series of disconnected crises – tariff wars, sanctions, export controls, debt distress, military encirclement, territorial threats, and regional wars – is better understood as one historical process: the effort to preserve an imperialist hierarchy whose economic foundations are under strain.

Trump's imperialism is the attempt to convert the advantages that remain to the United States – its military reach, dollar power, consumer market, technological monopolies, and control over strategic infrastructure – into instruments of tribute and command. It does not represent a withdrawal from empire. 'America First', Trump's slogan, means that the United States will continue to claim global privileges while disclaiming even the pretence of universal obligations. It will dominate without stewardship, command without consent, and demand payment for the order it has itself made increasingly dangerous. Trumpism is not the retreat of US imperialism from the world; it is the retreat of imperialism from the language of international responsibility.

FROM PRODUCTIVE SUPREMACY TO COERCIVE POWER

The international order that emerged after 1945 rested upon three interconnected pillars: US productive superiority, dollar centrality, and military supremacy. The United States came out of the Second World War with its industrial plant intact and greatly expanded, while Europe and large parts of Asia lay devastated. US factories, scientific institutions, infrastructure, and corporations formed the productive core of the capitalist world. Through the Bretton Woods institutions, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and a widening network of military alliances, Washington translated this economic advantage into an institutional order. The dollar became the principal reserve and trading currency, while US armed power secured trade routes, resources, compliant governments, and the political conditions required for capital accumulation. This arrangement changed after the crises of the 1970s. US capital increasingly shifted production abroad, first to lower-wage sites and then into complex global supply chains, particularly in East Asia. Finance grew in power relative to manufacturing. Wall Street, the dollar, and the legal architecture of US capital markets allowed the United States to maintain its global authority even as industrial capacity moved elsewhere. The factories departed, but the invoices, credit lines, insurance contracts, intellectual-property claims, and payments systems remained under the authority of institutions centred in New York, London, and Washington.

For a time, this appeared to be a brilliant solution to the problem of profitability. US corporations could profit from low-cost production abroad, US consumers could purchase cheaper goods, and the US Treasury could finance enormous deficits because global savings continued to flow into dollar assets. Yet the same process strengthened new productive centres. China did not remain confined to low-value assembly. Through planning, public investment, technology transfer, infrastructure construction, and control over the commanding heights of finance, it moved into telecommunications, high-speed rail, shipbuilding, renewable energy, electric vehicles, batteries, advanced machinery, and artificial intelligence, and thereby constructed industrial ecosystems that tariffs alone cannot reproduce.

This is the historical irony of neoliberal globalisation: The internationalisation of production initially reinforced US corporate and financial power, but it also created the material basis for the erosion of the North Atlantic monopoly over advanced production. The United States could continue to collect rents through finance, technology, brands, and

intellectual property, but it could no longer assume that the most sophisticated productive forces would remain under its control. The Chinese challenge is therefore not merely that China has a large gross domestic product. It is that China has developed the capacity to produce at scale, to innovate across industrial sectors, and to offer infrastructure and trade relationships that do not pass entirely through the old imperial centres.

No serious analysis should mistake relative decline for weakness. The United States remains more powerful than any previous empire in military reach and financial coercion. Decline describes a relationship, not a collapse. It means that the distance between US power and the capabilities of other states has narrowed, and that Washington can no longer reproduce its leadership through the same combination of consent, productive superiority, and institutional legitimacy. It is precisely the gap between continuing coercive power and declining productive supremacy that produces the aggressiveness of the present.

Trump grasps this gap in his own fashion. He correctly senses that the old promises of globalisation no longer command legitimacy among millions of people in the United States. Entire regions have endured factory closures, declining union power, wage stagnation, opioid addiction, collapsing public services, and the humiliation of social abandonment. But Trump does not indict the corporations that moved production or the financiers who profited from the destruction. He displaces the blame onto China, migrants, foreign governments, and allies said to be cheating the United States. He takes a crisis produced by capital and translates it into national resentment. The social wounds of neoliberalism become the emotional fuel of a more aggressive imperialism.

AMERICA FIRST IS NOT ISOLATIONISM

Trump is frequently described as an isolationist because he is hostile to multilateral institutions, contemptuous of alliances, and suspicious of wars whose benefits he cannot express in commercial terms. This description is misleading. Isolationism would mean a contraction of US military and political ambitions. Trump instead seeks to revise the terms upon which those ambitions are exercised. He does not want fewer privileges for the United States; he wants fewer restraints and lower costs. He does not oppose alliances as instruments of power; he opposes alliances in which subordinate states appear to possess rights independent of what they contribute to Washington. Liberal internationalism represented US national interests as universal interests. It spoke in the name of democracy, human rights, open markets, and international law, even as it supported coups, occupations, sanctions, and dictatorships. The claim was that US leadership supplied global public goods: security, stable money, navigable seas, and predictable institutions. This language was always ideological, but it allowed allied ruling classes to present their subordination as voluntary participation in an international community.

Trump discards much of this mediation. He interprets NATO as a protection contract and its members as delinquent customers. He treats military bases not as the infrastructure of a common defence but as services for which host countries must pay. He regards development aid as waste unless it purchases immediate obedience. He sees the United Nations as useful only when it ratifies US decisions and illegitimate when it constrains them.

The substance of domination persists, but the grammar changes from leadership to transaction. This transactionalism does not make the empire less violent. It makes violence more directly connected to extraction. The world becomes a field of deals backed by the threat of exclusion from the US market, the dollar system, advanced technology, intelligence cooperation, or military protection. An ally that pays and obeys may be rewarded; an ally that dissents can be punished. An adversary may be bombed, sanctioned, or blockaded, but can also be offered a bargain if it recognises US primacy. What matters is not adherence to a stable doctrine but the public demonstration that Washington can impose the terms.

Trump's 2025 *National Security Strategy* gives this outlook an official form. It attacks earlier US elites for permitting China to benefit from US markets and investment and presents the second Trump administration as a restoration of national power. Yet this restoration cannot return the United States to 1945. The industrial landscape, world market, and balance of productive forces have changed. Trump therefore attempts to use state power to force an outcome that US capital can no longer secure through ordinary commercial competition. Tariffs, export controls, investment screening, sanctions, military pressure, and territorial claims become substitutes for the productive preponderance that has been lost.

Trump is both a rupture and a continuation. The strategic confrontation with China did not begin with him and did not disappear under Joseph Biden. Export controls, military alliances in Asia, sanctions, and industrial subsidies crossed party lines. But Trump concentrates these tendencies and removes their liberal varnish. His distinctiveness lies not in inventing US imperialism but in transforming its accumulated anxiety into a programme of open compulsion.

TARIFFS AND THE IMPERIALISM OF TRIBUTE

Tariffs are central to Trump's political imagination because they appear to solve several problems at once. They promise to protect domestic industry, punish foreign competitors, produce government revenue, compel investment inside the United States, and demonstrate that the president can make other countries submit. Trump presents the trade deficit as proof that the United States has been robbed, as though every container arriving at a US port were a tribute paid in the wrong direction. The tariff is his instrument for reversing the flow. Yet tariffs under Trump are not simply instruments of protection. They are instruments of political coercion. Access to the US market is treated as a privilege that can be suspended unless another state changes its trade policy, migration controls, diplomatic alignment, relationship with China, or position on a territorial dispute. The power comes from the continued size of US consumption: even as the country's relative productive position declines, it remains an enormous destination for goods and capital. Trump seeks to weaponise this asymmetry.

The policy therefore contains a distinctly imperial logic. In the colonial era, imperial powers compelled subordinated territories to open their markets, surrender resources, and accept unequal legal arrangements. Under contemporary conditions, direct administration

is often unnecessary. The threat of tariffs, exclusion from payment systems, secondary sanctions, or denial of technology can compel governments formally recognised as sovereign. Economic policy becomes a means of enforcing political obedience.

The attack on China displays the widest version of this strategy. The objective is not merely to reduce the bilateral trade deficit. It is to slow Chinese technological development, restrict access to advanced semiconductors and machinery, reorganise supply chains away from China, and oblige allies to participate in a system of containment. Washington no longer trusts market competition to preserve its technological lead. It must rely upon administrative bans, alliance discipline, and control over chokepoints in technology production. The language is national security, but the goal is to prevent a rival productive system from achieving strategic autonomy.

The limits of this policy are considerable. A tariff can raise the price of an imported electric vehicle, but it cannot instantly build the transport networks, trained labour force, supplier clusters, public research systems, and long-term planning that made the vehicle possible. It can redirect a final stage of assembly from one country to another while Chinese components continue to move through the supply chain. It can produce windfall profits for protected firms without requiring them to make productive investments. Above all, it can impose higher costs on US workers whose wages have not risen with the cost of housing, health care, education, and food.

Trump's industrial policy is therefore caught in a contradiction. He needs the state because the market cannot restore US productive supremacy, but the class forces behind him resist the planning, public ownership, redistribution, and social investment that a genuine industrial reconstruction would require. His coalition wants subsidies without public control, protection without labour power, and reindustrialisation without a transformation in property relations. The result is a militarised industrial policy organised around weapons, fossil energy, artificial intelligence, logistics, and strategic minerals rather than a programme to meet social need.

Sanctions operate alongside tariffs as another form of tribute. The dollar's continuing role in reserves, payments, debt, and commodity pricing gives the United States jurisdiction far beyond its borders. A bank in one country can be punished for processing a transaction involving a third country, even if no US goods are present. A state can be excluded from payment systems, its foreign assets seized, its shipping obstructed, and its population deprived of medicines and essential imports. Financial power becomes the capacity to decide which countries may participate normally in the world economy.

Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, and other sanctioned states demonstrate that economic warfare is not an alternative to military violence. It is violence conducted through shortages, interrupted production, deteriorating hospitals, inflation, and migration. The suffering is then attributed to the sanctioned government, allowing Washington to present the effects of coercion as evidence that the target has failed. Trump intensifies this practice while speaking of it as maximum pressure: an admission that the purpose is to make social life unbearable until political concessions are obtained.

This combination of tariffs, sanctions, and protection payments can be called the imperialism of tribute. Trump seeks to make states pay for security, pay for market access,

pay for exemption from punishment, and pay through the surrender of resources or political autonomy. The method is transactional, but the relationship is not a transaction between equals. A bargain made under the shadow of a carrier group, the dollar system, and the world's largest consumer market remains an act of compulsion.

TERRITORY, CHOKEPOINTS, AND THE RETURN OF POSSESSION

Trump's talk of acquiring Greenland, retaking control of the Panama Canal, and absorbing Canada is often dismissed as spectacle. But the spectacle contains a theory of power. Liberal imperialism preferred to exercise control without formal annexation, using bases, treaties, investment rules, and compliant elites. Trump revives the older vocabulary of possession. He imagines territory as real estate and sovereignty as an obstacle that can be overcome by purchase, pressure, or force.

Greenland condenses the central concerns of the new imperialism. Its location matters for Arctic military strategy, missile warning systems, emerging shipping lanes, and the contest with Russia and China. Its subsoil contains minerals regarded as critical for batteries, electronics, weapons, and the energy transition. As the climate crisis melts Arctic ice, the catastrophe produced largely by the historic emissions of the old industrial powers opens new routes for commerce and extraction. Trump looks at this transformed geography and sees an acquisition opportunity.

The people of Greenland largely disappear from this calculation. Their long struggle against Danish colonial rule and their right to determine their future are subordinated to the strategic appetite of Washington. Here Trump's imperialism reveals its colonial core: land is valuable because of what lies beneath it and where it is situated, while the people who live upon it become an inconvenience. His threats against Denmark also show that the hierarchy of empire includes allies. NATO membership does not provide equality; it formalises degrees of subordination. When an ally stands between the United States and an asset it desires, tariffs and military pressure can be turned against the ally itself.

The Panama Canal represents a related logic. The canal is not merely a symbol of past US power. It is a key artery of world trade and a strategic link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Trump's rhetoric about taking it back reflects anxiety that Chinese commercial relationships in Latin America might reduce Washington's control over the logistical infrastructure of the hemisphere. Ports, canals, undersea cables, railways, and data centres now occupy the place once held primarily by forts and coaling stations. Control over circulation is as important as control over production.

The renewed territorial imagination extends across the Americas. The Monroe Doctrine has always asserted that the hemisphere constitutes a special zone of US entitlement. Under Trump, this doctrine is enlarged to encompass oil, lithium, ports, migration routes, digital infrastructure, and the exclusion of China. Cuba remains subject to an economic siege designed to punish its refusal to surrender the sovereignty won by its revolution. Venezuela's oil reserves and independent political project make it a target of sanctions, asset confiscation, destabilisation, and military threat. Governments throughout Latin

America are pressed to restrict Chinese investment, accept US migration demands, and align their foreign policies with Washington.

Migration is central to this imperial geography. US policies have helped destroy economies, sustain wars, and intensify climate vulnerability, producing the conditions from which millions flee. Trump then militarises the border against those displaced by the system the United States has dominated. Migrants are represented as invaders while US capital, military forces, and political interference cross borders with impunity. The border does not mark a withdrawal from the world. It distinguishes between the mobility granted to capital and violence and the immobility imposed upon labour.

Canada enters Trump's rhetoric from a different position, but the underlying principle is recognisable. He imagines national borders as provisional where US security, resources, and commercial advantage are concerned. His jokes and threats are political pedagogy: they teach the US public to regard neighbouring sovereignty as contingent and to see the enlargement of American power as a natural entitlement. The imperial map is presented as unfinished.

PALESTINE, IRAN, AND IMPERIALIST IMPUNITY

Nowhere is the violence of Trump's imperialism clearer than in West Asia. Palestine and Iran reveal the unity of military, financial, territorial, and ideological power. They also expose the fraud of the claim that the United States defends a rules-based order. Rules are invoked against adversaries and discarded for allies; sovereignty is absolute when claimed by Washington and conditional when claimed by those who resist it.

US support for Israel is not simply an alliance between two states. Israel functions as an advanced military and intelligence position within the imperial architecture of West Asia, a region whose energy resources, trade routes, and strategic location have made it a central concern of US power. Washington supplies arms, money, diplomatic protection, and intelligence, while Israel demonstrates the forms of surveillance, collective punishment, population control, and military technology that circulate through the wider imperial system.

Trump's treatment of Palestine carries his property-developer imagination into the field of colonial war. Gaza is seen not as a homeland inhabited by a people with rights, history, and political claims, but as territory whose population can be moved and whose coastline can be redeveloped. This is the old colonial fantasy expressed in the language of real estate: remove the people, clear the land, and convert devastation into an investment opportunity. The obscenity lies not only in the proposal but in the fact that it gives explicit form to a logic already present in the destruction of homes, hospitals, universities, archives, agricultural land, and civic life.

The assault on Palestine also requires an assault on international law. When international institutions investigate Israeli or US conduct, Washington sanctions officials, threatens courts, vetoes resolutions, and withdraws cooperation. Imperial sovereignty means the right to judge others without being judged. The United States insists upon universal jurisdiction for its sanctions and military operations while denying jurisdiction to

bodies that might hold its leaders or allies accountable. Trump does not create this double standard, but he makes it a point of pride.

Iran presents the same structure on a larger regional scale. For decades, sanctions have attempted to prevent Iran from exercising economic and strategic sovereignty. Restrictions on oil exports, banking, shipping, technology, and investment have been designed to exhaust the country and isolate it from the world economy. Trump's 'maximum pressure' policy treats the suffering of ordinary Iranians as leverage. It assumes that economic pain can be calibrated until a state relinquishes its independent regional role and accepts the terms set by Washington and Tel Aviv.

But financial coercion readily becomes military coercion. Strikes, assassinations, blockades, threats against nuclear facilities, and efforts to command navigation through the Strait of Hormuz lie along the same continuum. The strait is one of the world's most important energy passages, and control over it carries consequences far beyond Iran. To claim the right to police it unilaterally is to claim authority over a central artery of the world economy. Once again, the United States presents its own command as freedom of navigation and the resistance of a regional state as a threat to international order.

Trump's policies in West Asia are often described as erratic because threats, negotiations, strikes, and proposed deals follow one another rapidly. Yet the apparent volatility has a purpose. Unpredictability becomes an instrument of negotiation. The adversary must believe that the president may exceed established limits, while allies must continually purchase reassurance. The danger is immense because a strategy that relies upon performed irrationality can generate consequences no performance can contain.

This is hyper-imperialism in its most concentrated form: the attempt of a military-political-economic bloc led by the United States to compensate for reduced authority through intensified coercion. The United States and its allies possess an overwhelming share of global military expenditure, an immense network of overseas bases, control over strategic technologies, and the capacity to wage economic war across jurisdictions. Yet they cannot obtain stable political outcomes. Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Palestine, and the long campaign against Iran demonstrate the destructive power of the bloc and the limits of its capacity to create legitimacy. It can devastate societies more readily than it can govern the consequences.

ASIA AND THE MILITARISATION OF PRODUCTIVE COMPETITION

The central long-term preoccupation of US strategy remains Asia because Asia is the most dynamic region of the world economy and China is the power that has most decisively broken the old productive hierarchy. The United States faces a dilemma: it cannot detach itself economically from a region upon which its corporations and consumers depend, but it cannot accept an Asian economic order in which Washington does not possess final authority. Its answer is to militarise economic competition.

US bases in Japan, South Korea, Guam, the Philippines, and Australia form an arc around China. AUKUS, the Quad, naval patrols, military exercises, new basing agreements, and the weaponisation of the Taiwan question expand the infrastructure of confrontation.

Semiconductor controls and investment restrictions operate in tandem with this military architecture. The factory, laboratory, shipping lane, satellite, payment platform, and naval base become parts of a single strategy.

Trump adds transactional pressure to this structure. Japan and South Korea are told to pay more for US forces, even though those forces serve Washington's strategic design. Taiwan is treated simultaneously as a strategic position, a customer for US weapons, and a semiconductor asset whose productive capacity the United States wants relocated. Allies are expected not merely to align diplomatically but to reorganise their economies, technology relationships, and supply chains around the containment of China.

The danger is that the United States will attempt to compensate militarily for what it cannot achieve commercially. China's rise cannot be reversed through aircraft carriers. Its industrial ecosystems cannot be bombed out of existence without inflicting catastrophe upon the entire world economy. Yet the military option remains embedded in US planning because the loss of primacy is treated as a security threat rather than as an invitation to cooperation among sovereign states.

The people of Asia are asked to live inside this contradiction. Their economies are increasingly integrated with China, while their security establishments are pressured to align with the United States. Military spending diverts resources from social development, and bases transform cities, islands, and coastlines into potential targets. Washington speaks of a free and open region, but freedom is defined as the continued freedom of US forces to operate thousands of kilometres from their own territory.

Trump's racial nationalism intensifies the danger. Economic competition is narrated as civilisational theft, and China becomes the external explanation for internal US decline. This language prepares a population for sacrifice by turning a complex transformation of the world economy into a story of national victimhood. It conceals the role of US corporations in relocating production and makes hostility to China appear as working-class politics, even though confrontation threatens workers everywhere.

THE CLASS PROJECT BEHIND TRUMPISM

Trump's political strength comes from his ability to speak to real social devastation while protecting the property relations that produced it. Deindustrialisation, indebtedness, insecure employment, racialised inequality, and the collapse of public institutions have generated an enormous reservoir of anger. The Democratic establishment defended the globalisation that enriched finance and technology corporations while offering affected communities retraining, consumer credit, and moral lectures. Trump entered this landscape and promised restoration.

But the restoration is fraudulent. Trump does not seek to transfer power to workers or rebuild society around public provision. His project joins sections of fossil-fuel capital, finance, weapons manufacturers, real-estate interests, private equity, logistics, and technology billionaires with a mass base drawn partly from the casualties of neoliberalism. The contradiction is managed through nationalism. Capital is absolved of responsibility,

while migrants, China, public employees, universities, minorities, and foreign governments are designated as enemies.

This class coalition explains the peculiar shape of Trump's industrial policy. A genuine reconstruction of productive capacity would require long-term planning, public banks, modern infrastructure, strong schools and universities, expanded social wages, worker power, and some form of public authority over investment. Trump's coalition will not tolerate such a programme. It therefore relies upon tax concessions, deregulation, military procurement, tariffs, cheap energy, and subsidies to private capital. Public money absorbs risk while private owners retain control.

The technology oligarchy occupies a special place within this arrangement. Digital platforms, cloud systems, artificial-intelligence models, satellites, data centres, and undersea cables have become infrastructure essential to economic and political life. The firms that control them exercise quasi-sovereign power. They can determine access to information, communications, payment channels, and computational capacity. Their relationship with the state is neither simply antagonistic nor subordinate. They require public research, energy, contracts, military protection, and favourable regulation, while the state increasingly depends upon their technologies for surveillance, warfare, and administration.

For the Global South, this concentration creates a new frontier of dependency. A country may possess formal independence while its public data, communications, cloud infrastructure, and digital payments remain controlled abroad. Digitalisation can improve planning, health, education, and production, but only if questions of ownership and sovereignty are confronted. Who owns the data? Who builds the systems? Who sets the standards? Who captures the value? Trump's alliance with technology capital gives these questions an openly geopolitical character, as access to chips, platforms, and artificial intelligence becomes conditional upon strategic alignment.

At home, the same technologies are joined to a strengthened coercive state. Border militarisation, deportation, surveillance, attacks on dissent, and the criminalisation of solidarity are not separate from foreign policy. Empire returns home through the institutions and habits it has developed abroad. A state accustomed to treating entire populations as security threats will eventually apply the same methods to workers, migrants, students, and political opponents within its borders.

Trumpism therefore cannot be defeated by restoring the neoliberal order that produced it. A defence of the old language of alliances and rules, without a transformation of class power, merely prepares the ground for another Trump. The answer must begin from the social injuries that his movement exploits while refusing the racism, militarism, and chauvinism through which he redirects them.

THE LIMITS OF IMPERIAL RESTORATION

Trump's imperialism is dangerous precisely because it combines extraordinary power with impossible ambitions. The United States can impose immense suffering, interrupt trade, seize assets, exclude firms from technology, and compel weaker states to make

concessions. But coercion cannot indefinitely reverse the redistribution of productive capacity. Nor can it solve the internal contradictions of US capitalism.

The dollar remains dominant, but the expanding use of sanctions encourages states to seek alternative payment arrangements. US technology remains powerful, but export controls accelerate investment in independent capabilities. Military alliances can encircle China, but they cannot erase the economic relationships that bind Asia together. Tariffs can change prices and routes, but they cannot summon industrial ecosystems into existence. Each use of coercive power demonstrates US strength while creating incentives to escape from it. There is no automatic passage from US decline to a just world. New centres of production may reproduce extractive relations. Governments of the Global South may seek room for manoeuvre without transforming the lives of workers and peasants. Regional institutions may remain cautious, uneven, or dominated by national interests. The redistribution of power among states is not identical to social emancipation.

Nevertheless, new possibilities have emerged. South-South trade, infrastructure cooperation, development banks, local-currency arrangements, public technology, and regional production networks can reduce dependence upon institutions controlled by the old imperial bloc. Their significance lies not in replacing one hegemon with another but in widening the space within which peoples can pursue sovereign development. This possibility will remain limited unless it is driven by popular struggle. Sovereignty cannot mean only the right of a national elite to negotiate a better position within world capitalism. It must mean the capacity of people to control resources, plan production, build public institutions, guarantee food and health, share technology, and determine the purposes for which the social surplus is used. Otherwise, resistance to US domination can coexist with internal exploitation.

The climate crisis makes this transformation urgent. The Global South bears a disproportionate share of climate damage while debt payments drain the resources required for adaptation. A green transition governed by Trump's imperialism will become another resource grab: critical minerals will be seized, technologies monopolised, and ecological costs transferred to workers and peasants. Climate justice therefore requires debt cancellation, public finance, technology sharing, and sovereignty over natural resources. It cannot be built through the acquisition of Greenland or the militarisation of mineral supply chains.

CONCLUSION: THE EMPIRE CANNOT BE REPAIRED

Donald Trump is not an aberration floating above the history of US power. He is the political expression of an imperial system that retains enormous coercive capacities while losing the productive supremacy and ideological confidence that once underwrote its leadership. His vulgarity is clarifying. He looks at alliances and sees unpaid protection bills, at Greenland and sees minerals and military position, at Panama and sees a toll road that should belong to the United States, at Gaza and sees cleared waterfront property, at migrants and sees invaders rather than the displaced people of an unequal world, and at tariffs and sees weapons with which to extract obedience.

The distinctive feature of Trump's imperialism is not that it abandons the world but that it demands tribute from it. It seeks payment for protection, deference in exchange for market access, resources in exchange for political favour, and impunity for the violence of the United States and its allies. It converts the remaining structural advantages of the United States into instruments for delaying a historical transition that it cannot prevent.

Yet the methods of delay deepen the crisis. Sanctions encourage alternatives to the dollar system. Technology controls stimulate independent research. Territorial threats expose the subordination hidden within alliances. Military encirclement makes Asia more dangerous without restoring US industrial primacy. The attack on international law destroys the legitimacy of institutions that once helped organise consent around US leadership. Trump can compel, punish, and destroy, but he cannot restore the world that made American supremacy appear natural.

The choice before humanity is not between Trump's naked empire and a return to the polite empire that preceded it. Liberal internationalism created the wars, inequalities, sanctions regimes, and social devastation from which Trump emerged. Nor is the alternative merely a different distribution of state power. The task is to build an international order rooted in sovereignty, cooperation, redistribution, ecological repair, and peace.

Such an order will not be delivered by states acting above society. It will have to be created through the struggles of workers, peasants, women, youth, Indigenous peoples, anti-imperialist movements, and governments pushed by organised populations. The productive transformation of the world economy has opened a breach in the old imperial structure, but only political struggle can widen that breach into emancipation.

Trump believes that history can be reversed by raising a tariff wall, seizing a canal, purchasing an island, threatening a court, or sending another carrier group towards a distant shore. But the empire's crisis is not a negotiating error. It is the result of changes in production, politics, and popular aspiration that no single president can command into submission. The danger is that an empire unable to repair itself will try to break the world. The urgent task is to prevent that destruction and to build, from the struggles already underway, a world that no empire can own.

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