

PEPE ESCOBAR: Iran Squeezed Between Imperial Psychos and European Cowards

Berlin, Paris and London assumed Tehran could not afford to leave the JCP0A even if it was not receiving any of the promised economic rewards. Now the EU3 are facing the hour of truth, writes Pepe Escobar.

By **Pepe Escobar**

in Bangkok

Special to Consortium News



The Trump administration unilaterally cheated on the 2015 multinational, UN-endorsed JCP0A, or Iran nuclear deal. It has imposed an illegal, worldwide financial and energy blockade on all forms of trade with Iran – from oil and gas to exports of iron, steel, aluminum and copper. For all practical purposes, and in any geopolitical scenario, this is a declaration of war.

Successive U.S. governments have ripped international law to shreds; ditching the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is only the latest instance. It doesn't matter that Tehran has fulfilled all its commitments to the deal – according to UN inspectors. Once the leadership in Tehran concluded that the U.S. sanctions tsunami is fiercer than ever, it decided to begin partially withdrawing from the deal.

President Hassan Rouhani was adamant: Iran has not left the JCP0A – yet. Tehran's measures are legal under the framework of articles 26 and 36 of the JCP0A – and European officials were informed in advance. But it's clear the EU3 (Germany,

France, Britain), who have always insisted on their vocal support for the JCPOA, must work seriously to alleviate the U.S.-provoked economic disaster to Iran if Tehran has any incentive to continue to abide by the agreement.

Russia and China – the pillars of Eurasia integration, to which Iran adheres – support Tehran's position. This was discussed extensively in Moscow by Sergey Lavrov and Iran's Javad Zarif, perhaps the world's top two foreign ministers.

At the same time, it's politically naïve to believe the Europeans will suddenly grow a backbone.

The comfortable assumption in Berlin, Paris and London was that Tehran could not afford to leave the JCPOA even if it was not receiving any of the economic rewards promised in 2015. Yet now the EU3 are facing the hour of truth.

It's hard to expect anything meaningful coming from an enfeebled Chancellor Angela Merkel, with Berlin already targeted by Washington's trade ire; a Brexit-paralyzed Britain; and a massively unpopular President Emmanuel Macron in France already threatening to impose his own sanctions if Tehran does not agree to limit its ballistic missile program. Tehran will never allow inspections over its thriving missile industry – and this was never part of the JCPOA to begin with.

As it stands, the EU3 are not buying Iranian oil. They are meekly abiding by the U.S. banking and oil/gas sanctions – which are now extended to manufacturing sectors – and doing nothing to protect Iran from its nasty effects. The implementation of INSTEX, the SWIFT alternative for trade with Iran, is languishing. Besides expressing lame “regrets”

about the U.S. sanctions, the EU3 are de facto playing the game on the side of U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates; and by extension against Russia, China and Iran.

Rise of the Imperial Psychos

As Tehran de facto kicked the ball to the European court, both EU3 options are dire. To meaningfully defend the JCP0A will invite a ballistic reaction from the Trump administration. To behave like poodles – the most probable course of action – means emboldening even more the psychopaths doubling as imperial functionaries bent on a hot war against Iran at all costs; [Koch brothers Big Oil asset](#) and enraptured evangelist, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and paid [Mujahideen-e Khalq asset](#) and notorious intel manipulator, National Security Advisor John Bolton.

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The Pompeo-Bolton gangster maneuver is hardly Bismarck's *Realpolitik*. It consists of relentlessly pushing Tehran to make a mistake, any mistake, in terms of “violating” its obligations under the JCP0A, so that this may be sold to gullible American public opinion as the proverbial “threat” to the “rules-based order” doubling as a *casus belli*.

There's one thing the no-holds-barred U.S. economic war against Iran has managed to achieve: internal unity in the Islamic Republic. Team Rouhani's initial aim for the JCP0A was to open up to Western trade (trade with Asia was always on) and somewhat curtail the power of the IRGC, or Revolutionary Guards, which control vast sectors of the

Iranian economy.

Washington's economic war proved instead the IRGC was right all along, echoing the finely-tuned geopolitical sentiment of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who always emphasized the Americans cannot be trusted, ever.

And as much as Washington has branded the IRGC a "terrorist organization," Tehran replied in kind, branding CENTCOM the same.

Independent Persian Gulf oil traders dismiss the notion that the kleptocrat House of Saud – de facto run by Jared "of Arabia" Kushner's Whatsapp pal Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the Saudi crown prince – holds up to 2.5 million barrels of oil a day in spare capacity capable of replacing Iran's 2 million barrels of exports (out of 3.45 million of total daily production). The House of Saud seems more interested in hiking oil prices for Asian customers.

Faulty Blockade

Washington's energy trade blockade of Iran is bound to fail.

China will continue to buy its 650,000 barrels a day – and may even buy more. Multiple Chinese companies trade technology and industrial services for Iranian oil.

Pakistan, Iraq and Turkey – all bordering Iran – will continue to buy Iranian high-quality light crude by every method of payment (including gold) and transportation available, formal or informal. Baghdad's trade relationship with Tehran will continue to thrive.

As economic suffocation won't suffice, Plan B is – what else

– the threat of a hot war.

It's by now established that the info, in fact rumors, about alleged Iranian maneuvers to attack U.S. interests in the Gulf was relayed to Bolton by the Mossad, at the White House, with Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben Shabbat personally briefing Bolton.

Everyone is aware of the corollary: a “reposition of assets” (in Pentagonese) – from the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group deployment to four B-52 bombers landing in Al Udeid Air base in Qatar, all part of a “warning” to Iran.

A pre-war roaring crescendo now engulfs the Lebanese front as well as the Iranian front.

Reasons for Psychotic Rage

Iran's GDP is similar to Thailand's, and its military budget is similar to Singapore's. Bullying Iran is a geopolitical and geo-economic absurdity. Iran may be an emerging Global South actor – it could easily be a member of the G20 – but can never be construed as a “threat” to the U.S.

Yet Iran provokes psychopathic imperial functionaries to a paroxysm of rage for three serious reasons. Neocons never mind that trying to destroy Iraq cost over \$6 trillion – and it was a major war crime, a political disaster, and an economic abyss all rolled into one. Trying to destroy Iran will cost untold trillions more.

The most glaring reason for the irrational hatred is the fact the Islamic Republic is one of the very few nations on the planet consistently defying the hegemon – for four decades now.

The second reason is that Iran, just like Venezuela – and this is a combined war front – have committed the supreme anathema; trading on energy bypassing the petrodollar, the foundation stone of U.S. hegemony.

The third (invisible) reason is that to attack Iran is to disable emerging Eurasia integration, just like using NSA spying to ultimately put Brazil in the bag was an attack on Latin American integration.

The non-stop hysteria over whether President Donald Trump is being maneuvered into war on Iran by his pet psychopaths –



well, he actually directed Iran to “Call me” – eludes the Big Picture. As shown before, a possible shut down of the Strait of Hormuz, whatever the reasons, would be like a major meteor impact on the global economy. And that would inevitably translate as no Trump reelection in 2020.

The Strait of Hormuz would never need to be blocked if all the oil Iran is able to export is bought by China, other Asian clients and even Russia – which could relabel it. But Tehran wouldn't blink on blocking Hormuz if faced with total economic strangulation.

According to a dissident U.S. intel expert, “the United States is at a clear disadvantage in that if the Strait of Hormuz is shut the U.S. collapses. But if the U.S. can divert Russia from defending Iran, then Iran can be attacked and Russia will have accomplished nothing, as the neocons do not want detente with Russia and China. Trump does want detente but the Deep State does not intend to permit it.”

Assuming this scenario is correct, the usual suspects in the United States government are trying to divert Putin from the Strait of Hormuz question while keeping Trump weakened, as the neocons proceed 24/7 on the business of strangling Iran. It’s hard to see Putin falling for this not exactly elaborate trap.

Not Bluffing

So what happens next? Professor Mohammad Marandi at the Faculty of World Studies of the University of Tehran offers quite a sobering perspective: “After 60 days Iran will push things even further. I don’t think the Iranians are bluffing. They will also be pushing back at the Saudis and the Emiratis by different means.”

Marandi, ominously, sees “further escalation” ahead:

“Iranians have been preparing for war with the United States ever since the Iraq invasion in 2003. After what they’ve seen in Libya, in Syria, Yemen, Venezuela, they know that the Americans and Europeans are utterly brutal. The whole shore of the Persian Gulf on the Iranian side and the Gulf of Oman is full of tunnels and underground high-tech missiles. The Persian Gulf is full of ships

equipped with highly developed sea-to-sea missiles. If there is real war, all the oil and gas facilities in the region will be destroyed, all the tankers will be destroyed.”

And if that show comes to pass, Marandi regards the Strait of Hormuz as the “sideshow”:

“The Americans will be driven out of Iraq. Iraq exports 4 million barrels of oil a day; that would probably come to an end, through strikes and other means. It would be catastrophic for the Americans. It would be catastrophic for the world – and for Iran as well. But the Americans would simply not win.”

So as Marandi explains it – and Iranian public opinion now largely agrees – the Islamic Republic has leverage because they know “the Americans can’t afford to go to war. Crazyies like Pompeo and Bolton may want it, but many in the establishment don’t.”

Tehran may have developed a modified MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) framework as leverage, mostly to push Trump ally MbS to cool down. “Assuming,” adds Marandi, “the madmen don’t get the upper hand, and if they do, then it’s war. But for the time being, I think that’s highly unlikely.”

All Options on the Table?

In Cold War 2.0 terms, from Central Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean and from the Indian Ocean to the Caspian Sea, Tehran is able to count on quite a set of formal and informal alliances. That not only centers on the Beirut-

Damascus-Baghdad-Tehran-Herat axis, but also includes Turkey and Qatar. And most important of all, the top actors on the Eurasian integration chessboard: the Russia and China in strategic partnership.

When Zarif met Lavrov last week in Moscow, they discussed virtually everything: Syria (they negotiate together in the Astana, now Nur-Sultan process), the Caspian, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (of which Iran will become a member), the JCPOA and Venezuela.

The Trump administration was dragged kicking and screaming to meet Kim Jong-Un at the same table because of the DPRK's intercontinental ballistic missile tests. And then Kim ordered extra missile tests because, in his own words, as quoted by KCNA, "genuine peace and security of the country are guaranteed only by the strong physical force capable of defending its sovereignty."

Global South Watching

The overwhelming majority of Global South nations are watching the U.S. neocon offensive to ultimately strangle "the Iranian people", aware more than ever that Iran may be bullied to extinction because it does not possess a nuclear deterrent. The IRGC has reached the same conclusion.

That would mean the death of the JCPOA – and the Return of the Living Dead of "all options on the table."

But then, there'll be twists and turns in the Art of the (Demented) Deal. So what if, and it's a major "if", Donald Trump is being held hostage by his pet psychopaths?

Let The Dealer speak:

“We hope we don’t have to do anything with regard to the use of military force...We can make a deal, a fair deal. ... We just don’t want them to have nuclear weapons. Not too much to ask. And we would help put them back into great shape. They’re in bad shape right now. I look forward to the day where we can actually help Iran. We’re not looking to hurt Iran. I want them to be strong and great and have a great economy... We have no secrets. And they can be very, very strong, financially. They have great potential.”

Then again, Ayatollah Khamenei said: the Americans cannot be trusted, ever.

Pepe Escobar, a veteran Brazilian journalist, is the correspondent-at-large for Hong Kong-based [Asia Times](#). His latest book is [“2030.”](#) Follow him on [Facebook](#).

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PEPE ESCOBAR: The Eagle, the Bear and the Dragon

The eagle has conveniently forgotten that the original, Ancient Silk Road linked the dragon with the Roman empire for centuries – with no interlopers outside of Eurasia, muses Pepe Escobar.

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

Special to Consortium News



Once upon a time, deep into the night in selected campfires across the deserts of Southwest Asia, I used to tell a fable about the eagle, the bear and the dragon – much to the amusement of my Arab and Persian interlocutors.

It was about how, in the young 21st century, the eagle, the bear and the dragon had taken their (furry) gloves off and engaged in what turned out to be Cold War 2.0.

As we approach the end of the second decade of this already incandescent century, perhaps it's fruitful to upgrade the fable. With all due respect to Jean de la Fontaine, excuse me while I kiss the (desert) sky again.

Long gone are the days when a frustrated bear repeatedly offered to cooperate with the eagle and its minions on a burning question: nuclear missiles.

The bear repeatedly argued that the deployment of interceptor missiles and radars in that land of the blind leading the blind – Europe – was a threat. The eagle repeatedly argued that this is to protect us from those rogue Persians.

Now the eagle – claiming the dragon is getting an easy ride – has torn down every treaty in sight and is bent on deploying nuclear missiles in selected eastern parts of the land of the blind leading the blind, essentially targeting the bear.

All That Glitters is Silk

Roughly two decades after what top bear Putin defined as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”,

he proposed a form of USSR light; a political/economic body called the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The idea was to have the EAEU interact with the EU – the top institution of the motley crew congregated as the blind leading the blind.

The eagle not only rejected the possible integration; it came up with a modified color revolution scenario to unplug Ukraine from the EAEU.

Even earlier than that, the eagle had wanted to set up a New Silk Road under its total control. The eagle had conveniently forgotten that the original, Ancient Silk Road linked the dragon with the Roman empire for centuries – with no interlopers outside of Eurasia.

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So one can imagine the eagle's stupor when the dragon irrupted on the global stage with its own super-charged New Silk Roads – upgrading the bear original idea of a free trade area “from Lisbon to Vladivostok” to a multi-connectivity corridor, terrestrial and maritime, from eastern China to western Europe and everything in between, spanning the whole of Eurasia.

Facing this new paradigm the blind, well, remained blind for as long as anyone could remember; they simply could not get their act together.

The eagle, meanwhile, was incrementally raising the stakes. It launched what amounted for all practical purposes to a

progressively weaponized encirclement of the dragon.



The eagle made a series of moves that amount to inciting nations bordering the South China Sea to antagonize the dragon, while repositioning an array of toys – nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, fighter jets – closer and closer to the dragon's territory.

All the time, what the dragon saw – and continues to see – is a battered eagle trying to muscle its way out of an irreversible decline by trying to intimidate, isolate and sabotage the dragon's irreversible ascent back to where it has been for 18 of the past 20 centuries; enthroned as the king of the jungle.

A key vector is that Eurasia-wide players know that under the new laws of the jungle the dragon simply can't – and won't – be reduced to the status of a supporting actor. And Eurasia-wide players are too smart to embark on a Cold War 2.0 that will undermine Eurasia itself.

The eagle's reaction to the dragon's New Silk strategy took some time to swing from inaction to outright demonization – complementing the joint description of both the dragon and the bear as existential threats.

And yet, for all the spinning crossfire, Eurasia-wide players are not exactly impressed anymore with an eagle empire armed to its teeth. Especially after the eagle's crest was severely damaged by failure upon hunting failure in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Eagle aircraft carriers patrolling the eastern part of Mare Nostrum are not exactly scaring the bear, the Persians and the Syrians.

A "reset" between the eagle and the bear was always a myth. It took some time – and much financial distress – for the bear to realize there won't be any reset, while the dragon only saw a reset towards open confrontation.

After establishing itself, slowly but surely, as the most advanced military power on the planet, with hypersonic know-how, the bear came to a startling conclusion: we don't care anymore about what the eagle says – or does.

Under the Raging Volcano

Meanwhile, the dragon kept expanding, inexorably, across all Asian latitudes as well as Africa, Latin America and even across the unemployment-infested pastures of the austerity-hit blind leading the blind.

The dragon is firmly assured that, if cornered to the point of resorting to a nuclear option, it holds the power to make the eagle's staggering deficit explode, degrade its credit rating to junk, and wreak havoc in the global financial system.

No wonder the eagle, under an all-enveloping paranoid cloud of cognitive dissonance, feeding state propaganda 24/7 to its subjects and minions, keeps spewing out lava like a

raging volcano – dispensing sanctions to a great deal of the planet, entertaining regime change wet dreams, launching a total energy embargo against the Persians, resurrecting the “war on terra”, and aiming to punish like a Bat Out Of Hell any journalist, publisher or whistleblower revealing its inner machinations.

It hurts, so bad, to admit that the political/economic center of a new multipolar world will be Asia – actually Eurasia.

As the eagle got more and more threatening, the bear and the dragon got closer and closer in their strategic partnership. Now both bear and dragon have too many strategic links across the planet to be intimidated by the eagle’s massive Empire of Bases or those periodic coalitions of the (somewhat reluctant) willing.

To match comprehensive, in-progress Eurasia integration, of which the New Silk Roads are the graphic symbol, the eagle’s fury, unleashed, has nothing to offer – except rehashing a war against Islam coupled with the weaponized cornering of both bear and dragon.

Then there’s Persia – those master chess players. The eagle has been gunning for the Persians ever since they got rid of the eagle’s proconsul, the Shah, in 1979 – and this after the eagle and perfidious Albion had already smashed democracy to place the Shah, who made Saddam look like Gandhi, in power in 1953.

The eagle wants all that oil and natural gas back – not to mention a new Shah as the new gendarme of the Persian Gulf. The difference is now the bear and the dragon are saying No

Way. What is the eagle to do? Set up the false flag to end all false flags?

This is where we stand now. And once again, we reach the end – though not the endgame. There’s still no moral to this revamped fable. We continue to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Our only, slim hope is that a bunch of Hollow Men obsessed by the Second Coming won’t turn Cold War 2.0 into Armageddon.

Pepe Escobar, a veteran Brazilian journalist, is the correspondent-at-large for Hong Kong-based [Asia Times](#). His latest book is [“2030.”](#) Follow him on [Facebook](#).

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In Upcoming Elections EU Parliament Faces a Long List of Enemies

Attilio Moro explains why the EU’s only directly elected legislative body is mounting such an energetic voter-turnout campaign.

By [Attilio Moro](#)
in Brussels

Special to Consortium News



As the EU approaches what are considered to be the most important elections in the history of its parliament – [between May 22 and 26](#) – the EU has never had so many enemies.

The list starts with U.S. President Donald Trump and extends to the Brexiters in the UK. It goes from Andrzej Duda, the Polish premier, to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán; from the Czech Republic's Prime Minister Andrej Babiš to the Romanian government.

Italy also makes the list. Its unofficial prime minister, Matteo Salvini, has been advocating, until he took office, the exit from the euro and possibly from the EU altogether. Other anti-EU leaders include Austrian Prime Minister Norbert Hofer, who assumed office on an anti-European platform, and France's Marine Le Pen.

There is also the AfD Party in Germany and a score of sizable anti-EU minorities in almost all European countries.

The most aggressive of all has been Donald Trump, who went well beyond his "American First" slogan in calling EU countries the trade "enemy" of the U.S. Under his watch, EU-U.S. relations have never been so bad.

Divisions with EU

The Trump administration's divisions with the EU seem to involve everything, from NATO (Europeans have to pay more, Trump keeps saying) to Iran (Washington trying to block Europe from dealing with Teheran); from trade (too many German cars in the U.S.) to the environment (Trump backed out of the collective reduction of CO₂, as internationally agreed in Paris).

Trump has given confidence and strength to Brexiteers and every possible type of EU dissident, to the point that Poland's Duda has openly defied the EU Commission's demand

to abolish the illiberal law allowing his government to appoint the justices of the Supreme Court.

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Hungary's Orban could defy the European immigration policy by refusing to take in one single migrant (Trump is building a wall, after all). And, contrary to the "European spirit of openness" (and against the wishes of many of George Soros's friends in Brussels) – Orban in 2018 managed to force most of operations of the private university in Budapest funded by the Hungarian-born billionaire philanthropist to move to Vienna.

The Czech Republic's Babis, the richest man in the country, continues to flout warnings from Brussels about his violations of press freedom and the independence of the judiciary.

Romania is displaying the most conspicuous insubordination in the case of Laura Kovesi, its former chief prosecutor, who oversaw the convictions of thousands of politicians, officials and businesspeople. Now Bucharest, which is holding the rotating presidency of the EU until the end of June, is trying to prevent Kovesi from leading the new European Public Prosecutor's Office, which will begin functioning in 2020. Romania's justice minister has been smearing her in letters to his EU counterparts and the government briefly subjected her to a travel ban. The only government that opposes her nomination is her own.

Sovereignism

The ideology that unifies most of the European “enemies” of the EU is sovereigntism, the idea that national interests should come before those of Europe and that sharing wealth doesn’t imply sharing policies and values.

In line with Trump, Sovereignists don’t believe that the problems of the modern world can be dealt with through a multilateral approach. They will win, according to most estimates, a sizeable share of the seats in the EU Parliament later this month.

They will be supported by a substantial share of the European public opinion (mainly right-wing) which is at odds with what they consider to be an EU immigration policy that is too permissive.

They will also be supported by plenty who feel that the EU institutions, including the EU Parliament, are bureaucratic and remote from ordinary people, while too close to the lobbies. They have a point. Around 15 thousand lobbyists are active in Brussels. It is not a mystery that they are very influential in the EU Parliament.

Recently, it turned out that the EU’s liberal party, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, or ALDE, received hundreds of thousands of euros in donations from Google, Bayer, Microsoft, Uber, Syngenta and Deloitte.

The leftists of the GUE/NGL and the Greens both fiercely oppose corporate lobbying. But with those two exceptions, there is good reason to believe that all the other major political groups have received this much money and more.

One of the most striking cases of EU corporate influence is

that of Bayer-Monsanto, which managed last year to renew its European license for the weed killer, Roundup, which has been defined by leading research institutions as an endocrine disrupter with links to cancer.

In addition to corporate corruption, anti-EU sentiment includes those opposed to the neoliberal economic policies (privatizations of public companies, cuts in social spending, deregulation) imposed in the last 20 years by the EU institutions, which not only failed to revive the economy but brought southern European countries to the brink of bankruptcy.

Despite the widespread frustrations, most European citizens consider the EU as vital in the era of globalization. And a reasonable percentage of the European constituency will turn out to elect their delegates to Brussels.

But the EU Parliament senses the threat it is facing and is running an unprecedented voter turnout campaign. In every European airport now, huge (and very expensive) billboards inform travelers of what the EU has done for their country.

Had parliamentarians arranged more transparency in the way they do business, or had they passed a proposal that has been languishing for decades for passage – which would oblige lobbies to register – that might have been more effective than billboards.

Attilio Moro is a veteran Italian journalist who was a correspondent for the daily Il Giorno from New York and worked earlier in both radio (Italia Radio) and TV. He has travelled extensively, covering the first Iraq war, the first elections in Cambodia and South Africa, and has

reported from Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan and several Latin American countries, including Cuba, Ecuador and Argentina. Presently, he is a correspondent on European affairs based in Brussels.

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Democratic Triumph for Catalan Separatists

Given all they were up against, Craig Murray underscores the importance of their victory in Spain's general election.

By **Craig Murray**

CraigMurray.org.uk



The Spanish general election in Catalonia was a stunning victory for the Catalan separatists, their best election result, achieved despite their leadership being exiled or political prisoners and despite an avalanche of mainstream media propaganda against them.

Four of those elected are currently in jail.

The Spanish state has reacted by declaring the two major separatist candidates – Clara Ponsati and Carles Puigdemont – ineligible for the European Parliament elections.

The Catalan Republican left won the biggest share of the vote, which negates the continued false propaganda being put

about Catalanian independence being a right-wing movement. Over 60 percent of the vote in Catalonia went to avowedly left-wing parties.

It is further worth noting that there is a very plain correlation between the geographical location of the 3.6 percent of the vote that the neo-fascists of Vox gained in Catalonia, and the Spanish occupation garrisons in the country.

You will struggle very hard indeed to learn any of the above facts from British mainstream media; I had to get them all from Catalan sources.

The Guardian has published 55 articles in the last three years boosting Ines Arrimadas, the leader of the Catalan branch of the right wing "Spanish" Citizens party, including at least three op-eds written by Ines Arrimadas herself. The *Guardian* has sought relentlessly to portray public opinion in Catalonia as anti-independence, and Arrimadas as its true representative.

Yet in the Spanish general election, Arrimadas' party got only 11.6 percent of the vote in Catalonia. The right-wing nationalist Spanish parties, the fascist Vox, the Francoist PP and Arrimadas' foreign security service promoted Citizens, got a pathetic 20.1 percent of the vote among all three, in a stunning Catalan rejection of Spanish nationalism.

Citizens started life as an astroturf effort to help counter the left-wing and anti-EU populism of Podemos. To that end it was funded and assisted by the German foreign intelligence service, the BND. It remains a favorite tool of

foreign intelligence services, particularly MI6 which of course sees the links between Catalan and Scottish nationalism. Hence the peculiarly active link between Ciudadanos and MI6's print media mouthpiece, the *Guardian*.

It is impossible to correlate directly from party results to potential referendum results, as a number of parties including Podemos and the Greens hold ambivalent positions on independence, and a percentage of voters will have a view on independence that differs from the party they support. For example, a small but significant number of Socialist Party supporters of PM Pedro Sanchez, also support Catalan independence.

Given the thuggish violence of Francoist paramilitary forces against the ordinary voters in Catalonia's referendum, given the imprisoning and exile of its peaceful leadership, given the extraordinary Madrid dictated barrage of MSM propaganda, the Catalan nationalist victory in the general election is a wonderful triumph for the human spirit. Now you won't hear that in the MSM.

Craig Murray is an author, broadcaster and human rights activist. He was British ambassador to Uzbekistan from August 2002 to October 2004 and rector of the University of Dundee from 2007 to 2010. This article first appeared on his [website](#).

Dear Social Media Judges: Don't Forget the Fundamentals of a Fair Trial

Julian Assange's Australian lawyer and his EU advisor say the publisher should not be tried in social media and must be given a fair hearing in court.

By **Greg Barns** and **Lisanne Adam**

Special to Consortium News

On Thursday this week *WikiLeaks* founder Julian Assange will face a London court. This hearing relates to the request by the United States to extradite Assange to that country to face a computer hacking charge carrying a maximum penalty of five years. No doubt social media will be alive with commentary, support, abuse and everything in between concerning Assange's plight.

When, after almost seven years, on April 11, 2019, Assange was arrested on Ecuadorian soil and taken into custody by U.K. police, social media exploded with the pro- and anti-Assange forces countering each other, and there has been a deluge of commentary about *WikiLeaks* and Assange the man. But much of what passes for comment about Assange on social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook ignores some fundamental issues and facts about this extraordinary case. It is important to restate them in the hope, vain though it may be, that social media comment about Assange and *WikiLeaks* is at least well informed and deals with what is actually at stake in his case.

There is firstly the issue of Assange's breaching bail in 2012 and seeking asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. This was never a case of an individual seeking to flee from justice. To see Assange's actions in this light is to ignore

the fundamental right every person has to seek asylum if they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on political opinion. In his case the fear was Sweden would detain him and then hand him over to the United States. Sweden refused to assure him it would not. We must also remember that Assange did not “hide” in the embassy, like a fugitive. He was detained because he had no choice – leave and be arrested was not a viable option.

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It is also essential that Assange’s right to a fair trial be respected. The opinions on his arrests, his alleged (mis-)conduct and his persona has essentially involved many on social media engaging in the classic “trial by media.” The ongoing discussions about this on media platforms got divided in two camps: Assange is either a villain who deserves what he got or a hero who disclosed information that the public had a right to know.

Trial by Twitter

Assange’s case has, and is being decided upon by millions of social media judges around the world who are finding him guilty of hacking, espionage and sexual misconduct. And many of these same social media judges are deliberating on Assange’s extradition fight and the role of Sweden and the United States. Moreover, his trial on social media leads inevitably to the persecution by non-state actors in the form of harassment to *WikiLeaks*, Assange and to those close to him.

One issue is of particular concern. It is particularly troubling that many on social media are misleading others into thinking that there are legal proceedings afoot in Sweden today. This assertion is simply wrong. Assange has never been charged in Sweden, the investigation into the alleged sexual misconduct was closed, twice. There are only two live issues before the courts, leaving aside the sentencing for breach of bail. They are, the extradition request and the accompanying charges brought by the U.S. in respect of which there is a real possibility that once on U.S. soil, Assange will face an inhumane and degrading treatment, torture and an unfair trial. It is to be expected Assange will receive a similar treatment as his collaborator, Chelsea Manning, who is currently detained due to her unwillingness to testify to a grand jury investigation into *WikiLeaks*.

We simply say this to social media participants. Don't judge Assange's case on its presentation in the political arena, in the news or in the analysis of others on social media. Moreover, don't let the procedure in Assange's trial set a dangerous precedent for future, similar cases. The legal proceedings involving him must be decided by an impartial judge respecting and following the rule of law. His case has to be judged fairly on the merits and on actual evidence rather than on conspiracy theories or political games. The right to a fair trial entails the right to defend oneself, access to a lawyer, a hearing with an impartial judge and the respect to all the procedural requirements to minimize the risk on other potential breaches of fundamental rights. There is no exception to these fundamental rights in Assange's case. Respecting Assange's fair trial and the rule

of law, will benefit justice.

Greg Barns is a barrister in Australia and Australian legal adviser to Julian Assange. Lianne Adam is a consultant on EU human rights law based in Melbourne, Australia.

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VIDEO: European Parliament Debates Assange Extradition

The European Parliament Tuesday held a fiery debate on Julian Assange's fate. Some MEPs argued the matter had no place in their body, others said human rights & press freedom were fundamental European issues. Video by Cathy Vogan.

Watch the 27-minute debate on Assange here, captured from the plenary session by Cathy Vogan for *Consortium News*.

Catherine Vogan is an Australian film-maker and academic at Sydney Film School. She is a contributor to *Consortium News*.

China's European Moment Has Arrived

The simplicities of the postwar order have just begun to pass into history, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Xi Jinping's visits to Rome, Paris and Monaco last week. In bringing his much-remarked Belt and Road Initiative to the center of Europe, the Chinese president has faced the Continent with the most fundamental question it will have to resolve in coming decades: Where does it stand as a trans-Atlantic partner with the U.S. and – as of Xi's European tour – the western flank of the Eurasian landmass? The simplicities of the postwar order, to put the point another way, have just begun to pass into history.

In Rome, the populist government of Premier Giuseppe Conte brought Italy into China's ambitious plan to connect East Asia and Western Europe via a multitude of infrastructure projects stretching from Shanghai to Lisbon and beyond. The memorandum of understanding Xi and Deputy Premier Luigi Di Maio signed calls for joint development of roads, railways, bridges, airports, seaports, energy projects and telecommunications systems. Along with the MoU, Chinese investors signed 29 agreements worth \$2.8 billion.

Italy is the first Group of 7 nation to commit to China's BRI strategy and the first among the European Union's founding members. It did so two weeks after the European Commission released "EU-China: A Strategic Outlook," an assessment of China's swift arrival in Europe that goes straight to the core of the Continent's ambivalence. Here is the operative passage in the E.C. report:

“China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the E.U. has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the E.U. needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”

There is much in this document to chew upon. One is the mounting concern among EU members and senior officials in Brussels about China’s emergence as a global power. This is natural, providing it does not tip into a contemporary version of the last century’s Yellow Peril. At the same time, the Continent’s leaders are highly resistant to the confrontational posture toward China that Washington urges upon them. This is the wisest course they could possibly choose: It is a strong indicator that Europeans are at last seeking an independent voice in global affairs.

Looking for Unity

They are also looking for a united EU front in the Continent’s relations with China. This was Emmanuel Macron’s point when Xi arrived in Paris. The French president made sure German Chancellor Angela Merkel and E.C. President Jean–Claude Juncker were there to greet Xi on his arrival at the Élysée Palace. The primary reason Italy sent shockwaves through Europe when it signed onto Xi’s signature project is because it effectively broke ranks at a highly charged moment.

But unity of the kind Macron and Merkel advocate is likely to prove elusive. For one thing, Brussels can impose only so far on the sovereignty of member states. For another, no one

wants to miss, in the name of an E.U. principle, the opportunities China promises to bring Europe's way. While Macron insisted on EU unity, he and Xi looked on as China signed contracts with Airbus, Électricité de France, and numerous other companies worth more than \$35 billion.

There is only one way to read this: Core Europe can argue all it wants that China is unrolling a divide-and-conquer strategy, but one looks in vain for on-the-ground resistance to China's apparent preference for bilateral agreements across the Continent. On his way home, Xi stopped in Monaco, which agreed in February to allow Huawei, China's controversial telecoms company, to develop the principality's 5G phone network.

In numerous ways, Italy was fated to demonstrate the likely shape of China's arrival in Europe. The Conte government, a coalition led by the rightist Lega and the Five-Star Movement, has been a contrarian among EU members since it came to power last year: It is highly critical of Brussels and of other member states, it opposes EU austerity policies, it is fiercely jealous of its sovereignty in the EU context, and it favors better ties with Russia.

Closer to the ground, the Italian economy is weak and inward investment is paltry. Chinese manufacturers have made short work of Italian competitors in industries such as textiles and pharmaceuticals over the past couple of decades. A map, finally, tells us all we need to know about Italy's geographic position: Its ports, notably Trieste at the northern end of the Adriatic, are gateways to the heart of Europe's strongest markets.

As the westward destination of Xi's envisioned Belt and Road, Europe's economic and political relations with China were bound to reach a takeoff point. The accord with Italy, Xi's European tour and an [EU-China summit](#) scheduled to take place in Brussels on April 9 signal that this moment has arrived.

Shift in Relationship

But it is not yet clear whether Europeans have grasped the strategic magnitude of last week's events. In effect, the Continent's leaders have started down a path that is almost certain to induce a shift in the longstanding trans-Atlantic relationship. In effect, Europe is starting – at last – to act more independently while repositioning itself between the Atlantic world and the dynamic nations of the East; China first among them by a long way.

No European leader has yet addressed this inevitable question.

Let us not overstate this case. Trans-Atlantic ties have been increasingly strained since Barack Obama's presidency. President Donald Trump's antagonisms, most notably over the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear agreement, have intensified this friction. But there is still no indication that any European leader advocates a rupture in relations with Washington.

Can U.S.–European ties evolve gradually as China's presence on the Continent grows more evident? This is the core question. Both sides will determine the outcome. The Europeans appear to be preparing for a new chapter in the

trans-Atlantic story, but there is simply no telling how Washington will respond to a reduction in its long-unchallenged influence in Western European capitals.

There is one other question the West as a whole must face. The E.C.'s "strategic outlook" terms China "a systemic rival promoting alternative forms of governance." There are two problems with this commonly sounded theme.

First, there is no evidence whatsoever that China has or ever will insist that other countries conform to its political standards in exchange for economic advantage. That may be customary practice among Western nations and at institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It is not China's.

Second, as we advance toward a condition of parity between West and non-West – an inevitable feature of our century – it will no longer be plausible to assume that the West's parliamentary democracies set the standard by which all others can be judged. Nations have vastly varying political traditions. It is up to each to maintain or depart from them. China understands this. So should the West.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the *International Herald Tribune*, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is "Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century" (Yale). Follow him [@thefloutist](https://twitter.com/thefloutist). His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

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Italy Looks to China

The U.S. and EU may worry about Rome joining the New Silk Road, but it's their fault, writes Andrew Spannaus.

By [Andrew Spannaus](#)
in Milan

Special to Consortium News



Italy caused a political firestorm in mid-March when it announced that it would be joining China's Belt and Road Initiative by signing a memorandum of understanding during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome from March 21 to 23.

As the first G-7 country to accept a formal agreement to participate in the initiative, also known as the New Silk Road, Italy found itself under instant pressure from both the United States and its allies in Europe, all of which worried that it represented an expansion of China's economic foothold in the West.

The populist government led by the Five-Star Movement and the League was caught off guard by the rapid backlash, which began with a pointed tweet from the U.S. National Security Council on March 9.

Italy is a major global economy and a great investment destination. Endorsing BRI lends legitimacy to China's predatory approach to investment and will bring no benefits to the Italian people.

– NSC (@WHNSC) March 9, 2019

Garrett Marquis, confidant of U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton and former Security Council spokesman, followed up with a threat to stop intelligence-sharing between the two countries.

Prior to the Chinese leader's arrival, Giancarlo Giorgetti, the secretary of the Council of Ministers, a post equivalent to chief of staff in the U.S., confirmed the signing of the memorandum to exploit new economic opportunities, but said important restrictions would be placed on cooperation with China, and that it was "ridiculous to speak of detachment from the United States."

The government also took practical measures immediately, expanding the scope of the "golden power," the government's ability to veto economic operations that it deems a threat to national security. This is aimed in particular at protecting the telecommunications sector and the development of the 5G mobile network, an area where the Trump Administration is putting pressure on other European countries as well.

On March 25, by the time Xi Jinping had come and gone, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said "I think the proper balance has been reached. ... Nobody should see this as a change in course, or a change in strategy internationally. Italy remains where it is."

Nonetheless, the *China Daily* is calling it a “milestone in cooperation” and plenty of news outlets are underscoring the significance of the deal, which starts at \$2.8 billion and could expand to \$22.6 billion.

Michele Geraci, undersecretary of state at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, who led negotiations on the deal, has insisted that despite taking into account U.S. and EU worries, Italy must make its own decisions, following an “Italy first” strategy.

But Salvini, to whom Geraci owes his position, and who is poised to have even more clout after the European elections at the end of May, has been clear that it is not the type of change in alignment the Chinese had trumpeted.

Salvini even stayed away from the state dinner with Xi; and he has vowed to use his position as interior minister to monitor national security as regards port infrastructure. The other deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, who met with Bolton last Thursday in Washington, says that while Italy is simply pursuing its economic interests, it remains a key NATO ally and trade partner. This is Italy’s standard posture, which will likely be accommodated as long as the government responds to specific requests from the U.S., as it already has, for example on 5G, the new telecommunications infrastructure.

Larger Partnerships

Italy is certainly not the first country in Europe to look to China for economic growth opportunities. Its larger neighbors in the European Union (EU) actually do more business with China, and have established themselves as key

partners in the BRI.

Germany exports 94 billion euros worth of goods to China, for example, while the United Kingdom and France come in at 23 billion and 21 billion, respectively. Italy's share is currently only 13 billion.

After his visit to Rome, Xi Jinping was welcomed to Paris, where he signed agreements for the purchase of tens of billions of euros of French products, from airplanes to wind power systems, despite not formally joining the BRI. And the German city of Duisburg has become a key terminal for the Chinese initiative, with the arrival of dozens of trains every week that carry goods to be distributed throughout Europe thanks to the city's central position and infrastructure connections.

Critics of these agreements point to two negative effects of Chinese expansion: cheaper products that undercut European producers, costing manufacturing jobs, and growing Chinese ownership of assets in Europe, giving the Asian giant increasing power over Western economies.

Other European countries, such as Portugal and Greece, have signed formal agreements with China regarding the New Silk Road. Italy is different because it has a much larger economy, and is a member of the G-7. Yet it shares the need to rebound from the economic collapse suffered in recent years during the Euro crisis. These have been aggravated by the neoliberal policies imposed by the European Commission and the European Central Bank, with the assistance of the International Monetary Fund.

Between 2011 until 2014, during EU-dictated austerities,

Italy's GDP declined by 7 percent, with the loss of 20 percent of the country's industrial production.

It's been a disaster from which the economy has only partially recovered. The current government is attempting to reverse the situation, with greater social spending and public investment. But lacking many allies in Europe, it's being forced to compromise with EU institutions and scale back on its plans.

So, it's no surprise that Italy would look to China to help jump-start the economy. And given that other European countries have more trade with China, it's reasonable to expect Italy to make up the gap with countries such as France and Germany, both through investment in private enterprises and the construction of public infrastructure. And the Italians are seeking more opportunities for their companies to sell products in China.

Larger Problem for West

Italy's situation reflects a larger problem for the West. The neoliberal economic policies of the past 30 years have brought the outsourcing of well-paying jobs, and a reduction of the role of the state in both stimulating growth and guaranteeing the welfare state. This has weakened the middle class and widened inequalities. As this has happened, the West has lost economic and political weight, opening the door for new powers to expand. China has been the main beneficiary, considerably increasing its economic presence in areas such as Africa and Latin America, and now aiming to play a leading role in Europe as well.

This shift worries U.S. government institutions seeking to

bar China from such strategic sectors as telecommunications and to maintain close military-industrial cooperation with European allies.

The strong negative reaction from the U.S., followed by the European Commission, may have been driven by China's public relations about the deal and in part by the make-up of the Italian government.

China portrayed it as a major step, not just another agreement with one country among many in Europe. The Chinese press hailed the accord as a step forward in a "comprehensive strategic partnership," and published remarks calling it an "antidote to the rising wave of unilateralism and trade protectionism," a clear dig at the U.S.

Xi Jinping then wrote a long article published on the front page of Italy's leading daily, *Corriere della Sera*. Meanwhile, on the day of Xi's arrival, copies of the official *China Daily* were distributed free to numerous hotels around Rome.

All that contributed to the unease, and key players in the Italian institutions quickly decided they could not afford to anger the United States. The memorandum has been signed, and Italy will try to obtain as much economic benefit as possible, attempting to make up ground compared to its European competitors. However, the document, and the government's rhetoric, have been adjusted to dampen the notion of a change in Italy's strategic positioning.

Italy has the only fully populist government in Europe: the Five-Star Movement and the League came to power after elections one year ago, determined to challenge the status

quo, meaning going against EU economic orthodoxy, and also hoping to lower the tensions that have dominated relations with Russia in recent years.

The Trump administration has generally been supportive of the Italians, while other European governments have not. Thus, the desire to accelerate cooperation with China is now being tempered by the need to maintain the full support of the country's most important ally.

Andrew Spannaus is a journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan. He was elected chairman of the Milan Foreign Press Association in March 2018. His latest book "Original Sins. Globalization, Populism, and the Six Contradictions of the European Union" is due out at the end of April.

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Liberal Elite Still Luring Us Towards the Abyss

We have so little time, but still the old guard wants to block any possible path to salvation, writes Jonathan Cook.

By JonathanCook



A group of 30 respected intellectuals, writers and historians has published a manifesto bemoaning the imminent collapse of Europe and its supposed Enlightenment values of liberalism and rationalism. The idea of Europe, they warn, “is falling apart before our eyes,” as Britain prepares for Brexit and “populist and nationalist” parties look poised to make sweeping gains in elections across the continent.

The short manifesto has been published in the liberal elite’s European house journals, newspapers such as the *Guardian*. “We must now fight for the idea of Europe or perish beneath the waves of populism,” their document reads. Failure means “resentment, hatred and their cortege of sad passions will surround and submerge us.”

Unless the tide can be turned, elections across the European Union will be “the most calamitous that we have ever known: victory for the wreckers; disgrace for those who still believe in the legacy of Erasmus, Dante, Goethe, and Comenius; disdain for intelligence and culture; explosions of xenophobia and antisemitism; disaster.”

The manifesto was penned by Bernard-Henri Lévy, the French philosopher and devotee of Alexis de Tocqueville, a theorist of classical liberalism. Its signatories include novelists Ian McEwan, Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie; the historian Simon Shama; and Nobel prize laureates Svetlana Alexievitch, Herta Müller, Orhan Pamuk and Elfriede Jelinek.

Though unnamed, their European political heroes appear to be Emmanuel Macron of France, currently trying to crush the

popular, anti-austerity protests of the Yellow Vests, and German chancellor Angela Merkel, manning the barricades for the liberal elite against a resurgence of the nationalist right in Germany.

Let us set aside, on this occasion, the strange irony that several of the manifesto's signatories – not least Henri-Levy himself – have a well-known passion for Israel, a state that has always rejected the universal principles ostensibly embodied in liberal ideology and that instead openly espouses the kind of ethnic nationalism that nearly tore Europe apart in two world wars last century.

Instead let us focus on their claim that “populism and nationalism” are on the verge of slaying Europe's liberal democratic tradition and the values held dearest by this distinguished group. Their hope presumably is that their manifesto will serve as a wake-up call before things take an irreversible turn for the worse.

Liberalism's Collapse

In one sense, their diagnosis is correct: Europe and the liberal tradition are coming apart at the seams. But not because, as they strongly imply, European politicians are pandering to the basest instincts of a mindless rabble – the ordinary people they have so little faith in. Rather, it is because a long experiment in liberalism has finally run its course. Liberalism has patently failed – and failed catastrophically.

These intellectuals are standing, like the rest of us, on a precipice from which we are about to jump or topple. But the abyss has not opened up, as they suppose, because liberalism

is being rejected. Rather, the abyss is the inevitable outcome of this shrinking elite's continuing promotion – against all rational evidence – of liberalism as a solution to our current predicament. It is the continuing transformation of a deeply flawed ideology into a religion. It is idol worship of a value system hellbent on destroying us.

Liberalism, like most ideologies, has an upside. Its respect for the individual and his freedoms, its interest in nurturing human creativity, and its promotion of universal values and human rights over tribal attachment have had some positive consequences.

But liberal ideology has been very effective at hiding its dark side – or more accurately, at persuading us that this dark side is the consequence of liberalism's abandonment rather than inherent to the liberal's political project.

The loss of traditional social bonds – tribal, sectarian, geographic – has left people today more lonely, more isolated than was true of any previous human society. We may pay lip service to universal values, but in our atomized communities, we feel adrift, abandoned and angry.

Humanitarian Resource Grabs

The liberal's professed concern for others' welfare and their rights has, in reality, provided cynical cover for a series of ever-more transparent resource grabs. The parading of liberalism's humanitarian credentials has entitled our elites to leave a trail of carnage and wreckage in their wake in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and soon, it seems, [in Venezuela](#). We have killed with our kindness and then

stolen our victims' inheritance.

Unfettered individual creativity may have fostered some great – if fetishized – art, as well as rapid mechanical and technological developments. But it has also encouraged unbridled competition in every sphere of life, whether beneficial to humankind or not, and however wasteful of resources.

At its worst, it has unleashed quite literally an arms race, one that – because of a mix of our unconstrained creativity, our godlessness and the economic logic of the military-industrial complex – culminated in the development of nuclear weapons. We have now devised the most complete and horrific ways imaginable to kill each other. We can commit genocide on a global scale.

Meanwhile, the absolute prioritizing of the individual has sanctioned a pathological self-absorption, a selfishness that has provided fertile ground not only for capitalism, materialism and consumerism but for the fusing of all of them into a turbo-charged neoliberalism. That has entitled a tiny elite to amass and squirrel away most of the planet's wealth out of reach of the rest of humanity.

Worst of all, our rampant creativity, our self-regard and our competitiveness have blinded us to all things bigger and smaller than ourselves. We lack an emotional and spiritual connection to our planet, to other animals, to future generations, to the chaotic harmony of our universe. What we cannot understand or control, we ignore or mock.

And so, the liberal impulse has driven us to the brink of extinguishing our species and possibly all life on our

planet. Our drive to asset-strip, to hoard resources for personal gain, to plunder nature's riches without respect to the consequences is so overwhelming, so compulsive that the planet will have to find a way to rebalance itself. And if we carry on, that new balance – what we limply term “climate change” – will necessitate that we are stripped from the planet.

Dangerous Arrogance

One can plausibly argue that humans have been on this suicidal path for some time. Competition, creativity, selfishness predate liberalism, after all. But liberalism removed the last restraints, it crushed any opposing sentiment as irrational, as uncivilized, as primitive.

Liberalism isn't the cause of our predicament. It is the nadir of a dangerous arrogance we as a species have been indulging for too long, where the individual's good trumps any collective good, defined in the widest possible sense.

The liberal reveres his small, partial field of knowledge and expertise, eclipsing ancient and future wisdoms, those rooted in natural cycles, the seasons and a wonder at the ineffable and unknowable. The liberal's relentless and exclusive focus is on “progress,” growth, accumulation.

What is needed to save us is radical change. Not tinkering, not reform, but an entirely new vision that removes the individual and his personal gratification from the center of our social organization.

This is impossible to contemplate for the elites who think more liberalism, not less, is the solution. Anyone departing

from their prescriptions, anyone who aspires to be more than a technocrat correcting minor defects in the status quo, is presented as a menace. Despite the modesty of their proposals, Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. have been reviled by a media, political and intellectual elite heavily invested in blindly pursuing the path to self-destruction.

Status-quo Cheerleaders

As a result, we now have three clear political trends.

The first is the status-quo cheerleaders like the European writers of liberalism's latest – last? – manifesto. With every utterance they prove how irrelevant they have become, how incapable they are of supplying answers to the question of where we must head next. They adamantly refuse both to look inwards to see where liberalism went wrong and to look outwards to consider how we might extricate ourselves.

Irresponsibly, these guardians of the status quo lump together the second and third trends in the futile hope of preserving their grip on power. Both trends are derided indiscriminately as “populism,” as the politics of envy, the politics of the mob. These two fundamentally opposed, alternative trends are treated as indistinguishable.

This will not save liberalism, but it will assist in promoting the much worse of the two alternatives.

Those among the elites who understand that liberalism has had its day are exploiting the old ideology of grab-it-for-yourself capitalism while deflecting attention from their greed and the maintenance of their privilege by sowing

discord and insinuating dark threats.

The criticisms of the liberal elite made by the ethnic nationalists sound persuasive because they are rooted in truths about liberalism's failure. But as critics, they are disingenuous. They have no solutions apart from their own personal advancement in the existing, failed, self-sabotaging system.

The new authoritarians are reverting to old, trusted models of xenophobic nationalism, scapegoating others to shore up their own power. They are ditching the ostentatious, conscience-salving sensitivities of the liberal so that they can continue plundering with heady abandon. If the ship is going down, then they will be gorging on the buffet till the waters reach the dining-hall ceiling.

Where Hope Can Reside

The third trend is the only place where hope can reside. This trend – what I have previously ascribed to a group I call the “dissenters” – understands that radical new thinking is required. But given that this group is being actively crushed by the old liberal elite and the new authoritarians, it has little public and political space to explore its ideas, to experiment, to collaborate, as it urgently needs to.

Social media provides a potentially vital platform to begin critiquing the old, failed system, to raise awareness of what has gone wrong, to contemplate and share radical new ideas, and to mobilize. But the liberals and authoritarians understand this as threat to their own privilege and, under a confected hysteria about “fake news,” are rapidly working

to snuff out even this small space.

We have so little time, but still the old guard wants to block any possible path to salvation – even as seas filled with plastic start to rise, as insect populations disappear across the globe, and as the planet prepares to cough us out like a lump of infected mucus.

We must not be hoodwinked by these posturing, manifesto-spouting liberals: the philosophers, historians and writers – the public relations wing – of our suicidal status quo. They did not warn us of the beast lying cradled in our midst. They failed to see the danger looming, and their narcissism blinds them still.

We should have no use for the guardians of the old, those who held our hands, who shone a light along a path that has led to the brink of our own extinction. We need to discard them, to close our ears to their siren song.

There are small voices struggling to be heard above the roar of the dying liberal elites and the trumpeting of the new authoritarians. They need to be listened to, to be helped to share and collaborate, to offer us their visions of a different world. One where the individual is no longer king. Where we learn some modesty and humility – and how to love in our infinitely small corner of the universe.

Jonathan Cook is a freelance journalist based in Nazareth. He blogs at <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>.

Bases, Bases, Everywhere ... Except in the Pentagon's Report

These installations exist somewhere between light and shadow, writes Nick Turse. While acknowledged as foreign military outposts, they are excluded from the official inventory.

By Nick Turse

TomDispatch



Within hours of President Trump's announcement of a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, equipment at that base was already being inventoried for removal. And just like that, arguably the most important American garrison in Syria was ([maybe](#)) being struck from the Pentagon's books – except, as it happens, al-Tanf was never actually on the Pentagon's books. [Opened in 2015](#) and, until recently, home to hundreds of U.S. troops, it was one of the many military bases that exist somewhere between light and shadow, an acknowledged foreign outpost that somehow never actually made it onto the Pentagon's official inventory of bases.

Officially, the Department of Defense maintains 4,775 “sites,” spread across all 50 states, eight U.S. territories, and 45 foreign countries. A total of 514 of these outposts are located overseas, according to the Pentagon's [worldwide property portfolio](#). Just to start down a long list, these include bases on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa, as well as in Peru and Portugal, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. But the most recent version of that

portfolio, issued in early 2018 and known as the Base Structure Report (BSR), doesn't include any mention of al-Tanf. Or, for that matter, any other base in Syria. Or Iraq. Or Afghanistan. Or Niger. Or Tunisia. Or Cameroon. Or Somalia. Or any number of locales where such military outposts are known to exist and even, unlike in Syria, to be expanding.

According to David Vine, author of "Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World," there could be hundreds of similar off-the-books bases around the world. "The missing sites are a reflection of the lack of transparency involved in the system of what I still estimate to be around 800 U.S. bases outside the 50 states and Washington, D.C., that have been encircling the globe since World War II," says Vine, who is also a founding member of the recently established Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition, a group of military analysts from across the ideological spectrum who advocate shrinking the U.S. military's global "footprint."

Such off-the-books bases are off the books for a reason. The Pentagon doesn't want to talk about them. "I spoke to the press officer who is responsible for the Base Structure Report and she has nothing to add and no one available to discuss further at this time," Pentagon spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Michelle Baldanza told *TomDispatch* when asked about the Defense Department's many mystery bases.

"Undocumented bases are immune to oversight by the public and often even Congress," Vine explains. "Bases are a physical manifestation of U.S. foreign and military policy, so off-the-books bases mean the military and executive

branch are deciding such policy without public debate, frequently spending hundreds of millions or billions of dollars and potentially getting the U.S. involved in wars and conflicts about which most of the country knows nothing.”

Where Are They?

The Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition notes that the United States possesses up to 95 percent of the world’s foreign military bases, while countries like France, Russia, and the United Kingdom have perhaps 10-20 foreign outposts each. China has just one.

The Department of Defense even boasts that its “locations” include 164 countries. Put another way, it has a military presence of some sort in approximately 84 percent of the nations on this planet – or at least the DoD briefly claimed this. After *TomDispatch* inquired about the number on a new webpage designed to tell the Pentagon’s “story” to the general public, it was quickly changed. “We appreciate your diligence in getting to the bottom of this,” said Lieutenant Colonel Baldanza. “Thanks to your observations, we have updated defense.gov to say ‘more than 160.’”

What the Pentagon still doesn’t say is how it defines a “location.” The number 164 does roughly track with the Department of Defense’s current manpower statistics, which show personnel deployments of varying sizes in 166 “overseas” locales – including some nations with token numbers of U.S. military personnel and others, like Iraq and Syria, where the size of the force was obviously far larger, even if unlisted at the time of the assessment. (The

Pentagon recently claimed that there were 5,200 troops in Iraq and at least 2,000 troops in Syria although that number should now markedly shrink.) The Defense Department's "overseas" tally, however, also lists troops in U.S. territories like American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Wake Island. Dozens of soldiers, according to the Pentagon, are also deployed to the country of "Akrotiri" (which is actually a village on the island of Santorini in Greece) and thousands more are based in "unknown" locations.

In the latest report, the number of those "unknown" troops exceeds 44,000.

The annual cost of deploying U.S. military personnel overseas, as well as maintaining and running those foreign bases, tops out at an estimated \$150 billion annually, according to the Overseas Bases Realignment and Closure Coalition. The price tag for the outposts alone adds up to about one-third of that total. "U.S. bases abroad cost upwards of \$50 billion per year to build and maintain, which is money that could be used to address pressing needs at home in education, health care, housing, and infrastructure," Vine points out.

Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that the Pentagon is also somewhat fuzzy about just where its troops are stationed. The new Defense Department website, for instance, offered a count of "4,800+ defense sites" around the world. After *TomDispatch* inquired about this total and how it related to the official count of 4,775 sites listed in the BSR, the website was changed to read "approximately 4,800 Defense Sites."

“Thank you for pointing out the discrepancy. As we transition to the new site, we are working on updating information,” wrote Lieutenant Colonel Baldanza. “Please refer to the Base Structure Report which has the latest numbers.”

In the most literal sense, the Base Structure Report does indeed have the latest numbers – but their accuracy is another matter. “The number of bases listed in the BSR has long borne little relation to the actual number of U.S. bases outside the United States,” says Vine. “Many, many well-known and secretive bases have long been left off the list.”

One prime example is the constellation of outposts that the U.S. has built across Africa. The official BSR inventory lists only a handful of sites there – on Ascension Island as well as in Djibouti, Egypt, and Kenya. In reality, though, there are many more outposts in many more African countries.

A recent investigation by the *Intercept*, based on documents obtained from U.S. Africa Command via the Freedom of Information Act, revealed a network of 34 bases heavily clustered in the north and west of that continent as well as in the Horn of Africa. AFRICOM’s “strategic posture” consists of larger “enduring” outposts, including two forward operating sites (FOSes), 12 cooperative security locations (CSLs), and 20 more austere sites known as contingency locations (CLs).

The Pentagon’s official inventory does include the two FOSes: Ascension Island and the crown jewel of Washington’s African bases, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti,

which expanded from 88 acres in the early 2000s to nearly 600 acres today. The Base Structure Report is, however, missing a CSL in that same country, Chabelley Airfield, a lower-profile outpost located about 10 kilometers away that has served as a drone hub for operations in Africa and the Middle East.

The official Pentagon tally also mentions a site that goes by the confusing moniker of “NSA Bahrain-Kenya.” AFRICOM had previously described it as a collection of warehouses built in the 1980s at the airport and seaport of Mombasa, Kenya, but it now appears on that command’s 2018 list as a CSL. Missing, however, is another Kenyan base, Camp Simba, mentioned in a 2013 internal Pentagon study of secret drone operations in Somalia and Yemen. At least two manned surveillance aircraft were based there at the time. Simba, a longtime Navy-run facility, is currently operated by the Air Force’s 475th Expeditionary Air Base Squadron, part of the 435th Air Expeditionary Wing.

Personnel from that same air wing can be found at yet another outpost that doesn’t appear in the Base Structure Report, this one on the opposite side of the continent. The BSR states that it doesn’t list specific information on “non-U.S. locations” not at least 10 acres in size or worth at least \$10 million. However, the base in question – Air Base 201 in Agadez, Niger – already has a \$100 million construction price tag, a sum soon to be eclipsed by the cost of operating the facility: about \$30 million a year. By 2024, when the present 10-year agreement for use of the base ends, its construction and operating costs will have reached about \$280 million.

Also missing from the BSR are outposts in nearby Cameroon, including a longtime base in [Douala](#), a drone airfield in the remote town of [Garoua](#), and a facility known as Salak. That site, according to a [2017 investigation](#) by the *Intercept*, the research firm [Forensic Architecture](#), and [Amnesty International](#), has been used by U.S. personnel and private contractors for drone surveillance and training missions and by allied Cameroonian forces for illegal imprisonment and torture.

According to Vine, keeping America's African bases secret is advantageous to Washington. It protects allies on that continent from possible domestic opposition to the presence of American troops, he points out, while helping to ensure that there will be no domestic debate in the U.S. over such spending and the military commitments involved. "It's important for U.S. citizens to know where their troops are based in Africa and elsewhere around the world," he told *TomDispatch*, "because that troop presence costs the U.S. billions of dollars every year and because the U.S. is involved, or potentially involved, in wars and conflicts that could spiral out of control."

Those Missing Bases

Africa is hardly the only place where the Pentagon's official list doesn't match up well with reality. For close to two decades, the Base Structure Report has ignored bases of all sorts in America's active war zones. At the height of the American occupation of Iraq, for instance, the United States had 505 bases there, ranging from small outposts to mega-sized facilities. None appeared on the Pentagon's official rolls.

In Afghanistan, the numbers were even higher. As *TomDispatch* reported in 2012, the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force had about 550 bases in that country. If you had added ISAF checkpoints – small baselets used to secure roads and villages – to the count of mega-bases, forward operating bases, combat outposts, and patrol bases, the number reached an astounding 750. And counting all foreign military installations of every type – including logistical, administrative, and support facilities – hiked ISAF Joint Command's official count to 1,500 sites. America's significant share of them was, however, also mysteriously absent from the Defense Department's official tally.

There are now far fewer such facilities in Afghanistan – and the numbers may drop further in the months ahead as troop levels decrease. But the existence of Camp Morehead, Forward Operating Base Fenty, Tarin Kowt Airfield, Camp Dahlke West, and Bost Airfield, as well as Camp Shorab, a small installation occupying what was once the site of much larger twin bases known as Camp Leatherneck and Camp Bastion, is indisputable. Yet none of them has ever appeared in the Base Structure Report.

Similarly, while there are no longer 500-plus U.S. bases in Iraq, in recent years, as American troops returned to that country, some garrisons have either been reconstituted or built from scratch. These include the Besmaya Range Complex, Firebase Sakheem, Firebase Um Jorais, and Al Asad Air Base, as well as Qayyarah Airfield West—a base 40 miles south of Mosul that's better known as “Q-West.” Again, you

won't find any of them listed in the Pentagon's official count.

These days, it's even difficult to obtain accurate manpower numbers for the military personnel in America's war zones, let alone the number of bases in each of them. As Vine explains, "The military keeps the figures secret to some extent to hide the base presence from its adversaries. Because it is probably not hard to spot these bases in places like Syria and Iraq, however, the secrecy is mostly to prevent domestic debate about the money, danger, and death involved, as well as to avoid diplomatic tensions and international inquiries."

If stifling domestic debate through information control is the Pentagon's aim, it's been doing a fine job for years of deflecting questions about its global posture, or what the late *TomDispatch* regular [Chalmers Johnson](#) called America's "[empire of bases.](#)"

In mid-October, *TomDispatch* asked Heather Babb, another Pentagon spokesperson, for details about the outposts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria that were absent from the Base Structure Report, as well as about those missing African bases. Among the other questions put to Babb: Could the Pentagon offer a simple count – if not a list – of all its outposts? Did it have a true count of overseas facilities, even if it hadn't been released to the public – a list, that is, which actually did what the Base Structure Report only purports to do? October and November passed without answers.

In December, in response to follow-up requests for

information, Babb responded in a fashion firmly in line with the Pentagon's well-worn policy of keeping American taxpayers in the dark about the bases they pay for – no matter the theoretical difficulty of denying the existence of outposts that stretch from Agadez in Niger to Mosul in Iraq. “I have nothing to add,” she explained, “to the information and criteria that is included in the report.”

President Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria means that the 2019 Base Structure Report will likely be the most accurate in years. For the first time since 2015, the Pentagon's inventory of outposts will no longer be missing the al-Tanf garrison (or then again, [maybe it will](#)). But that still potentially leaves hundreds of off-the-books bases absent from the official rolls. Consider it one outpost down and who knows how many to go.

Nick Turse is the managing editor of [TomDispatch](#) and a contributing writer for the *Intercept*. His latest book is “Next Time They’ll Come to Count the Dead: War and Survival in South Sudan.” His website is [NickTurse.com](#).
