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AMERICAN AGGRESSION

The United States on the warpath against international law

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US Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Andrew J. Moseley

A United States airbase in Qatar. The US has inflicted violence and turmoil from Iran and Gaza to Venezuela, upending geopolitical relations and violating international law in the process. **11**

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Corporations are using carbon credits to exploit refugees

A UN scheme that purports to help tackle climate change while uplifting the lot of refugees through generation of carbon credits falls short on both counts.

Nicholas Beuret and David Harvie

AT the start of 2026, the White House declared that it was withdrawing from a raft of international organisations, covering areas of supposed global cooperation from education to aid to climate change. As with much that comes from the current administration, this announcement was deceptive: not only had the United States already disengaged and withdrawn funding from many of these bodies, but it has also long been actively undermining their operation.

Perhaps the starkest example concerned the United States' international aid budget. In 2025, massive cuts led to the UN World Food Programme cutting upward of 30% of its staff, while the international body responsible for refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), declared it would downsize, cutting positions and reducing expenditure. In this new world, Donald Trump warned that the UN and its agencies must 'adapt, shrink or die'.

The deepening climate crisis of UNHCR

This is not a new crisis for the UN and its refugee agency. It is, however, a dramatic escalation.

In 2024, the number of forcibly displaced people reached a record high of 122.6 million, 32 million of whom are refugees under UNHCR's mandate. While the numbers of those forced from their homes have often fluctuated, there have been more dramatic increases since 2010 and, especially, since 2020, driven increasingly by environmental disasters.

Around a fifth of refugees end up in camps, where they are often stuck for a decade or more. But while refugee numbers have exploded, funding to support them has not. UNHCR has rarely had sufficient funding. Now it is in a deep financial crisis. While its target for funding in 2025 was $10.6 billion, it had only managed to raise $3.5 billion. This shortfall will put millions at risk of harm.

Climate change is one of the central drivers of displacement, both directly through environmental crises and indirectly as conflicts over resources – from water to critical minerals used for 'green' technologies – force people from their villages and towns.

In response to both crises – funding shortfalls and climate impacts – the UN is choosing to adapt. But it's doing so by exploiting refugees to enable corporations to keep trashing the atmosphere, all to fund refugee camp infrastructure.

In 2021, UNHCR launched the Refugee Environmental Protection (REP) Fund. The idea is that refugees' labour, both waged and unwaged, is used to create carbon credits, which are then sold to fund the refugee camps.

As with similar social and environmental funds and bonds, the fund starts by attracting initial donors who enable the initial investment in credit-generating programmes around refugee camps. The positive carbon impacts of these programmes are then verified and registered as carbon credits that are sold on voluntary carbon markets; the income generated replenishes the fund, allowing camps to become more financially sustainable and enabling additional programmes in other camps.

A carbon credit is a tradeable certificate representing the removal of one tonne of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. It essentially acts as a permit that allows a person or organisation to 'offset' its own pollution by paying for environmental improvements elsewhere. A voluntary carbon credit (VCC) is one bought by a company or person who is not legally required to purchase them, similar to when you purchase an airline ticket and you're invited to pay more in order to 'offset' the environmental impact of your flight.

Following feasibility assessments, UNHCR has selected three pilot sites for the fund in Uganda and Rwanda. Fund managers are planning further feasibility studies in Brazil, Bangladesh, Kenya, Mozambique, Cameroon and Chad.

Two labour processes will be mobilised in order to generate carbon credits across these three sites. The first is the planting and maintaining of trees (reforestation). Starting with 20,000 hectares around the three pilot sites, the fund's eventual target is tens of millions of new trees in the vicinity of refugee camps. The employment provided for refugees is an additional benefit of the scheme.

However, reforestation work is poorly paid. There is no standard pay rate for reforestation work in Uganda and Rwanda, but the pay for a similar project in Uganda was

around $1.30 per day. Most accounts suggest pay rates of $2 to $5 per day for formal work contracts; actual pay can be much lower.

While reforestation work is poorly paid, the other credit-generating activity isn't paid at all. A sizeable proportion of the labour generating carbon credits will come from the use of so-called clean cooking stoves, that is, stoves that use liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) or solar energy. (Their use of LPG is one reason why gas-exporting countries such as the United States support clean-cooking initiatives, even when they otherwise oppose climate measures.) This work is done 'for free'; it is unwaged reproductive labour – in this case, everyday housework – done primarily by women. For the purpose of generating carbon credits, this unwaged work is assessed in the same way as reforestation work.

Counting carbon credits

Trees sequester carbon dioxide, but carbon credits are made by people. Apart from the highly remunerated financial engineers and intermediaries, the REP Fund will put refugees to work to generate these credits. Refugees' work will be low-waged in the case of reforestation and unwaged in the case of credits 'generated' by the use of clean cooking stoves.

We can compare this against the money the fund expects to raise. The fund will produce Gold Standard–certified carbon credits, which are typically valued at $20–27 per tonne of CO2e (carbon dioxide equivalent, at 2025 prices). If we take the midrange for carbon sequestration of eight tonnes of CO2e per hectare per year, the value per year for the planned 20,000 hectares of the REP Fund programme is $3.2 million, generating $64 million over a presumed 20-year period.

The vast majority of the value generated won't go to the refugees, however, but to the companies buying the credits enabling them to continue polluting the atmosphere, to the intermediatory actors who manage the transactions, and finally to UNHCR itself, where the sale underwrites the continued operations of UN camps.

Won't someone think of the climate?

But will the exploitation of vulnerable refugees trapped in camps for decades at least contribute to stopping climate change? The short answer is no.

There are significant and by now well-known problems with VCCs. Markets are self-regulated and there is no common set of criteria and methodologies concerning their generation – both factors undermine the credibility of any claims to carbon reductions. What's more, key actors across the production and reporting chain, including host governments, are incentivised to overstate the impacts of projects. Worse, the science behind carbon credits in general is questionable.

To assess what carbon has been 'saved' by a project, an assessor needs to make a series of counterfactual estimates. What would have happened if the reforestation or clean-cooking project had not gone ahead? This is difficult to do accurately, if not impossible. Not only because of the need for counterfactual evidence but because climate change and land use themselves impact local carbon sequestration rates.

In addition, reforestation projects have high failure rates, with many projects suffering close to 45% mortality rates in the first five years. Some poorly managed projects can have mortality rates as high as 90 percent. Die-off isn't the only factor to consider. Reforestation projects can also have destructive impacts on soil (releasing more carbon) and biodiversity and can provoke water shortages. Climate change is also increasing the frequency of wildfires, creating additional risks of carbon emissions from reforestation projects.

This combination of problems with VCCs, and accreditation in general, make even the most legitimate carbon credit schemes dubious at best. It's for this reason that they are generally decried as false climate solutions that enable companies to continue to create carbon emissions without any countervailing carbon reductions. Indeed, much research has established that large numbers of VCCs are in fact worthless.

Maladapting to climate change

All this means UNHCR's REP Fund risks making the situation worse. It is less an adaptation and more a maladaptation to climate change.

In effect, the project takes those displaced in no small part by the climate crisis and puts them to work for a pittance to benefit those companies responsible for the climate crisis. Worse, these displaced people labour to make the camps that confine them sustainable. While not quite the same as installing bird-friendly electric fences around prisons, this nevertheless is on the spectrum of 'greening' the technologies of confinement that many of the world's 'surplus' populations find themselves trapped within.

Similar to the social and environmental consequences of many aspects of the emerging 'green economy', the REP Fund risks contributing to worsening climate impacts while exploiting refugee labour for the benefit of those most responsible for climate-changing emissions.

It's hard to see this as anything but the worst outcome in response to the existing situation, one that greenwashes the abandonment of the world's climate-displaced. ◆

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The plan to put health at the heart of the global economy

The World Health Organization has drawn up a blueprint to orient economies towards realising 'Health for All'.

WHO Watch

Anna Frodesiak

WHO's approach insists that healthy populations aren't a byproduct of wealth: they are the very engine that produces it.

FOR decades, finance ministers have viewed health spending the way homeowners view repairing leaky roofs: a necessary nuisance, a cost to be minimised. Hospitals consume budgets. Doctors require salaries. Medicines drain foreign exchange. When economies tighten, the health minister is often among the first cabinet ministers sent home with a smaller envelope.

But a quiet revolution might be underway in Geneva which threatens to flip this logic on its head.

This May, when member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) gather for the 79th World Health Assembly, they will be asked to approve something unprecedented: a formal strategy declaring that health is not a cost at all but the single best investment any economy can make.

WHO's new 'Economics of Health for All' (EH4A) strategy, six years in the making, begins with a startling premise. For generations, we have measured national success by gross domestic product (GDP), the total value of the stuff we make and sell. By that metric, a country that sells cigarettes and cancer treatment looks more successful than a country where nobody gets sick. This is not just wrong. It is dangerous. And yet, this is the logic that has driven globalisation for decades, centuries even.

In the prevailing economic framework, health is treated as a residual. We grow the economy first, and then if there's anything left, we spend a little on keeping people alive and productive. We've had it backwards.

WHO's approach insists that healthy populations aren't a byproduct of wealth: they are the very engine that produces it. It sounds like common sense. But common sense, in global health politics, often collides with powerful interests.

From Alma Ata to Geneva: a 50-year arc

To understand why this moment matters, we need to look back. In 1978, at the International Conference on Primary Health Care, held in Alma Ata in present-day Kazakhstan, the world declared that 'Health for All' would be achieved by the year 2000. That declaration was radical for its time. It explicitly linked health to economic justice, calling for a 'New International Economic Order' that would redistribute resources from rich nations to poor ones.

This was a direct reference to the 1974 United Nations General Assembly resolution establishing the New International Economic Order (NIEO). The framework was designed to rectify the structural imbalances inherited from colonialism, a system sustained through resource extraction, labour exploitation and the systematic appropriation of knowledge. Anchored in principles of sovereign equality and human dignity, the NIEO sought to secure permanent sovereignty over natural resources for developing states, reform global trade to ensure equitable pricing for raw commodities, and transform international monetary arrangements. It further called for facilitated technology transfer

and a binding code of conduct to govern transnational corporations, recognising that political independence would remain incomplete without economic sovereignty.

It didn't happen. The 1980s brought debt crises, structural adjustment programmes and the creeping privatisation of health systems. The 2000s brought ambitious disease-specific programmes: HIV treatment, malaria bednets and vaccine campaigns that saved millions but neglected various other health needs and left health systems fragmented, underfunded and commodified.

Now, a half-century later, a holistic vision is being resurrected. Its relevance and prescience are more obvious than ever.

What the strategy actually does

For all its lofty language, the draft EH4A strategy is surprisingly concrete. Its recommendations fall into five categories, each with specific tools that governments can adopt immediately. The first directs economic policy towards health by reforming tax systems, integrating health impact assessments into trade agreements, ensuring decent work and social protection, and recognising unpaid care work.

The second moves beyond GDP by adopting progress dashboards that monitor health equity and community vitality, while applying equity standards to guide private investment. The third increases domestic financing through progressive taxation, earmarked health taxes and outcome-focused budgeting, while using tax credits and intellectual property sharing to build local innovation ecosystems.

The fourth builds public sector capacity by embedding health economics expertise across government, integrating these competencies into medical education, and fostering coordination through multistakeholder observatories. The fifth secures evidence-informed implementation through a long-term research agenda, transparency protections, conflict-of-interest management and civil society engagement to counter disinformation.

Guilhem Vellut (CC BY 2.0)

WHO headquarters in Geneva.

In February, at the 158th WHO Executive Board meeting, developing countries expressed their enthusiasm for the strategy, though they approached it differently.

Even the staunchest supporters must acknowledge the strategy's blind spots. It largely sidesteps the sovereign debt crisis crushing health budgets across Africa and Latin America. It mentions the growing dominance of financial markets in healthcare delivery but without confronting it.

Nor does it name the geopolitical forces constraining its vision. Trade agreements that constrain domestic regulation, currency volatility that wrecks import-dependent health systems, the imperial architecture of global economic governance. These remain, for now, outside the frame.

But despite its limitations, the strategy is paving a way for a new kind of economics, one that is more humane. For 50 years, the global health menu has offered variations on the same theme: more aid, more efficient delivery, better metrics. The EH4A strategy offers something else entirely. It asks countries to redesign the economic order.

Whether the strategy can deliver on its vision depends on battles still unwaged. But for the first time in a generation, the question is no longer whether health belongs in economic policymaking. It is what kind of economy we are willing to build.

The strategy predictably will hit a wall of political tension that no clever policy wording can dismantle. Powerful players with a comfortable stake in how things work now are not about to just roll over. The real question isn't whether they'll push back (they already are). It's whether the countries and communities who stand to gain can organise enough weight to push back harder. Without that, the most ambitious ideas in this strategy risk becoming fine print nobody ever acts on, yet again. ◆

The WHO Watch is a programme in global health governance for activists organised by the People's Health Movement (PHM). To learn more about the programme, visit phmovement.org/global-health-governance.

Migration is an underdevelopment issue

For the people of the Global South, migration can be both lifeline and death trap.

Vijay Prashad

USDA photo by Bob Nichols (CC BY 2.0)

Migrant farm workers in the United States. Migration plays a key but contradictory role in development.

IN 2014, the United Nations' International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched the Missing Migrants Project. The project, which 'hosts the only open-access database of records of deaths during migration on the global level', estimates that at least 33,220 migrants have died or disappeared while crossing the Mediterranean Sea since 2014. This is a very low estimate because IOM admits that it cannot account for every boat that leaves the North African coast, let alone trace those that never arrive in Europe.

South of the Mediterranean lies the Sahara Desert, where the dangers are even greater. IOM estimates that more people die crossing the Sahara each year than they do crossing the Mediterranean, but because these deaths occur far from Europe's shores, they receive far less attention.

It takes about three days to cross the Sahara from Agadez, Niger, to Sabha, Libya, if conditions allow and the sandstorms are not particularly brutal. Almost a decade ago, while travelling in the region, I heard survivors of the crossing describe how common it is to come across bodies half-buried in the sand and hear cries of distress from those left behind. It is routine for one or two migrants to die in a convoy; some fall from the back of a truck and are abandoned, while others are sometimes shot by smugglers.

This corridor is used by people from across the continent, including Eritreans. As Teklebrhan Tefamariam Tekle, an Eritrean refugee in Sweden, told the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as part of the Telling the Real Story project, 'The accidents are back there in the Sahara. The Sahara is full of Eritrean bodies.' When Teklebrhan reached Libya, he was held in captivity. When he and others attempted to cross the sea, their boat was intercepted by the Libyan coast guards, and they were taken to a detention centre in the coastal city of Zuwara. After eight months, Teklebrhan signed up for what he thought was an evacuation flight, only to be sent back to Eritrea. He later fled again and eventually secured resettlement in Sweden.

I have been thinking about people such as Teklebrhan and others whom I met in the Sahara, who made brave journeys against all odds to reach Europe in search of work. Few of them wanted to get to Europe for the sake of the destination; their true destination was a livelihood, wherever that might be. Their countries, destabilised by war, sanctions and plunder, cannot provide employment so long as they remain caged in neocolonial structures.

Contradictory role

The data on migration tells an important story. The number of international migrants has doubled, from 154 million in 1990 to 304 million in 2024. If all these migrants formed one country, it would be the fourth most populous country in the world after India, China and the United States. The World Bank estimates that global remittances increased by 4.6%, from $865 billion in 2023 to $905 billion in 2024. If these migrants were a country, their remittances would exceed the combined value of outward foreign direct investment from the United States, Japan and China in 2024. One in

eight people on the planet rely on these remittances to supplement their income and consumption patterns. The question of migration is not a rounding error in the world economy, it is one of its organising features.

For the poorer nations, migration plays a key but contradictory role in development. On the one hand, the youth-led protests in Morocco and Nepal in 2025 showed that young people increasingly resent the economic compulsion to emigrate for precarious employment in foreign lands. They would prefer to work in their own countries so that they can live culturally and socially fulfilling lives with their family and friends. This puts pressure on governments in the Global South to build national development strategies that generate decent employment through measures such as agrarian reform, industrial policy and public investment. On the other hand, in many countries remittances bring in more foreign currency than foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, especially as total FDI to developing countries fell by 7% in 2023 to $867 billion, with notable declines in Africa and Asia. This means that countries become structurally dependent on exporting labour simply to survive.

Any economic agenda in the Global South needs to grapple with the contradiction between the loss of labour to migration and the dependence on remittances for macroeconomic stability and household livelihoods. In the short term, the poorer nations need to link remittance flows to development finance, so that a share of these funds is not absorbed entirely by the immediate day-to-day needs of the working-class and poor households that depend on them. This can be done through voluntary public savings and credit instruments, rather than by attempting to control household transfers. In the longer term, productive investment is required to employ labour at home and end the economic compulsion to emigrate.

Ógláigh na hÉireann (CC BY 2.0)

Migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean Sea rescued by an Irish naval vessel. At least 33,220 migrants are estimated to have died or disappeared while crossing the Mediterranean since 2014.

Mexico, under the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), began an interesting experiment in 2023 to reduce remittance costs and expand access to public financial services. The AMLO government used an existing state financial vehicle – Financiera para el Bienestar (Finabien) – to promote lower-cost remittances and financial inclusion. Through the creation of a Finabien card and app, Mexican migrants in the United States were able to send money directly to their families through Finabien's platform, reducing reliance on high-fee remittance intermediaries. The funds were deposited into digital accounts linked to the card. This policy reduced the transaction costs of remittances while bringing more recipient households into the formal financial system. Yet remittances are also a point of vulnerability, since the infrastructure that enables these transfers sits largely in the hands of the Global North. In the United States, the Trump administration has enacted a 1% excise tax on certain remittance transfers from 1 January 2026, echoing earlier threats to cut off remittances to the region as a tool of political pressure.

If a programme like Finabien were expanded and linked to a broader development strategy in other parts of the world, remittances entering these state-backed accounts could serve as a stable pool of deposits, allowing recipients to save and access credit, while strengthening the banking system's deposit base and lending capacity. With the right public institutions – such as development banks and directed-credit programmes – a portion of this expanded deposit base could be channelled into long-term lending for infrastructure and productive industry. In this way, remittances could be given voluntary pathways into productive investment, rather than being absorbed entirely by day-to-day consumption needs.

Constraints on development

For decades, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed on the poorer nations have prioritised creditor and rentier interests, in the name of 'macroeconomic stabilisation', over productive investment and employment. SAP conditionalities consistently include fiscal austerity, limits on public-sector hiring, wage restraint, and reductions in state-led investment. These measures constrain the ability of governments to pursue industrial policy, expand public works or actively create jobs. In practice, the IMF's prescriptions create a 'surplus population' in the Global South that is compelled to emigrate for survival. This displacement is intensified by

imperialist wars and by economic weapons such as unilateral coercive measures, which erode public revenue, destroy key infrastructure, restrict access to trade and finance, and fracture families. According to UNHCR, by the end of 2024, 122 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence and related violations.

Development strategies that fail to generate productive employment merely export labour while deepening dependency on remittances. Domestic job creation – through measures that raise productivity and expand public capacity, from agrarian reform and public investment to industrial policy and public services – allows people to remain rooted in their communities, strengthens national economies and reduces forced migration. Development that does not create gainful employment ultimately displaces the poor rather than liberating them from poverty.

Migration must therefore be understood as a consequence of Global South underdevelopment and unequal exchange, not merely a security problem for the Global North. Creating dignified employment in the poorer nations is the primary answer to forced economic migration. But for that, the IMF's austerity policies need to be replaced by a development agenda that expands fiscal space, supports public investment and enables industrial policy.

Of course, there are other issues at stake. With rapidly ageing populations and low birth rates, driven by a crisis in social reproduction, the Global North has come to rely on migrant labour from the Global South across key sectors, from care work and agriculture to construction and logistics. In the main settler-colonial states of the Global North, this dependence also extends to high-skilled labour in health, engineering and universities, as gaps in public training and education are increasingly filled through immigration. Yet migrants are routinely vilified and criminalised, even as their labour becomes indispensable. This contradiction has not gone uncontested. On 30 January, mass mobilisations across the United States challenged the Trump administration's highly militarised anti-immigrant campaign that has included mass raids, detention and deportations. They came amid the deaths of dozens of migrants in immigration custody in 2025 and the fatal shootings of two US citizens in Minneapolis at the hands of federal immigration agents.

The tensions around migration are also reflected in international policy. The United Nations' Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), endorsed by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, sets out 23 objectives. A close reading of the GCM's objectives suggests three important policy points:

1. Address the root causes of migration through productive investment. This is raised in objective 2: 'Minimise the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin'. In principle, reducing forced migration requires expanding livelihoods at home, but that demands fiscal space and policy autonomy that austerity regimes routinely deny.

2. Align labour mobility with demographic realities. This is raised in objective 5: 'Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration' and objective 18: 'Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences'. In effect, the GCM promotes regular labour mobility pathways that respond to labour market needs in destination countries, alongside mechanisms to recognise migrants' qualifications. This can reduce irregular migration and exploitation, but it can also normalise labour export as a development 'solution'.

3. Reduce the cost of remittances and promote financial inclusion. This is raised in objective 20: 'Promote faster, safer and cheaper transfer of remittances and foster financial inclusion of migrants'. The GCM also notes that remittances are private funds and 'cannot be equated' with other development finance, which underlines the contradiction: households are forced to shoulder burdens that should be met by public investment.

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While travelling in Libya two years ago, I was struck to see the nest of a barn swallow in an abandoned military truck. Barn swallows are migratory birds that cross the Mediterranean and the Sahara each year. They pay no heed to borders, and they often nest among us, even amid our wreckage. The swallow has long been a symbol of the long journey and the hope of return. In maritime tradition, sailors tattooed swallows as a sign of safe passage and homecoming. In parts of Europe, it is considered bad luck to destroy a swallow's nest. Perhaps the old superstition carries a simple lesson: respect the traveller, and build a world in which no one is forced to risk death to find a livelihood. As the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote, 'And as you return home – to your home – think of others.' ◆

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Coupang v. South Korea: When a data breach leads to a geopolitical standoff

Investigations into a massive data leak involving an American e-commerce giant in South Korea have triggered investment dispute action and tariff threats. Such pushback, cautions *Burcu Kilic*, can serve as a recourse for tech companies to deter government scrutiny of their extensive operations.

USUALLY, hearing the words 'investor-state arbitration' invokes a familiar story: a foreign investor suing a host government in international arbitration, claiming that the government harmed its investment through regulation or other state action. For decades, that has been true, but the *Coupang v. South Korea* case now challenges that assumption.

Coupang – widely known as 'the Amazon of Korea' – is that nation's dominant e-commerce and logistics platform. It is built for Korean consumers and operates primarily in South Korea, with nearly 90% of its revenue coming from the Korean market.

Crucially, it does not operate in the United States, and most Americans have never heard of it. However, Coupang is incorporated in the US state of Delaware, listed on the New York Stock Exchange, backed by American investors, and files with the US Securities and Exchange Commission. On paper, that makes Coupang an American company, and in the world of investment arbitration and Washington politics, that is all it takes.

Coupang has 33.7 million customer accounts in South Korea, a country with a population of roughly 50 million. In November 2025, the company announced a data breach involving 33.7 million accounts but asserted that only 3,000 records were exposed. The sheer scale of the breach – involving two-thirds of the population – prompted police and regulatory investigations, lawsuits and political outrage.

Bonnielou2013 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Coupang is the dominant e-commerce and logistics platform in South Korea. Picture shows a Coupang delivery truck in Seoul.

However, it soon became clear that those '3,000' records were not telling the full story. Authorities later found that an additional 165,000 records had been exposed, including sensitive information such as names, phone numbers and addresses.

More importantly, this was not a 'hack scandal' as we usually understand it, but rather a massive data leak stemming from a security failure on Coupang's end. The government investigation found that a former Coupang engineer had walked out with a cryptographic signing key and used it to generate login tokens. For seven months, Coupang's monitoring systems caught nothing out of the ordinary. According to press reports, Coupang's security budget accounted for only 0.2% of revenue. Amazon, for reference, invests between 1–1.4% of its revenue in security.

Given the context, the data leak caused significant public backlash in South Korea in December 2025. The breach triggered regulatory and parliamentary scrutiny, and the kind of political outrage one would expect when tens of millions of consumers learn that their data has been exposed. Coupang's CEO resigned, and the government established a 'Coupang Task

Force' to investigate the leak and take necessary measures to protect Korean consumers. The incident also resurfaced broader concerns about Coupang, including market power, labour practices and the safety risks associated with its extremely short delivery windows: same- or next-day delivery, year round.

Amid all this outrage, the case took a turn deserving close attention from anyone working on digital governance.

The pressure campaign: investor-state dispute settlement, Section 301 and tariffs

Two US investors – Greenoaks and Altimeter – served a notice of intent to initiate arbitration against South Korea under the investment chapter of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) is a set of rules that permits foreign investors to sue a government in international arbitration for damages arising from alleged breaches of a free trade agreement. As such, ISDS threats can deter regulatory and enforcement efforts by making them appear to pose a liability risk. In this case, Greenoaks and Altimeter claim that Korea's regulatory and administrative response after the leak was 'discriminatory, disproportionate and pretextual', and estimate their losses in the tens of billions of dollars.

However, the notice of intent was only the beginning. While dealing with the fallout from one of the country's biggest data leaks and trying to control the narrative in South Korea, Coupang was lobbying hard in Washington. The investors also petitioned the United States Trade Representative under Section 301 of the US Trade Act, requesting an investigation into Korea's actions and trade remedies that could include retaliatory tariffs on Korean goods. Republican Party lawmakers in the US Congress are investigating alleged discrimination against Coupang, the American company in South Korea, and have issued a subpoena seeking communications between Coupang and the Korean government. Press reports linked the Trump administration's decision to raise tariffs on Korean goods, from an already agreed 15% to 25%, partly to the Coupang dispute.

Data breaches and leaks occur frequently, and when companies fail to implement basic cybersecurity controls (in this case, a basic offboarding process), communicate clearly and take responsibility, regulators must be able to investigate and hold them accountable. Coupang was already facing scrutiny over platform market power, worker safety and labour practices, and the data leak and public outrage pushed the Korean government and parliament to dig deeper into consumer protection. The case also made clear that Coupang is so dominant in the South Korean market that, even if users want to leave, many have no real alternative.

Looking ahead, this arbitration threat should be seen as a test case. If foreign investors can frame the Korean multi-agency enforcement as 'discrimination' or 'unfair treatment', it could chill privacy, cybersecurity and competition enforcement well beyond Korea.

What makes Coupang's case even more interesting are the different layers. This layering of ISDS threats, Section 301 petition and congressional pressure is aimed at casting South Korean regulatory and parliamentary action as anti-American, protectionist and pro-China. In other words, it turns a domestic accountability response into a geopolitical confrontation.

South Korea may have a strong case for regulatory and parliamentary action following mismanagement and a major cybersecurity failure. However, tariff pressures may push Seoul towards a settlement.

As one US commentator wrote back in December 2025: 'Trump has worked hard to rebalance the trade relationship with Korea, and it would be very unfortunate if Korea undermines his efforts by targeting US tech firms. … A strong, coordinated US response is essential to safeguard fair treatment of US companies and maintain strategic balance against China's growing economic influence in the sector.'

Traditionally, tech companies have not relied on ISDS to challenge government regulations or actions, in part because US trade policy and diplomacy have long advanced their agenda. In recent years, however, they have become more conscious of investment treaty protections. Uber tested this playbook in Colombia back in 2020, after the Colombian competition authority banned Uber's ride-hailing app. Uber threatened Colombia with an ISDS claim, but the ban was shortlived and was quickly overturned by the highest court soon after.

If South Korea settles, it will set a global precedent: It will let regulators worldwide know that ISDS cases do not have to reach a tribunal to cause damage. That threat alone could chill regulatory, administrative and judicial efforts globally, and it is precisely why the Coupang case serves as a cautionary tale for everyone. ISDS, or just the threat of it, combined with trade pressure and political lobbying, can be a powerful tool for tech companies to discipline governments. We need to name this pattern now – before it becomes the new normal. ◆

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The path to the Trump doctrine

Even prior to its attack on Iran, the United States under the Trump administration had dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape with a combination of brute force, blunt threat and bulldozing action. Reflecting both continuity and rupture with past US policy, this stance relies on coercion without consent, and influence without legitimacy, contend *Aslı Ü. Bâli* and *Aziz Rana* in this piece written before the Iran conflict.

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The Trump administration's National Security Strategy 'largely abandons the post–Cold War language of multilateralism and liberal internationalism, replacing that language with a blunt, transactional vision of national interest and hemispheric dominance'.

IN late 2024, the world watched with a mix of hope and disbelief as opposition forces in Syria finally toppled Bashar al-Assad, ending more than 50 years of rule by the Assad family. Images of rebel fighters throwing open the gates of the notorious Sednaya prison, where thousands had been detained, tortured and killed under the old government, symbolised a break from a past defined by repression and mass killing. Opposition leader Ahmed al-Sharaa declared the beginning of 'a new chapter in the history of the region', and in the months that followed, it seemed like that old hope might finally be realised. Several countries – including the United States – eased sanctions to support Syria's fragile democratic transition. And by November 2025 al-Sharaa was standing in the Oval Office, where even US President Donald Trump expressed something like cautious optimism. 'We want to see Syria become a country that's very successful,' he said. 'We have all had rough pasts.'

In theory, the fall of Assad created a moment for reconstruction and renewed sovereignty. In reality, Syria's transition would fall swiftly under American supervision. The Trump administration spent the second half of 2025 forging new arrangements for managing Syria in partnership with Israel, drawing up a security pact in which Syrian forces would withdraw from the border region and allow for the opening of an air corridor for Israel to strike Iran. Negotiations remain ongoing to finalise the details, but the core elements underscore the double edge of the opportunity presented by Assad's toppling: while the new Syrian leadership seeks to end regional isolation, the proposed agreements risk turning Damascus into a client state.

If 2025 opened with the hope – albeit quickly dashed – that the United States might encourage local sovereignty, the first days of 2026 witnessed that hope's stark opposite: the sudden, forcible removal of a sitting head of state. After an abduction operation that apparently involved the killing of over a hundred people on Venezuelan soil, US officials declared Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was in American custody, a fact quickly confirmed by a photo of a blindfolded Maduro in a US Navy ship. A gloating Trump proclaimed the United States would now 'run Venezuela' and take control of the country's oil.

It was a stunning action, but not necessarily a surprising one. A month earlier, the Trump administration had hinted at its future plans in its National Security Strategy, a 33-page manifesto-like statement of its foreign policy priorities. The document frankly describes the world in terms of 'global and regional balances of power', highlighting the need for the United States to redefine its economic relationship with China while framing the challenge in Europe as one of managing the continent's relations with Russia.

It largely abandons the post–Cold War language of multilateralism and liberal internationalism, replacing that language with a blunt, transactional vision of national interest and hemispheric dominance. And it presents the Western Hemisphere as a region to be dominated under the 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine – or as he calls it, the Donroe Doctrine.

Unlike earlier American framings, Trump's embrace of conditional sovereignty suggests an approach where the United States stands first in a multipolar world of authoritarian hegemons and operates independent of longstanding American self-understanding with respect to democracy or the rule of law. This approach sees the globe as divided among 'civilisationally' distinct ethno-national communities. And the explicitness of its embrace of quid pro quo arrangements and hard power alone renders quaint the long-familiar talk of international law. US action now depends on raw threat rather than the classic combination of hard and soft power, where force proceeded alongside legitimating narratives and consensus-building. Under the Trump doctrine, 'America First' suggests two claims: a domestic ethno-racial identity that asserts a fortress wall against immigrants, and continued global dominance where the strongest stick presides over a lawless order.

Today, Trump and those around him openly talk about annexing Greenland, Canada and the Panama Canal, gloat over extrajudicial killings in the Caribbean and the Pacific, threaten to seize rare-earth minerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and oil in Venezuela, abduct foreign heads of state, and suggest similar actions – along with potential regime change – across the Americas and the world, from Iran to Cuba, Nicaragua, Colombia and even Mexico. All the while, they muse over the benefits of Palestinian ethnic cleansing, impose sanctions on jurists – foreign and international – that seek accountability for war crimes or gross human rights abuses, use tariff threats to extract global resources, and treat white South Africans as the world's only worthy refugees. What brought us to this point?

'Regardless of who governs in DC, American and Israeli preferences systematically override the sovereignty of local populations in the Middle East.'

New old doctrine

Depending on your vantage point, the Trump doctrine appears either strikingly new or eerily familiar. Beltway commentators rushed to label the National Security Strategy a 'radical departure' from the US-led post–World War II era. Others saw its mirror in the 19th-century gunboat diplomacy of US naval coercion from Japan to the Caribbean. And critics to the left were quick to underscore its links to the long trail of US imperialism, from Cold War rivalries in the Global South to the more recent terms of the war on terror. In many ways, the best reading is one that underscores both continuity and rupture.

If there was a break from the past, it began long before January 2025. For one thing, the post-1945 liberal international order has always been marked by legal restraint and self-interested defection, the creation of human rights bodies and the embrace of coups, assassinations and armed overthrows. In the last 25 years, those defections have swallowed the rule. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States rendered sovereignty negotiable and transformed the universal premises of the postwar order into something far narrower: a reconfigured world subject to American prerogatives, conditions and tutelage. Trump has now pushed this logic past its breaking point, by directly attacking even the institutions that would sustain international law for other states. Today, the country is not simply defecting from the rules – expanding the zone of exception for itself – but acting to make those rules fundamentally inoperable.

The path to the Trump doctrine is long and winding, but to understand its most proximate influences, we need only look back a couple of presidents – especially to their actions in the Middle East. Barack Obama may have been celebrated for his commitment to liberal internationalism, and in many ways, he did embody its last gasp. Even so, his administration designed a system of targeted killing through drone strikes in the Muslim world that purported to legalise extrajudicial executions at the sole discretion of the US president. Trump's killings at sea take such Obama-era lawlessness

as their clear precedent.

After Trump's first term, the Biden presidency was billed a return to normalcy with respect to international law and global responsibility. Yet instead of resurrecting the old order, Biden cemented its end, exemplified by his refusal to apply either US or international law to Gaza – even in the face of a drumbeat of official resignations.

In 2021, he came into office declaring that 'America is back' and 'ready to lead the world', asserting a 'values-based' approach to foreign policy that evoked the days of postwar internationalism. As it turned out, the change was more one of tone than substance. In press conferences and statements, Biden liked to invoke a nostalgic image of Cold War American multilateralism (one that conveniently omitted all those interventions and coups). Yet the centrepiece of 'winning hearts and minds' during the Cold War had been massive material investments to woo potential allies, embodied through projects such as the Marshall Plan. And while Biden did reestablish some funding for organisations like the World Health Organization (WHO), his administration was sceptical of WHO's new investment round and related funding reforms, both backed by a cross-section of Europe and the Global South.

Neither did Biden slow the decades-long decline of US foreign aid as a percentage of GDP, let alone suggest any real dedication to spreading American largesse – an attitude highlighted by the terms of his much-touted exit from Afghanistan. The United States may have pumped billions of dollars into the country, but often through defence contracting that enriched US companies without materially improving the lives of Afghans or building legitimacy for US-backed institutions. When Biden ordered troops to leave the country, he left behind a record of broken promises and local allies bereft of protection,

UNRWA (CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO)

Flooded tents of displaced Palestinians due to heavy rain in Deir el-Balah, Gaza Strip. Under Trump's Gaza ceasefire plan, 'Palestinians are treated not as a community with legitimate political claims but as a problem to be managed and policed'.

all of which reduced grand US rhetoric to cheap talk.

At the same time, the Biden administration embraced its own aggressive posturing and rule-breaking. It essentially kept in place the hardline Trump policies towards Cuba, undermining trade and travel and further isolating the country after the Obama-era détente. And despite claims to the contrary, it never recommitted to the signature foreign policy accomplishment of those Obama years, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, from which Trump had unilaterally withdrawn. Instead, Biden continued to blanket Tehran with harsh sanctions.

'Pivot to Asia'

But Biden's most visible continuation of the Trump 1.0 approach came in the so-called 'pivot to Asia'. When Biden entered office, he sought to complete a project that had eluded his two predecessors: recentring American grand strategy around long-term technological, military and economic competition with China while extricating the United States from its oversight of wars and resource dependencies in the Middle East. China's rise, the logic went, was the structural challenge of this century. The United States continued to have significant strategic interests in the Middle East: preserving Israel's military hegemony, containing Iran and maintaining privileged access to the Gulf's energy resources. But direct presence in the region had real diminishing returns, given the opportunity costs. The Biden administration's foreign-policy triage – withdraw from Afghanistan, downgrade the region, and redirect attention to the Indo-Pacific – was meant to consolidate American power for a new era of system-level rivalry.

From the start, Biden consciously followed both Obama and Trump's lead in his adversarial approach to China. His administration re-energised the Quad with Japan, Australia and India; launched the security partnership AUKUS to embed Britain and Australia in the Pacific security architecture; and passed industrial-policy packages – most notably the CHIPS and Inflation Reduction Acts – designed to promote US innovation beyond Beijing while increasingly boxing China out of access to critical technologies.

The goal was to contain China without overt confrontation (though Biden's commitment to Taiwan and military-first approach to the South China Sea did little to turn down the heat).

All of this would soon give way to global overstretch. The first snag was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which led Washington to re-militarise NATO and sustain a massive flow of weapons and intelligence to Europe. Still, by mid-2023, the White House believed it had stabilised the transatlantic front and could finally execute the eastward shift. Its marquee initiative – the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled at the New Delhi G20 summit – was conceived as the infrastructural complement to the pivot: a US-led alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

IMEC, which aimed to connect South Asia, the Gulf and Europe through Israel's ports, formed the economic wing of the realignment project Biden inherited from Trump: if successful, it would fulfil the Abraham Accords' vision of normalising relations between Israel and Arab nations by courting Saudi Arabia. But it was precisely the Accords' dream of a new, Israel-centred order for the Middle East that foreshadowed the unravelling of Biden's strategy. October 7 and the invasion of Gaza forced the administration into an all-consuming crisis that upended every premise of the pivot. While Biden administration officials regularly assured global audiences that they were working 'tirelessly' to achieve a ceasefire, the United States, once the self-styled indispensable mediator, was bankrolling and facilitating the Israeli military campaign behind the scenes. Instead of downsizing its Middle East footprint, Washington's 'ironclad' commitment to Israel became the defining feature of its foreign policy and global posture.

The war's timing was catastrophic for Biden's grand design. On 6 October – the day before the Hamas attack – US officials were meeting Saudi diplomats to finalise what they believed could be a historic bargain: normalisation between Israel and Riyadh. The entire enterprise rested on the Abraham Accords' illusion that the Palestinian question could be managed and sidelined, not resolved. Hamas's assault shattered the premise of a stable region anchored in Gulf-Israel cooperation: in its wake, the Saudi-Israeli deal collapsed, the Abraham Accords lost momentum, and IMEC – dependent on an 'integrated Middle East' – became politically untenable. The 'pivot to China' lay in ruins.

Middle East muddle

If Gaza derailed the pivot, it also revealed – again – how much the Biden team had followed Trump's lead in the Middle East. Biden entered office promising to recalibrate relations with Saudi Arabia after American journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in their Turkish embassy, to revive the Iran nuclear deal, and to 'put human rights at the centre' of US foreign policy. By 2024 none of these goals were remotely on the agenda. Biden never engaged in meaningful nuclear negotiations; Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who allegedly called for Khashoggi's killing, was rehabilitated; and Washington underwrote what international organisations, human rights groups including in Israel, and legal and historical experts would broadly conclude was a genocide that left tens of thousands of Palestinians dead.

In the Middle East, Biden's only genuine commitment seemed to be to Israel, and so by extension the Abraham Accords. But the very states whose partnership in the Abraham Accords he had spent three years cultivating – the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco – faced domestic backlash over Israel's war on Gaza; Saudi Arabia suspended talks; and Jordan and Egypt, longtime US clients, publicly condemned Israeli actions. China, by contrast, used the moment to advertise itself as a mediator, hosting Arab delegations and amplifying calls for a Gaza ceasefire. Beijing's earlier success in brokering Saudi-Iranian rapprochement demonstrated its growing diplomatic reach. Now, it was leading an 'Asia pivot' of its own.

By the time Biden shuffled off the campaign trail in July 2024, it was clear that every part of his elaborate plan had imploded. Israel's campaign in Gaza accelerated the drawdown of US munitions stocks already depleted by Ukraine, forcing the Pentagon to stretch production lines meant for deterrence in the Pacific. Domestically, a Democratic base increasingly hostile to Israel eroded the political consensus needed for sustained competition with Beijing. And abroad, Gaza collapsed the moral clarity Biden had sought in framing a global contest between American democracy and Chinese autocracy. If anything, the images from Rafah and Khan Yunis seemed to invert just this legal and moral calculus for global audiences.

In his second term, Trump abandoned the Biden-era framing of US power still in service of liberal internationalism. But Biden's actual practices in the Middle East – hard power, with few efforts at consensus-building, local legitimacy or multilateral constraint – already demonstrated the extent to which Pax Americana was disintegrating. Trump 2.0 has now intensified these dynamics while doing away with surface narratives of democracy promotion, human rights and the rule of law. In his recent speech at Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney made just this point: the rules-based order has become little more than a fiction, and any stable multilateral order going forward cannot survive

on grounds of the primacy of any single superpower – including the United States.

Managed instability

Even before Trump's second term, Washington's approach to Syria and Lebanon already exemplified what might best be described as primacy shorn of legitimacy. In late 2024, when the Syrian conflict turned in favour of domestic forces opposed to Assad's rule, Biden responded not by supporting reconstruction, but by encouraging Israeli attacks on post-Assad Syrian assets and sustaining sanctions that paralysed the new government's economic recovery. The 2019 Caesar Act and related restrictions blocked access to banking systems and foreign investment, making it nearly impossible for Syrian institutions to rebuild even civilian infrastructure. Presented as leverage to promote 'accountability', it left hospitals without fuel, municipalities without budgets, and refugees without prospects of return.

The interim Syrian government that formed early in the Trump administration pursued talks with Israel to end attacks, but was met with renewed coercion. Ongoing Israeli drone and missile strikes on southern Lebanon under the pretext of countering Hezbollah were extended eastward into southern Syria. Israel's conduct has been described as a 'silent war' in the border provinces: targeted assassinations, precision strikes on infrastructure, and incursions into the 1974 demilitarised zone. By preventing Syria and Lebanon from restoring basic governance in their southern regions, Israel ensures a permanent security vacuum along its borders – a buffer not of peace, but of instability. Despite repealing the Caesar Act, Trump reinforced this logic through his own policies of coercive containment.

Likewise, the near-daily Israeli bombardments in southern Lebanon since 2024 – sanctioned indirectly by Washington despite a purported more-than-year-old ceasefire – have devastated the area's infrastructure. Reports from the region chronicle how entire villages were razed under the rubric of 'security operations', echoing campaigns in Gaza. The US response has been to blame Hezbollah for the state's dysfunction, despite the fact that it has been effectively demobilised after Israel decapitated its leadership. In effect, Washington has abandoned Lebanese civil institutions while endorsing Israel's accelerating cross-border militarisation. Instead of supporting reconstruction or political mediation, US policy treats Lebanon as an extension of Israel's northern front – a territory to be disciplined rather than rebuilt.

This approach undermines not only Lebanon's sovereignty but also its fragile pluralism. By equating the Lebanese state with Hezbollah, US officials conflate a confessional political system with a largely defeated militant movement, collapsing distinctions critical to Lebanese civilian governance. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy: a 'failed state', as US envoy Thomas Barrack called it, whose fate has been ensured in part through external pressure. For Washington, the breakdown of Lebanese authority justifies giving Israel licence for continued incursions – a licence Israel then employs at will, even beyond these border regions. Following fears that the United States might intervene in Iran during Tehran's repression of mass popular protests, there is now speculation in the Israeli media that Tel Aviv might engage in such strikes, coordinated with the United States. The cycle of coercion sustains itself.

Combined, these policies perpetuate a zone of managed instability along and beyond Israel's northern and eastern borders. In Syria, the postwar transition becomes an externally managed process of containment, with 'sovereignty' bounded by the interests of others. Worse still, the local experiment with self-determination in Syria's Kurdish region is now being extinguished. As part of its new security framework, the Trump administration is engaging in discretionary strikes on Syrian soil, purportedly against ISIS, but it has withdrawn support for the only force on the ground that had contained the Islamic State. In the process, the United States has licensed Damascus and Ankara to dismantle Kurdish self-governance in Rojava.

If Trump's foreign policy represents a rupture with Biden's, then the difference has hardly been felt by Syrians and Lebanese. Both administrations oversaw a bipartisan foreign policy consensus that authorised Israel to engage in constant military action. Both administrations refused to recognise the independent agency of communities in Lebanon and Syria. And both administrations have treated the region's recovery as a variable in their own strategic calculus: establishing a coercive architecture linking the Abraham Accords to the suppression of Iranian influence and the bolstering of Israeli regional military supremacy. Regardless of who governs in DC, American and Israeli preferences systematically override the sovereignty of local populations in the Middle East.

The Gaza plan

Trump's 20-point Gaza ceasefire plan pursues this approach to its purest form: maximalist demands imposed through threats and incentives, bypassing local agency and real global buy-in alike. No Palestinian representatives of any kind, whether from Hamas or any other group across the political spectrum, were consulted in defining the 'deal'. The content of the proposal was more or less what Biden had previously proposed to Israel: a deal, he hoped, that would resuscitate the Abraham Accords while quieting domestic discontent about an ongoing genocide. Tel Aviv summarily rejected Biden's overtures, but under Trump, its posture has changed. Now,

the Trump administration can revive those Accords and enable potential Saudi participation in the United States' preferred regional architecture.

Trump gave Hamas what he called 'three or four days' to comply with his plan, after which he promised to give Israel his 'full backing to finish the job'. The message was not subtle: accept the American-devised terms or face annihilation. This is diplomacy as a continuation of war by other means. The 20-point plan imposes a technocratic administration – in no way chosen by Palestinians – under international supervision, with Trump allies reportedly responsible for oversight. The plan's terms in practice mean that the US and Israel have sole discretion over whether civilians will be allowed access to real aid flows for relief and reconstruction – despite the clear human rights entitlements to these goods. And it makes that discretion dependent on whether Hamas capitulates by disarming and dissolving. In effect, Palestinians are presented with a form of ceasefire in which the experience of not being at imminent risk of death by bombardment is likely replaced by slow-motion killing via famine, disease and exposure. At worst, ceasefire is twisted to mean merely a reduction (not a cessation) of ongoing Israeli bombardment.

Trump's demands may appear superficially reasonable to Western decision-makers, who have long seen the rights of Gaza's Palestinians to the humanitarian prerequisites of their subsistence as conditional. In a world where Palestinians' human rights have become a bargaining chip, linking access to food, water and shelter to ultimatums is not new. But like so many Trump initiatives, the Gaza plan doubles down on American presumptions that force can substitute for legitimacy and that the weak will suffer what they must.

Of course, the plan's reliance on coercion is also its central weakness: it commands no genuine consent from those whose compliance it requires. The 'stabilisation' of Gaza is something to be enforced from without by 'an international stabilisation force', which third states have – no surprise – proven unwilling to join. By excluding Hamas, minimising the role of the Palestinian Authority and placing Gaza under foreign 'trusteeship', the plan effectively and indefinitely blocks Palestinian self-determination. Palestinians are treated not as a community with legitimate political claims but as a problem to be managed and policed. There should be little shock, then, when this plan – like so many other diktats that preceded it – inevitably fails to generate either durable peace or stability: again, it refuses to address the enduring questions of occupation and self-determination driving the conflict.

Internationally, the proposal undercuts the very norms that confer legitimacy on peacemaking. It was advanced without consultation with Palestinians but also by excluding the United Nations. The absence of a multilateral process was deliberate: Washington regards international institutions as obstacles rather than sources of authority. Under consistent criticism regionally and globally, the UN was eventually brought into the deal, but the belated imprimatur of the Security Council cannot legitimate it. The Gaza plan makes plain that the United Nations itself no longer serves as a forum to defend its founding commitments. Indeed, Trump's new 'Board of Peace' is framed as a substitute for the United Nations, recasting the Gaza plan as a pilot for bypassing multilateral institutions he sees as constraining American leverage. More broadly, the Board institutionalises his transactional worldview, built around ad hoc bargaining forums calibrated to power, pressure and dealmaking.

The familiar transactionalism of the Trump doctrine extends to the plan's economic proposals, which envision massive reconstruction projects and foreign investment once Gaza is 'stabilised'. The beneficiaries are conceived as America's allies in the region, awarded massive contracts and a captive territory in which to build experimental new projects. Leaked blueprints suggest that the Palestinians of Gaza will be pushed into makeshift dwellings on one half of the territory while the other half, depopulated and destroyed, will be the site for a bonanza of reconstruction grift stamped in the image of Trump's Gaza Riviera fantasy and possibly new Israeli settlements. Comments by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief Eyal Zamir that the 'yellow line' now dividing Gaza will constitute a 'new border' for Israel make clear that the partition is simply another vehicle for annexation. This is no Marshall Plan for Palestinians, to say the least, but effectively a firesale of their land and resources.

Dealing in domination

In Trump's broader conception of global order, alliances are valued only insofar as they deliver immediate, tangible benefits. In this sense, the Gaza proposal mirrors his approach to NATO, trade policy, and negotiations with North Korea and Iran – high-stakes bargaining conducted through threats or extortion. What matters is not the infrastructure of peace and stability, let alone institutional legitimacy, but the optics of a 'deal' struck by the world's strongest power complete with the promise of lucrative contracts.

Supporters of Trump's method argue that it produces results: hostages returned, rockets silenced, enemies cowed. Yet agreements reached under duress rarely survive the waning of coercive leverage. Already, 'peace deals' Trump has touted in 2025, between Thailand and Cambodia, between Rwanda and the DRC, have begun to unravel as American attention has shifted elsewhere.

Moreover, even the US' capacity to achieve ends through coercion alone has limits, as indicated by Trump's climbdown from demands to colonise Greenland.

China's greater diplomatic muscle – from brokering Saudi-Iranian rapprochement to backing ceasefire resolutions at the UN – and its deals struck with a range of counterparts, from Canada to the UAE, suggest that other actors understand rationally that they have to diversify their own portfolio of alliances. Likewise, the growing role of multilateral institutions under the auspices of alternative powers – whether the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the increasing reliance on regional networks like Mercosur or ASEAN – may be less a consequence of other hegemons' ambitions than of how the American assault on its own post–World War II institutional order has left that order deeply compromised.

In this context, Trump has tended to punch down not up, avoiding direct confrontations with the United States' near-equivalent power players in China and Russia. Venezuela is a case in point: a far weaker adversary brought to heel through coercion. In the run-up to regime change in Caracas, the administration ratcheted up the pressure by carrying out extrajudicial killings, sanctioning and seizing oil tankers, and imposing a naval blockade – effectively trumpeting its pursuit of control from above in a bid to capture assets and establish a new client state.

Such a strategy closely mirrors the administration's longstanding playbook for the Middle East. In both cases, the Trump administration openly defends coercive intervention as a legitimate tool of statecraft, signals its intention to open post-transition economies to US firms through lucrative reconstruction and extraction contracts, and frames military power as a means of securing reliable access to strategic resources – oil in particular, but also critical minerals. The administration's unwillingness to disengage from the Middle East is not only about security commitments or alliance politics, but also about treating the region as within the US orbit and indispensable to global resource dominance. What emerges is a model of influence without legitimacy: power exercised through coercion, sanctions and proxy governance rather than consent, law or durable institutional buy-in. It's a worldview organised around regional spheres of influence and material control, in which the small players are subject to the whims of the powerful.

Of course, the United States has long leveraged its power to dominate weaker players and pursued Cold War objectives through extreme violence. But that violence was nonetheless in service of ideological ends that required it to actively build new multilateral institutions and invest significant material resources to 'win hearts and minds'. Now, however, documents like the National Security Strategy, along with gunboat diplomacy and annexation threats, appear in service of little beyond domination on grounds of 'civilisational' superiority and might-makes-right asset expropriation. This fact is further driven home by the administration's series of travel bans, which embody its profound contempt for the idea of community with a world that is overwhelmingly Black and brown.

Under the Trump doctrine, the world is meant to be organised through regional hegemons that dictate the terms for their sphere of influence while maintaining their fortress walls. It speaks to the longstanding comfort Trump has had with dictators, including his openness to Saudi and Gulf influence (not to mention their money). In this way, the Trump doctrine depends on maintaining instrumental partnerships that are more stable in some ways (no grand conflagrations between the United States and Russia or China, except maybe at the periphery), but pointedly less so in many others – especially for communities on the ground subject to extreme repression or arbitrary, capricious violence.

The limits of coercion

Yet Gaza and Venezuela also demonstrate – perhaps unintentionally – the intrinsic instability of such a coercive order. The Trump doctrine seeks control in a world that resists domination. By substituting coercion for consent, it multiplies the very crises it ostensibly aims to end. Not only does it underscore the degree to which the United States' global credibility has eroded; it demonstrates how pure coercion, in a context of real multipolar competition, is inevitably costlier and less effective at pursuing strategic ends.

In all the variations of American power since World War II, there is one approach that remains genuinely untested: multipolarity on inclusive terms, rather than through imperial rivalry. Such an approach would ground itself in the concerns of local publics and their own aspirations for self-determination. And it would link the domestic and foreign – from the Middle East to the streets of Minneapolis – through a vision of a world organised around mutual self-constraint, collective decision-making and a shared global commons. Such meaningful self-determination, at home and abroad, has always been the only plausible pathway to a more just and stable future. But for now, Palestine, Venezuela, Lebanon and Syria stand as stark embodiments of that pathway's continued foreclosure. ◆

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The illegal US-Israeli attack on Iran is also an assault on the United Nations

In waging an unprovoked war against Iran (one in which the fate of a recently announced ceasefire hangs tenuously in the balance), the US and Israel also have in their sights the UN Charter itself and the international rule of law.

Jeffrey D. Sachs and Sybil Fares

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The United States and Israel have launched an unprovoked war against Iran in flagrant violation of the UN Charter.

ON 16 February, one of us (Jeffrey Sachs) sent a letter to the UN Security Council warning that the United States was on the verge of tearing up the United Nations Charter. That warning has now come to pass. The United States and Israel have launched an unprovoked war against Iran in flagrant violation of Article 2(4) of the Charter, without authorisation from the Security Council, and without any legitimate claim of self-defence under Article 51. They are trying to kill the UN Charter and the international rule of law, but they will fail.

At the Security Council on 28 February, the US and its allies directed their condemnation not at the American and Israeli aggression, but at Iran. One US ally after the next condemned Iran for its retaliatory attacks yet absurdly failed to condemn the illegal and unprovoked US-Israeli attack on Iran. This performance by these countries was disgraceful and turned reality completely upside-down.

The joint US-Israeli attacks were described by Trump as necessary because Iran 'rejected every opportunity to renounce their nuclear ambitions, and we can't take it anymore'. This is of course a flat lie. As the letter of 16 February recounted, Iran agreed a decade ago to a nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that was adopted by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2231. It was Trump who ripped up the agreement in 2018. In June 2025, Israel bombed Iran in the midst of US-Iran negotiations. This time too, the Israel-US war plans were set weeks ago when Netanyahu met with Trump, and the negotiations underway between the US and Iran were a charade. This seems to be the new modus operandi of the US: start negotiations and then aim to murder the counterparts.

It is easy to understand why the US allies behave in the embarrassing and self-abasing way they did at the UN Security Council. In addition to the United States, eight of the other 14 Council members host US military bases or grant the US military access to local bases: Bahrain, Colombia, Denmark, France, Greece, Latvia, Panama and the United Kingdom. These countries are not fully sovereign. They are partially governed by the US. The US military bases house CIA operations, and the host countries constantly look over their shoulder to try to avoid US subversion in their own countries.

As Henry Kissinger famously said, 'It may be dangerous to be America's enemy, but to be its friend is fatal.' We can add that to host US military bases and CIA operations is to turn your country into a vassal state.

As an absurd but telling example, the Danish ambassador parroted every US talking point, pointing her finger at Iran for its aggression as if Iran had not been

attacked by the US and Israel. She completely forgot that such humiliating vassalage to the US will not play well for Denmark if the US occupies Greenland.

The truthful voices at the Security Council came from the countries not occupied by the United States. Russia explained correctly that the so-called West (that is, the countries occupied by the US) is engaged in victim-blaming when it points its finger at Iran. China reminded the Council that the crisis began with the US and Israeli attacks on Iran, not with Iran's retaliation. Somalia's ambassador, speaking on behalf of several African member states, truthfully portrayed the source of this recent escalation. The UN Representative of the League of Arab States spoke brilliantly about the root cause of Israel's mad aggression: the denial of rights to Palestinian people, and Israel's use of mass murder and regional war to prevent the emergence of a State of Palestine.

When Iran retaliates against US military bases in the Gulf, it is exercising its inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the Charter. We must remember that the US and Israel are openly and repeatedly assassinating Iran's leaders, with the aim of overthrowing its government. When states murder a foreign head of state and attempt to destroy the government, the target of those threats is entitled under international law to defend itself.

The US-Israeli bombing murdered not only Iran's Supreme Leader and several top government officials, but also more than 140 young girls in their school in Minab. These young children are the victims of a horrific war crime. The countries today that gave a pass to the United States and Israel for these killings – notably Denmark, France, Latvia, the United Kingdom and of course the US – are also complicit in this war crime.

This UN Security Council emergency meeting will likely be remembered as the day the United Nations ceased to function from its headquarters on American soil. An international organisation dedicated to the peaceful settlement of disputes cannot credibly operate from a country that wages illegal wars, threatens member states with annihilation, and treats UN Security Council resolutions as disposable instruments of convenience. For the UN to survive, and we need it to survive, it will need several homes around the world – in Brazil, China, India, South Africa and others – honouring the true multipolarity of our world.

Let us be clear about what the United States and Israel are pursuing. The US objective is not the security of the American people. The objective is global hegemony. The attempt is to destroy the UN and the international rule of law – an attempt that will fail. Israel's objective is to establish a Greater Israel, destroy the Palestinian people, and assert its hegemony over hundreds of millions of Arabs across the Middle East (from the Nile to the Euphrates, as US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee recently asserted).

The United States' delusional efforts at global hegemony are proceeding region by region. The US has recently claimed, in a wholly twisted supposed revival of the Monroe Doctrine, that it controls the Western Hemisphere and can dictate how Latin American countries conduct their economic and political affairs. The US kidnapped the sitting Venezuelan president to prove the point, and it now threatens to overthrow the Cuban government as well.

Today's war against Iran aims to prove that the US similarly owns the Middle East. The war is part of a 30-year campaign, initiated by the Clean Break doctrine, to overthrow all governments that oppose US and Israeli hegemony in the region. Those joint Israel-US wars have included the genocide in Gaza, the occupation of the West Bank, and the decades of wars and regime-change operations in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

One part of the US global plan is to commandeer the world's oil exports and to weaken China and Russia in the process. The US seizure of Venezuela was designed to ensure American control of that country's oil exports, especially to control the flow of oil to China. US sanctions on Russia aim to prevent Russian oil from reaching India and China. Now the US aims to stop the flow of Iran's oil to China. More broadly, the US aims to control the entire Gulf region plus Iran to maintain its imperial dominance.

The international order that Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt helped to build after the catastrophe of World War II was founded on a simple and profound idea – that law and respect, not force, should govern relations among states. That idea is now being destroyed by the very nation that did most to promote it in founding the UN. The irony is bitter beyond measure.

The truth is that the devastation of the war will not directly affect the so-called West: their children will not suffer traumas or death, and their countries will not be set ablaze. The victims of this attack are the people of the Middle East. They are the expendable ones who suffer from Western arrogance, abuse of power and addiction to war.

We close with two observations. First, the United States will not achieve global hegemony or kill the UN. The world is too large, too diverse and too determined to resist domination by any single power, much less one with 4% of the world's population. The world outside of the US and the countries it occupies wants the UN to live and thrive. The US attempt will surely fail, but it may cause immense suffering before it does.

Second, if Israel continues its addiction to war and occupation, it too will not survive. That addiction represents a mix of theocracy

and post-traumatic stress. Part of Israel believes that it is the biblical kingdom of the 5th century BC. The other part lives in the traumatic memory of the Holocaust, and so is determined to kill any perceived adversary rather than learn to live together with it in peace. The Israeli ambassador's twisted defence of Israel's brazen attack on Iran, as usual, cited the Bible and Auschwitz as the two justifications. These are Israel's two perennial references, but not the real world of today.

A state that depends on permanent war, permanent occupation and slaughter of the Palestinians, and the indefinite subjugation of millions of people has no viable future, and the policies that the United States is now pursuing on Israel's behalf will accelerate rather than prevent that outcome.

The two-state solution, which the Council has endorsed repeatedly, offers Israel a path to peace. Tragically, Israel rejects that. The result, eventually, will be the end of Israel itself in its current form, especially as the US population is rapidly turning against Israel's violent theocracy and towards the cause of Palestine. Perhaps there will be one democratic state for both Arabs and Jews living in peace, together, with an end of apartheid rule.

These are harsh truths, but emergencies demand honesty. The UN is being murdered by Israel and the United States. The Security Council must rouse itself from their military occupation by the US, and remember that they are the stewards of the UN Charter's promise to maintain international peace and security. ◆

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Maduro's abduction and the future global order

Washington's forcible seizure of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January reveals how US elites act on the assumption that they can exercise 'exceptional' powers – an assumption that risks becoming self-undermining.

Aleksandar Matković

SWinxy (CC BY 4.0)

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's forcible seizure and transfer to US territory can be characterised as 'kidnapping on an international scale'. Picture shows a protest in New York against the US action.

THE build-up of United States naval assets off the coast of Venezuela in the days preceding President Nicolás Maduro's abduction was widely perceived through a logic of denial, often summed up by the reaction: 'Surely they will not actually do it.' A comparable affective pattern could be observed before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the massing of Russian troops near the border was repeatedly read as a bluff rather than as preparation for war. This recurring disbelief rests on a persistent, and often under-examined, trust in state elites, presidents, parties and ruling classes. It presupposes, at a minimum, that decision-makers in powerful states possess a kind of higher knowledge about what they are doing. Such an assumption is better understood as a form of psychological projection than as an inference from the structural logics of capital, military power or international politics. At most, it corresponds to the logic of political marketing, which has become increasingly difficult to sustain as global crises accumulate.

In the wake of the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the US operation in Venezuela, Western political communication has appeared less as neutral 'information' and more as self-referential marketing of 'the West'. News cycles are dominated by statements from President Donald Trump, who justifies the attack and abduction by invoking an alleged transnational network of narcotics traffickers centred on Maduro. The same political and media actors who rejected characterisations of Israel's actions in Gaza as genocidal now present Maduro as a singularly dangerous 'narcoboss' whose removal by force and rendition to the United States is framed as the only viable option. Perhaps the liberal media would have felt more comfortable if Trump had simply used the age-old excuse of 'bringing democracy to Third World countries' instead of openly stating his aims.

However, regardless of the type of excuse, under the United Nations Charter, such an operation could only be lawful if the United States demonstrated that its territorial integrity or political independence faced an armed attack or comparable imminent threat – a standard that is not met by the alleged existence of Venezuelan drug networks. Alternatively, the use of cross-border force would have required an explicit mandate from the UN Security Council, which was neither sought nor obtained. In addition, the legal basis for the exercise of jurisdiction by a US federal court in New York over a sitting foreign head of state remains highly contested, given well-established norms on head-of-state immunity and sovereign equality.

From the perspective of public international law, then, the operation is not merely a politically controversial episode or a 'technical'

breach, but a serious repudiation of the international legal order. Some commentators have responded by proposing that we have entered a 'post-sovereignty' era, though such terminology risks obfuscating rather than clarifying the uneven ways in which sovereignty is undermined or selectively suspended. Sovereignty has never been absolute or evenly distributed; Trump's actions do not abolish it everywhere, but rather illustrate that for certain states and actors it can be set aside without meaningful consequence, while remaining operative for others. On any plausible reading of the relevant norms, Maduro's forcible seizure and transfer to US territory can be characterised as kidnapping on an international scale, and as such sits uneasily with both the UN Charter and basic principles of non-intervention and non-abduction.

The implications are therefore significant. A permanent member of the UN Security Council has undertaken a form of 'state terrorism' and 'piracy', or, at minimum, an unlawful use of force against another sovereign state, without incurring sanctions or even serious diplomatic penalties from most of its allies. This follows closely on its diplomatic and military support for Israel's decimation of Gaza that numerous jurists, UN officials and human rights organisations have assessed as meeting the legal criteria for genocide.

However, what is significant about US actions is the way those in power have tried to justify them, if at all. As I mentioned, the narrative of 'bringing back democracy' has obviously been thrown out of the window. However, one could be forgiven for thinking that, in its wake, the 'rationality of power' would finally be laid bare. Most of us would expect to see the true desires of those in power revealed as naked, fixed and coldly calculated; yet this, too, appears to be missing.

In 2010, Venezuela was producing more than 3 million barrels of oil per day (mb/d); by late 2025, production had fallen to roughly 0.9–1.1 mb/d, less than 1% of global output and a fraction of its historical level. In comparison, the US state of North Dakota produces more oil than Venezuela: around 1.15–1.2 mb/d. Take also into consideration the collapse in the price of oil, which is currently set at about $60 per barrel, and the 'oil narrative' suddenly becomes highly questionable. (Editor's note: This article was written before the US-Israeli attack on Iran sent oil prices soaring.) As Daniel Chavez has stated,[1] the current US operation in Venezuela can't be understood under a simple 'war for oil' narrative.

According to Chavez, 'the material reality of Venezuelan crude further complicates any straightforward extraction narrative. Three-quarters of the 300 billion barrel reserve consists of extra-heavy Orinoco crude: bituminous, viscous, heavily sulphurous, and prohibitively expensive to extract and refine. Global oil majors built the US Gulf Coast's complex refineries specifically to process this grade, but at realistic long-term prices, the economics are punishing. When oil prices peaked during 2005–2014, Venezuela inflated its "proved reserves" on paper through optimistic assumptions that have since collapsed. Today, with institutional capacity eroded by underinvestment and purges, reconstruction would demand $185 billion over 16 years and complete confidence from international capital, unlikely under any managed transition.'

This has led Venezuela to seek outside help, and one of the countries which heeded the call was China. Externally, Venezuela is deeply entangled in credit-energy circuits structured around China. Since the mid-2000s, Beijing has extended tens of billions of dollars in 'loans for oil' arrangements, under which oil revenues were pledged as collateral and payments were channelled through Chinese accounts to service debt. As Venezuela's repayment capacity eroded, Chinese institutions repeatedly rescheduled maturities and relaxed minimum shipment requirements, effectively turning once attractive resource-backed loans into a complex exercise in damage control. For Beijing, the US attack raises not only political questions, but also concerns about the security of this financial exposure, prompting regulators to demand detailed reporting from Chinese banks on their Venezuelan portfolios.

This combination of collapsing output, high extraction costs and entangled creditor relations suggests that the crude 'oil grab' thesis – understood in the narrow sense of a cost-effective, easily monetised resource seizure – does not fully account for the timing and form of the US intervention. Rather, as several observers have noted, Trump's rhetoric about 'taking the oil' appears to draw on an earlier repertoire of US imperial self-imagining, associated with the 1950s and 1960s, when military supremacy and access to strategic resources were framed as almost frictionless extensions of American power. The only thing placing limits on US power at the time was, of course, the Soviet Union. The justification of 'bringing in democracy' was, among other things, meant to save oil-producing countries from falling into the hands of US enemies, Soviet communists foremost among them. Now that the threat of communism or any serious international backlash has long since faded in the eyes of US elites, no such pretext is needed, and their imagination is free to roam far more openly. In that sense, through the Venezuelan operation, what Trump and his cabinet have done is less a rational response to energy market conditions than an attempt to stage a particular vision of US hegemony that is increasingly out of step with the realities of the global political economy.

This becomes clearer if one situates the episode within a longer history of US foreign policy. The United States today does not occupy the same uncontested position it enjoyed in the early Cold War, and Venezuela's oil is no longer a dormant prize awaiting simple transfer to US consumers and the Pentagon through a swift military intervention. Instead, what emerges is a ruling class attempting to reenact an earlier script of domination – one in which it enjoyed not only material advantages but also the perceived 'freedom' to use force with limited legal or geopolitical constraint. That imagined freedom included the ability to attack other states and expropriate their resources with minimal international backlash.

Whether or not the complete freedom to subjugate other states without any repercussions ever truly existed is beside the point. In this symbolic universe, the Venezuelan operation brings together three elements: a personalised executive, segments of the oil industry and the military apparatus. This combination exemplifies a fusion of economic and coercive power that has long been central to critical theories of ruling classes in capitalist states. One could even speak, without much exaggeration, of a 'perfect ruling class'. Trump's project points towards a mode of rule in which the state is increasingly treated as an extension of corporate balance sheets – not only in the United States, but across the Western Hemisphere. What is at stake is less the classic distinction between 'public' and 'private' than the subordination of public authority to the priorities of a narrow coalition of firms, creditors and political entrepreneurs. The case of Venezuela thus reveals far more clearly how contemporary US elites perceive their own role in global affairs, or how they wish to perceive it: as elites capable of unilateral, exemplary action unconstrained by legal or multilateral frameworks.

However, it is here that the fiction guiding Trump and his staff begins to generate real frictions in power relations across the Western Hemisphere, in particular in relation to international law and military alliances such as NATO. Historically, even at moments of intense Cold War confrontation, US policymakers tended to maintain at least a minimal 'surface' of legal justification – however tenuous – to shield interventions from overtly appearing as lawless aggression, partly out of concern over escalation with the Soviet Union. In contrast, the current operation is notable for the extent to which legal rationalisations appear *ex post* and fragmented, while the core decision to use force proceeds with open disregard for Charter-based constraints. As several legal commentators have argued, this marks not only a breach of the law but a denigration of the idea that law meaningfully binds great powers at all.

At the same time, Trump's repeated references to Cuba, Colombia, Mexico and even Greenland – an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, a NATO member – extend the implicit threat beyond Venezuela. For European governments, this raises uncomfortable questions. On the one hand, they are deeply integrated into US-led security structures and have recently agreed, under intense US pressure, to increase military spending to a benchmark of 5% of GDP by 2035. Meeting this commitment would, according to some estimates, bring NATO's annual military expenditure close to $3 trillion, requiring an extra $2–3 trillion. On the other hand, the possibility that a US administration might openly contemplate coercive action against or around territories under European sovereignty exposes internal fractures within the alliance and highlights the asymmetry of power and vulnerability between its members.

From the standpoint of what is often termed the 'collective West', the Venezuelan intervention thus has a double effect. First, it implicates European states in a controversial and arguably unlawful use of force, whether they wish it or not, due to alliance structures and diplomatic alignments. Second, it introduces a new level of uncertainty about the reliability and intentions of the United States itself as the central pillar of the security architecture on which they rely. Public statements by European leaders, including those of Denmark and Germany, that an attack on Greenland or Denmark would trigger NATO's collective defence commitments illustrate both their formal obligations and their latent concern that their main external threat may now originate from within the NATO alliance. As of recently, the UK has been debating the deployment of a NATO mission to Greenland in order to protect the Arctic Circle, while the European Parliament has been discussing the possibility of freezing trade deals with the US should Trump decide to materialise his claims. Thus, a major rupture in the Western Hemisphere may arise precisely from attempts by any single actor to dominate the West as a whole. However, rather than a bug, this should be seen as a feature of both US and European politics, long governed by a narrow circle of unchecked elites. Their own erratic behaviour is exactly what their system has produced. And, after Venezuela, it is a dangerous indicator of where the future of politics may lie if nothing is changed.

In this light, the US attack on Venezuela is not an isolated episode, but a lens on broader transformations of global order. Interpreted narrowly, Trump's moves can be read as a hybrid of resource politics, domestic signalling against left-wing opponents, and strategic communication directed at rivals such as China. Interpreted more broadly, they reveal how US elites continue to act on the assumption that they can exercise

'exceptional' powers – abrogating international law, abducting foreign leaders, threatening allies – without fundamentally jeopardising their own position. Yet that very assumption risks becoming self-undermining, as it erodes legal norms, alienates partners and normalises practices that other states may later emulate.

Finally, the Venezuelan case invites a reconsideration of widespread beliefs about the competence and rationality of ruling classes. The persistent idea that elites 'know what they are doing', and that they possess superior knowledge about how to manage complex crises, has long functioned as a stabilising myth in liberal and conservative political cultures alike. After all, years of neoliberal propaganda have done much to sway public opinion into presupposing that wealthy elites would simply reinvest in society and make everyone better off. Instead, from Elon Musk to Peter Thiel and Trump himself, the US millionaire (and billionaire) class has chosen to focus on building or acquiring territories where they can construct utopias in their own image. From 'Praxis', a modern-day 'Sparta' based on AI and blockchain that its backers want to establish in the Mediterranean, complete with a CEO-king, to Musk's dreams of colonising Mars and mining the Moon, this current strand of US elites is a striking example of what happens when state power meets unhinged private ambition.

The decision to abduct a foreign head of state in clear tension with international law, in a context where the material gains are highly uncertain and the reputational and systemic risks are substantial, calls that myth into question. It foregrounds the degree to which structural inequalities and concentrated wealth have enabled a narrow stratum of actors to make decisions with planetary consequences. Venezuela and Greenland are thus different sides of the coin: they show what happens when elite imagination is actually realised, with consequences that are visible and tangible for millions of people around the world. ◆

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Notes

1. Daniel Chavez, 'There's more to oil: Why Venezuela demands a deeper analysis of US imperialism', Transnational Institute, 6 January 2026, www.tni.org/en/article/theres-more-to-oil

Global Governance for Justice, Democracy and Sustainability

By *Lim Mah Hui*

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Transcending national borders, the gravest challenges of our time – such as climate change, unprecedented inequality and the spectre of nuclear conflict – require global solutions. However, the present system of global governance is ill-equipped to deal with these problems and is instead buckling under the weight of its own tensions and contradictions. In place of the current order, which was shaped by and for the interests of the developed world, a new global governance architecture must be constructed that advances distributive justice and equity among nations. Such an arrangement has to redress power imbalances in international institutions as well as promote policies oriented towards economic, social and environmental progress.

Download the book: https://twn.my/title2/books/Global_Governance_LMH.htm

Trump's cruelty is strangling Cuba

On top of a punishing decades-long trade embargo, the US is escalating its economic warfare against Cuba in a bid to force the socialist state into submission.

Marjorie Cohn

IN accordance with Secretary of State Marco Rubio's longstanding vendetta against Cuba, Donald Trump issued an executive order on 29 January aimed at tightening the US noose around Cuba's neck.

Trump's order preposterously declared Cuba 'an unusual and extraordinary threat', without providing a shred of evidence, and warned that he would impose punitive tariffs on states that deliver fuel to Cuba. His intention is to suffocate the Cuban people, who rely on oil for 80% of their electricity.

UN human rights experts called Trump's order 'a serious violation of international law' and 'an extreme form of unilateral economic coercion with extraterritorial effects, through which the United States seeks to exert coercion on the sovereign state of Cuba and compel other sovereign third States to alter their lawful commercial relations, under threat of punitive trade measures'.

On 20 February, however, the US Supreme Court struck down Trump's massive tariffs because they exceeded authority delegated by Congress under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). The IEEPA authorises the president to regulate commerce during national emergencies created by foreign threats.

Later that day, in response to the court's decision, Trump issued an executive order ending IEEPA-based tariffs, including those that would penalise countries that ship oil to Cuba. That order stops the collection of all IEEPA tariffs, including those threatened in the 29 January Cuba emergency order.

Trump's attempt to tighten the fuel blockade of Cuba came on the heels of the US oil blockade of Venezuela, which had supplied more than 50% of Cuba's oil. Countries that provided Cuba with oil, particularly Mexico, halted their shipments after 29 January.

The US has imposed on Cuba a naval blockade, which is considered an act of war. The Trump administration is militarily seizing oil tankers attempting to deliver fuel to Cuba. On 20 February, *The New York Times* reported that 'in recent days, vessels roaming the Caribbean Sea in search of fuel for Cuba have come up empty or been intercepted by the US authorities'. In mid-February, 'the US Coast Guard intercepted a tanker full of Colombian fuel oil en route to Cuba that had gotten within 70 miles of the island'. A US official anonymously told the *Times* that 'the Coast Guard's interception of the tanker headed to Cuba last week was part of a blockade that the Trump administration has not yet announced'.

Oil shipments to Cuba have virtually stopped. The lack of electricity has led to widespread blackouts, impacting hospitals and essential services. Cuba's oil reserves could be totally depleted by March.

Meanwhile, on 25 February, the crew of a US speedboat registered in Florida came within a nautical mile of Cuba's coast. After the crew opened fire on Cuban troops, injuring the vessel's commander, the Cuban forces returned fire, killing four crew members and wounding six, according to a statement by Cuba's Interior Ministry. The wounded were reportedly receiving medical attention. (Editor's note: On 5 March, the Interior Ministry announced that a fifth crew member had died as a result of his injuries.)

'In the face of current challenges, Cuba reaffirms its determination to protect its territorial waters, based on the principle that national defence is a fundamental pillar of the Cuban State in safeguarding its sovereignty and ensuring stability in the region,' the ministry said.

The longstanding US blockade of Cuba is illegal

For 67 years, the US government has maintained a vicious and illegal embargo/blockade of Cuba.

After the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the Eisenhower administration declared a partial embargo on trade with Cuba to pressure the people to overthrow their new government. The embargo was a response to a secret State Department memorandum that proposed 'a line of action which, while as adroit and inconspicuous as possible, makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government'. Two years later, John F. Kennedy expanded the embargo and it persists to this day.

In 2015, Barack Obama loosened some of its restrictions. Then, during his first term, Trump reversed Obama's progressive measures and imposed 243 onerous new sanctions – 50 of them during the COVID-19 pandemic – as part of his 'maximum pressure' strategy against Cuba.

The blockade cost Cuba $7.5 billion in 2025. Since 1960, it has cost Cuba $170 billion.

But although the blockade continues to take a toll on the Cuban people, it has been unsuccessful in causing the Cuban people to overthrow their socialist government.

'The illegal US blockade against Cuba and the measures that intensify it are an act of ruthless economic warfare against the Cuban people, which particularly targets the most vulnerable and the poorest,' Yamila González Ferrer, vice president of the National Union of Cuban Jurists, wrote in an email to Truthout. 'It has a devastating impact on families who suffer daily from material deprivation and separation from loved ones who have emigrated. Our "sin" has been defending our independence and sovereignty and showing the world that a path to social justice is possible. We will resist and we will prevail!'

The US government imposed the embargo/blockade (unilateral coercive measures) without UN Security Council approval in violation of Article 41 of the United Nations Charter, which empowers only the Security Council to impose and enforce sanctions. They constitute collective punishment, which is outlawed by Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

On 29 October 2025, for the 33rd consecutive year, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a resolution calling for an end to the US economic, commercial and financial embargo of Cuba. The resolution urged states to refrain from promulgating laws like the Helms-Burton Act, 'the extraterritorial effects of which affect the sovereignty of other States, the legitimate interests of entities or persons under their jurisdiction and the freedom of trade and navigation'.

Helms-Burton Act lawsuits

Before the 1959 Cuban Revolution, US companies owned or controlled 90% of Cuba's electricity generation, a large portion of its mining industry, sugarcane fields, telephone system, and several oil refineries and warehouses. After the revolution, the new Cuban government expropriated those assets and transferred them to government-owned companies.

In 1996, Bill Clinton signed the Helms-Burton Act, which codified the embargo against trade with and investment in Cuba, so that no president could unilaterally lift the sanctions. Title III of the Act allows US citizens to bring lawsuits against US and foreign entities for allegedly 'trafficking' in property confiscated in Cuba since 1959. 'Trafficking' includes knowingly and intentionally engaging in a commercial activity or otherwise 'benefiting from confiscated property'. US nationals who formerly owned commercial property expropriated by the Cuban government in 1960 were now authorised to file lawsuits in US courts against persons (including non-US companies) that may be 'trafficking' in that property.

Every US president, starting with Clinton, delayed the implementation of Title III by suspending its provisions for six-month increments. Clinton put Title III 'on hold because it triggered immense opposition from US allies, whose companies operating in Cuba would become targets of litigation in US courts', American University professor and Cuba scholar William M. LeoGrande wrote in The Conversation.

But in 2019, Trump's first administration announced that it would no longer suspend the operation of Title III, opening the door to federal lawsuits. Two of those lawsuits are now pending in the Supreme Court, and it heard arguments in the cases on 23 February.

One of the plaintiffs, Havana Docks, is a US company that owned a right to use and operate the docks at the port of Havana before 1960. It filed a lawsuit against four Florida-based cruise ship companies, seeking hundreds of millions of dollars from the cruise lines that transported tourists to the port between 2016 and 2019, even though Havana Docks' right to use the docks had been set to expire in 2004.

In its lawsuit, Havana Docks asserts that the cruise lines 'trafficked' in property it owned when they brought tourists to the Havana Cruise Port Terminal. The case raises the due-process question of whether Havana Docks should be permitted to receive much more money than Cuba should have paid it originally.

In the second case, the issue is whether Cuban state-owned companies are immune from a lawsuit filed by ExxonMobil, which seeks more than $1 billion for the confiscation of assets owned by subsidiaries of its predecessor, Standard Oil. Sovereign immunity generally prevents lawsuits in US courts against foreign governments and their agencies and instrumentalities. Attorney Jules Lobel argued on behalf of the Cuban-owned companies that the court 'should not read in an exception where Congress did not enact one'.

Although the members of the court actively engaged with the lawyers on the legal issues, it is hard to predict how the cases will turn out. The court will issue decisions by July 2026.

On several occasions, Cuba has offered to negotiate compensation of the nearly 6,000 claims of US parties, as it has

successfully done with claims from other countries. 'It is well-known that all nationalisations of foreign property, including that of the US, were provided by law with a commitment to compensation, which the US government refused even to discuss, while it was adopted by the governments of claimants of other countries, all of which enjoyed due compensation,' the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement in 2019.

Cuban resistance and international solidarity

Trump's recent actions are consistent with his 2025 National Security Strategy, which says the US seeks to control the Western Hemisphere. As part of its offensive against Venezuela, the Trump administration has illegally attacked civilian and commercial vessels with weapons and drones, boarded vessels, destroyed boats, kidnapped crew members of ships, and killed crew members of smaller boats in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. It has imposed an unlawful oil blockade against Venezuela and stolen Venezuela's oil. It has illegally attacked Venezuela and kidnapped President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores. And it maintains an unlawful naval blockade of Cuba.

'Trump's resort to piracy on the high seas, kidnapping of foreign leaders, and unconstitutional misuse of tariffs to starve the Cuban people into submission is a cruel but pathetic example of the decline in US domination of the hemisphere,' Arthur Heitzer, chairperson of the Cuba Subcommittee of the US National Lawyers Guild, told Truthout.

'Can a great power be allowed to attempt to destroy a small, peaceful nation, subjecting its people to genocide under the crude pretext of national security?' queried Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, denouncing Trump's 29 January executive order in a speech to the UN Human Rights Council. 'In the face of these threats, the Cuban people reaffirmed their firm decision to defend, with the utmost vigour, their right to self-determination, independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and constitutional order, in close unity and broad consensus.'

'Trump implemented every macabre idea that occurred to Marco Rubio against Cuba, but they didn't count on the resistance and patriotism of the Cuban people. The oil blockade is the latest bullet. What will come next?' Antonio Raudilio Martín Sánchez, a Cuban jurist and professor, and president of the continental advisory council of the American Association of Jurists, told Truthout.

Indeed, Cuba is taking steps to protect its people in the face of Trump's cruelty.

On 23 February, Cuba's Ministry of Transport launched a new transport system to facilitate the commute of health workers in Havana. Charging stations with solar panels and energy storage systems are being installed.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum warned that Trump's threat of new tariffs would unleash a 'humanitarian crisis of great scope' in Cuba. 'Mexico unequivocally reaffirms the principle of sovereignty and free self-determination of peoples, a fundamental pillar of our foreign policy and international law,' she added.

Although Trump has effectively blackmailed other countries, including Mexico, into halting their deliveries of oil to Cuba, Sheinbaum sent two shipments of humanitarian aid and has pledged to send more. Solidarity organisations in Mexico have initiated a nationwide campaign to collect non-perishable food and medical supplies to send to Cuba.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak pledged to continue to provide critical support to Cuba, although it isn't clear whether that would include oil. 'We are helping, but I will not reveal the details,' he said recently.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has sent 5,000 solar kits for rooftop energy harvesting and China has pledged to help Cuba build 92 solar farms. Vietnam, the largest investor in Cuba, is also assisting Cuba with wind and solar power, and Canada has also promised to send humanitarian aid to Cuba.

US feminist grassroots organisation CODEPINK travelled to Holguín, Cuba, and delivered 2,500 pounds of lentils to the people there. Marta Jiménez, a hairdresser in Holguín, sobbed as she told CODEPINK founder Medea Benjamin: 'You can't imagine how it touches every part of our lives. It's a vicious, all-encompassing spiral downward. With no gasoline, buses don't run, so we can't get to work. We have electricity only three to six hours a day. There's no gas for cooking, so we're burning wood and charcoal in our apartments. It's like going back 100 years. The blockade is suffocating us – especially single mothers … and no one is stopping these demons: Trump and Marco Rubio.'

On 21 March, the Nuestra América Convoy to Cuba will reach Havana, carrying food, medicines, medical supplies and essential goods. Inspired by the Global Sumud Flotilla to Gaza, the convoy is an 'international coalition of movements, trade unionists, parliamentarians, humanitarian organisations, and public figures', according to its most recent press release. ◆

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A world on its knees: Trump's 'Board of Peace' and the darkness it promises

Charged with presiding over the administration of Gaza, the newly established Board of Peace headed by Donald Trump is effectively an imperial imposition not only on the Palestinian people but, given its global reach, on the entire world.

Craig Mokhiber

TREMBLING and genuflecting before the global rampage of the US-Israel Axis, a cowardly world has, once again, offered up the Palestinian people for sacrifice, and, with them, the global system of international law itself.

I have written previously (see *TWR* No. 365) about the document of global surrender codified in notorious (and blatantly unlawful) UN Security Council Resolution 2803, and about Trump's outrageous imperial dictates upon which that resolution was based.

But the latest outrage, declared by the empire in the form of an autocratic 'Charter of the Board of Peace', threatens not only the survival of the indigenous Palestinian people but, in its expansive and unqualified language that includes no limits of territorial jurisdiction, that of the entire world.

An imperial charter

Conceived as a Trump-headed 'international organisation', the 'Board of Peace' is to have 'international legal personality', 'legal capacity', and international 'privileges and immunities'.

In a barely veiled preambular swipe at established international institutions like the United Nations, the imperial Charter opens with a call to 'depart from approaches and institutions that have too often failed', before declaring itself in its first article to be empowered to act in any 'areas affected or threatened by conflict'.

In other words, Trump's goal is to replace the law-based UN with an imperial mechanism, the imperial reach of this unaccountable, rogue entity is to be global, and its impunity is to be effectively guaranteed.

The ultimately autocratic nature of the new entity is made clear throughout the Charter, with most powers vested not in any accountable, intergovernmental, collaborative or democratic mechanism, nor even in any single state, but rather in the person of Donald Trump himself.

As such, Trump is explicitly empowered to serve both as the Chair and as the representative of the United States on the Board 'subject only to the provisions of [the Charter]', to solely determine the members of the Board, to approve any alternates, to renew the terms of members, to remove members (unless a two-thirds vote of the crony-packed Board decides they should stay), to decide the agenda of the Board, to convene extraordinary meetings, to personally issue 'resolutions or other directives', and to approve all decisions of the Board.

Trump will also have 'exclusive authority' to create, modify and dissolve subsidiary bodies, to establish subcommittees and to personally set their mandate, structure and rules, to select, appoint and remove members of the Executive Board of the Board of Peace (at his sole discretion), to veto any decisions of the Executive Board, and to call additional meetings of the Executive Board.

He is to remain as the Chair of the Board of Peace unless he resigns voluntarily or becomes incapacitated, is empowered to designate his own successor as Chair, and to be the final authority on 'meaning, interpretations, and application' of the Charter. And only he can approve any amendments to the Charter.

The Charter is, in sum, an authoritarian dream for Trump, and an Orwellian nightmare for the rest of the world.

A rogue's gallery of members

The Board's Charter, which permits 'no reservations', provides for members to be appointed at the head-of-state level by Trump himself to renewable three-year terms. Members that contribute $1 billion 'in cash' will not be subject to the three-year limit.

According to its Charter, the Board can be constituted with only three members (the US plus two others). The full list of countries and individuals was announced on 22 January by Trump, who has lined up

a large rogue's gallery of quislings, complicit regimes, corrupt financial actors and individual war criminals.

Most damning of all, of course, is the fact that, in the midst of the Israel-US genocide in Palestine, the two perpetrators are to head the Board and serve as one of its members, respectively, even as the Board is expected to impose its colonial control of Gaza.

Benjamin Netanyahu, head of the genocidal Israeli apartheid regime and a fugitive from justice indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Palestine, has already accepted to serve with his co-perpetrator, Donald Trump.

With them are to be the heads of complicit countries, US vassal states and authoritarian regimes like Viktor Orban's far-right Hungary, the UAE, Morocco, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Argentina's far-right and ultra-Zionist ruler Javier Milei, among others.

And individuals already named to serve in their personal capacity include some of the most notorious figures in modern history.

Unindicted Iraq war criminal and long-time close collaborator with the Israeli regime Tony Blair. Neocon extremist and Trump's Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Zionist billionaire Steve Witkoff, who serves as Trump's point person in Western Asia. Trump's son-in-law and close family friend of Netanyahu, Jared Kushner. Yakir Gabay, an Israeli billionaire who is close to the regime and who was part of an organised effort in New York to bribe officials to persecute students protesting Israeli regime abuses in Gaza, as well as a hodge-podge of former US and UN officials who are close to the Israeli regime.

The poison fruits of cowardice

As I have written elsewhere, the Security Council resolution upon which Trump is basing his arrogant imperial project was entirely unlawful and *ultra vires*, as it breached several *jus cogens* and *erga omnes* rules of international law, as well as the terms of the UN Charter itself. Clearly, the Council had no legal authority to pass such a resolution. But it was also an act of unprecedented foolishness on the part of the other 14 members (besides the US) of the Security Council.

The cowardice and obsequious deference to empire of those 14 ambassadors has now unleashed a dangerous force that threatens to prolong and reward genocide in Palestine, further destabilise first Western Asia and then other regions of the world, inflict a massive (perhaps fatal) blow to the already battered and beleaguered framework of international law, and hasten the dangerous downward spiral of the United Nations.

A way forward

It is not too late to stop this, if the people of the world will raise a righteous cry for justice and demand that their governments refuse to cooperate with the Board of Peace and Trump's other nefarious projects, convene a special session of the UN General Assembly to adopt a resolution to reject and mitigate the effects of Security Council Resolution 2803, call for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the illegality of key provisions of that resolution, adopt measures to hold the Israeli regime accountable, and mobilise protection for the Palestinian people.

In the meantime, let no one forget the axiomatic truth that the occupation of Palestine is entirely unlawful under international law, that Israel and the US are perpetrating genocide in Gaza, and that both the occupation and the genocide breach the highest (*jus cogens* and *erga omnes*) rules of international law. As such, no colonial edict by Trump, no *ultra vires* resolution of the Security Council, and no agreement by the occupied Palestinian Authority can legalise these acts or any structures or initiatives that reinforce them.

In the midst of the Israel-US genocide in Palestine, the two perpetrators are to head the Board of Peace and serve as one of its members, respectively.

Equally clear is that the Trump 'Board of Peace' is structurally and functionally an extension of the illegal occupation and is led by one of the genocide co-perpetrators with the authoritative participation of the other. As such, any state or individual that participates in this unlawful body is complicit in the grave international crimes of the US-Israel Axis, for which they could and should be held accountable.

And let us recall as well, that, as a matter of international law, the Palestinian people have a right to resist the foreign occupation, colonial domination and racist regime to which they are subjected, and people around the world have the legal right and the moral duty to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people in this struggle.

The world is watching to see who joins the Palestinian people in their struggle for freedom, and who joins their oppressors in the colonial 'Board of Peace'. ◆

Craig Mokhiber is an international human rights lawyer and former senior United Nations official. He left the UN in October of 2023, penning a widely read letter that warned of genocide in Gaza, criticised the international response, and called for a new approach to Palestine and Israel based on equality, human rights and international law.

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Will Trump break the nuclear taboo?

He has already left a lengthy trail of destruction, but the chilling risk is that the United States' volatile leader could go on to reach for the nuclear button.

Peter Kuznick and Ivana Nikolić Hughes

Kelly Michals (CC BY-NC 2.0)

'Trump has been escalating when it comes to nuclear weapons.' Picture shows a gallery of nuclear missiles at the National Museum of the US Air Force.

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump has been on quite a roll. Since just the beginning of the year, he has kidnapped the Venezuelan president, threatened to invade Greenland and Colombia, and now dragged the US – and seemingly much of the Middle East – into a new war by joining with Israel to attack Iran, something that even the biggest hawks among recent US presidents have managed to avoid. That's on top of bombing seven countries in 2025.

The 2024 campaign promises of a peace president who will end the forever wars have evaporated, only to be replaced by unrestrained use of military force and a seeming disdain for diplomacy. As the US comedy show *Saturday Night Live* put it, Trump, along with his United Nations–replacing Board of Peace, got 'bored of peace'.

Breaking international law seems to be a feature, not a bug, of Trump's actions, consistent with his admission that he is expressly not guided by international law, norms, traditions or common decency, but by 'my own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me'.

Trump's power-drunk top advisors are just as out of control. Secretary of War Pete 'Kill them all' Hegseth stated that his goal is to 'unleash overwhelming and punishing violence on the enemy' and to 'untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralise, hunt, and kill the enemies of our country'. At the Munich Security Conference, Secretary of State 'little Marco' Rubio bemoaned the end of the era of colonialism and called for returning to 'the West's age of dominance'. Deputy chief of staff Stephen 'Genghis' Miller declared, 'We live in a world … that is governed by force, that is governed by power.'

In addition to hegemonic actions in the conventional military realm, Trump has been escalating when it comes to nuclear weapons. He rejected Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation to extend the New START treaty for another year, making possible an unconstrained nuclear arms race alongside an ongoing modernisation race. He has also announced that the US will resume nuclear testing. Even without the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and tensions with China, these actions and threats would be destabilising and dangerous.

Trump is the mean and out-of-control bully on the global playground. Except that this bully has the sole authority to launch thousands of nuclear warheads.

It would be the ultimate expression of Trump's unbounded power for him to break the one remaining international taboo – which, despite far too many close calls, has persisted for more than 80 years – detonating a nuclear weapon. There are many indications that, despite the US and Israel's ability to bomb Iran at will, this war may not be going well for them. But that need not be the pretext for using a nuclear weapon. In Trump's mind, the more unprovoked, outrageous and unnecessary something is, the better. Given his fragile ego and rapidly deteriorating mental powers – going off on bizarre rants about poisonous snakes in Peru or the White House drapes – the more unhinged he is, the more he thinks it demonstrates his dominance.

Since the end of the Cold War, many people who pay attention have worried about an accidental or a miscalculated stumble into nuclear war. But with Trump breaking every taboo domestically

and internationally, demonstrating that he is above the law and can do as he pleases at every turn, the ultimate taboo waiting to be broken is the nuclear one. This may in fact be part of the reason why Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping have muted their response to the attacks on Iran. They know how dangerous Trump is, and they don't want to provoke him.

There are now reports from US Air Force veteran Mikey Weinstein, the head of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, that his organisation has received calls from more than 200 soldiers on over 50 military bases that 'have one damn thing in freaking common … the unrestricted euphoria of their commanders and command chains as to how this new "biblically sanctioned" war is clearly the undeniable sign of the expeditious approach of the fundamentalist Christian "end times" as vividly described in the New Testament book of Revelation'. The commander of one combat unit told non-commissioned officers 'that the Iran war is part of God's plan and that President Donald Trump was "anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth"'.

US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard warned in June that we were 'closer to the brink of nuclear annihilation than ever before'. We might be a lot closer than even she realised. ◆

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The drugs (policies) don't work

The 'Shield of the Americas' initiative is the latest manifestation of the militarised drug control framework that has failed to stem the narcotics trade even as it provides cover for authoritarian policies and US intervention in the region.

Carlos Ron

ON 7 March, at the Trump National Doral Golf Club in Miami, US President Donald Trump inaugurated the 'Shield of the Americas' summit, convening right-wing leaders from Latin America and the Caribbean's 'Angry Tide'[1] around what he called a 'counter-cartel coalition'. Washington's recipe was stated plainly: 'The only way to defeat these enemies is by unleashing the power of our military.' Monroeism[2] is on the offensive, and the Angry Tide has become its shield – not against cartels, but against people-centred projects of national sovereignty.

The invited leaders – Milei of Argentina, Paz of Bolivia, Bukele of El Salvador, Noboa of Ecuador, Asfura of Honduras, Peña of Paraguay, Chaves of Costa Rica, Mulino of Panama, Abinader of the Dominican Republic, Ali of Guyana, Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago, and President-elect Kast of Chile – are all to the right of the political spectrum. Conspicuously absent were the progressive leaders of Latin America's largest economies: Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. Of Mexico, Trump declared: 'The cartels are running Mexico. We can't have that.'

The images from Miami stood in stark contrast to regional gatherings of the last two decades, where Latin American leaders met on equal standing to build frameworks for political coordination and cooperation – such as the Council of South American Defense and the South American Health Council under the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), for example. In Miami, the assembled presidents competed in a publicity stunt to see who would stand closest to Trump in the photograph or keep the commemorative pen with which he signed the agreements.

'War on drugs': A failed policy

It is alarming that this coalition commits to deeper collaboration with the United States on fighting cartels, given the balance sheet of US-led drug control. The Addicted to Imperialism study series, co-produced by the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research with the Lawfare Observatory, CEPDIPO and COCCAM,[3] lays out the record with devastating clarity: after more than 50 years of the 'war on drugs', the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) acknowledged before the US Congress that the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels alone have 'associates, facilitators and intermediaries in all 50 states of the United States'. This is the outcome of half a century of the most expensive and militarised drug control effort in human history.

The aggregate data confirms the verdict. In 2023, 316 million people consumed illegal drugs worldwide – a 22% increase from a decade prior. The US government has invested over $10 billion in counternarcotics efforts in Colombia since 1999, yet cocaine production more than tripled between 2013 and 2017. The study shows that between 2016 and 2022 – a period of intense US-Colombian cooperation – potential cocaine production in Colombia rose from 1,053 to 1,738 metric tons, while seizures and forced eradication also increased simultaneously. More eradication, more production. More cooperation, more cocaine.

No contemporary case illustrates this more starkly than Ecuador, whose president Daniel Noboa stood prominently at Trump's event in Miami. As the Addicted to Imperialism studies document, Ecuador has been subjected to a process of foreign interference since at least 2017 – producing marked deterioration of the social rule of law and a progressive militarisation of public security across four structural axes: foreign interference, economic liberalisation and external debt, institutional deterioration, and the securitisation of social problems.

Under President Lenín Moreno (2017–21), Ecuador restored US security ties suspended by his predecessor Rafael Correa, rejoining US Southern Command exercises. Under Guillermo Lasso (2021–23), a memorandum of understanding was signed, modelled explicitly on Plan Colombia, with a projected budget of $3.1 billion over seven years – repositioning Ecuador as the top recipient of US foreign military financing in the region, with $310 million between 2022 and 2023, surpassing Colombia.

Under Noboa, after presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated during the 2023 campaign, General Laura Richardson of US Southern Command travelled personally to Ecuador to agree a 'joint plan' including the deployment of US military personnel with full immunity from Ecuadorian justice – the same conditions applied in

Colombia, and immediately dubbed a 'Plan Ecuador'. The homicide rate reached 47 per 100,000 in 2023. Noboa's Plan Fénix deployed armed forces in city streets, built mega-prisons modelled on those in Nayib Bukele's El Salvador, and sought a constitutional reform to permit foreign military installations – such as a base in the Galápagos Islands. The militarisation of public security has not resolved the crisis. It has deepened it, while subordinating Ecuador's sovereignty to Washington's hemispheric agenda.

Political pretext

The militarised drug war framework does not protect populations from narco-trafficking. It protects political elites from democratic accountability and normalises authoritarianism under the banner of security. Addicted to Imperialism documents that in 2008, 35% of Colombian senators and 13% of House representatives were under investigation for links to paramilitary groups that simultaneously ran drug-trafficking operations. The 'war on drugs' did not dismantle these networks. It provided them with political cover.

This is not surprising when we recall the framework's origins. US President Richard Nixon's chief domestic policy advisor admitted decades later that the administration's 1971 declaration of drugs as 'public enemy number one' had a different target: 'The Nixon White House, after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. … We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.'

On a regional scale, from Plan Colombia to the Shield of the Americas, the alleged combat against cartels has consistently served as a pretext for military spending, interventionism, and the displacement of populations from their territories. The most recent illustration is Venezuela: the abduction of its sitting president, Nicolás Maduro, was framed as an anti-drug operation – but swiftly revealed as a mechanism for reinserting Venezuela into Washington's oil economy.

The drug war, in its hyper-militarised version, creates the institutional framework for precisely the kind of health concerns, corruption and impunity it claims to be fighting.

In 1826, Simón Bolívar convened the Amphictyonic Congress of Panama with a vision of extraordinary clarity: a confederation of Latin American republics acting collectively, guaranteeing their independence, and negotiating with great powers from a position of sovereign equality. The Angry Tide is today's antithesis of that spirit. At Miami, Trump declared: 'We will not allow foreign hostile influence to establish itself in this hemisphere – including the Panama Canal' – while Panama's President José Raúl Mulino sat in the audience and listened in silence. It is Monroeism at its most undisguised.

Latin America and the Caribbean – its movements, parties and progressive governments – needs a renewed regional agenda of sovereignty and concrete cooperation, including institutions capable of coordinating a sovereign response to the drug economy. The price of a kilogram of cocaine rises from approximately $1,500 at the point of production in Colombia to $20,000 in the United States. The producers – the peasant farmers – capture less than 1% of the global cocaine market's value. Meanwhile, over 70% of the weapons fuelling cartel violence in Mexico are manufactured in and flow from the United States. The drug war, in its hyper-militarised version, creates the institutional framework for precisely the kind of health concerns, corruption and impunity it claims to be fighting.

The first quarter of this century offers proof that a different ambition produces results. Operación Milagro launched by the Cuban and Venezuelan governments restored sight to over 3 million people. The ALBA literacy programmes eradicated illiteracy in Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Ecuador. Regional unity with a true purpose of reaffirming sovereignty and guaranteeing a dignified life for the population must not be abandoned for failed policies and publicity stunts. ◆

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Notes

1. Editor's note: The 'Angry Tide' refers to the recent ascendancy of hardline right-wing political leaders in Latin America.
2. Editor's note: The Monroe Doctrine, first announced by US President James Monroe in 1823, claims the entire Western Hemisphere as Washington's zone of protection and influence.
3. https://thetricontinental.org/es/argentina/investigaciones/adictos-al-imperialismo/

The battle over historical memory in El Salvador

A state-backed film detailing the 1981 massacre at El Mozote raises thorny questions about the civil war in El Salvador even as the victims continue fighting for justice.

Kevin Ramírez

Ernesto Zelaya (CC BY-SA 3.0)

A memorial to the El Mozote massacre.

ON 11 December 2025, the red carpet was rolled out in San Salvador for the premiere of the long-anticipated film *Luciérnagas en El Mozote* (Fireflies in El Mozote). The movie, which depicts the events of El Mozote – one of the most violent massacres committed by a state in modern Latin American history – was released 44 years to the day of the killing. In attendance were members of the country's film industry, representatives from private sectors, and officials from the Salvadoran government who supported the making of the film.

While the event's well-dressed invitees smiled for cameras on the brightly lit carpet, community members of El Mozote celebrated the news that the case of the massacre would finally go to trial. The announcement marked a monumental victory for activists fighting since the publication of the United Nations Truth Commission report in 1993. Nevertheless, news of the trial was notably absent from the film's grand premiere.

The event's avoidance of the thornier issues related to the massacre, along with the narrative told by the film, was likely the product of the Salvadoran state's involvement in the production. Since coming into power in 2019, right-wing President Nayib Bukele has attempted to reframe the armed conflict of the 1980s, advancing a narrative that absolves the country's armed forces of atrocities committed during its 12-year civil war (1980–92).

A film recounting such a stained moment in Salvadoran history might be expected to honour the victims of the massacre. Instead, it celebrated a turning point in Salvadoran film history, promoting the endless possibilities of shooting a production of this magnitude in Bukele's 'new' El Salvador, which has achieved security at the expense of massive human rights abuses.

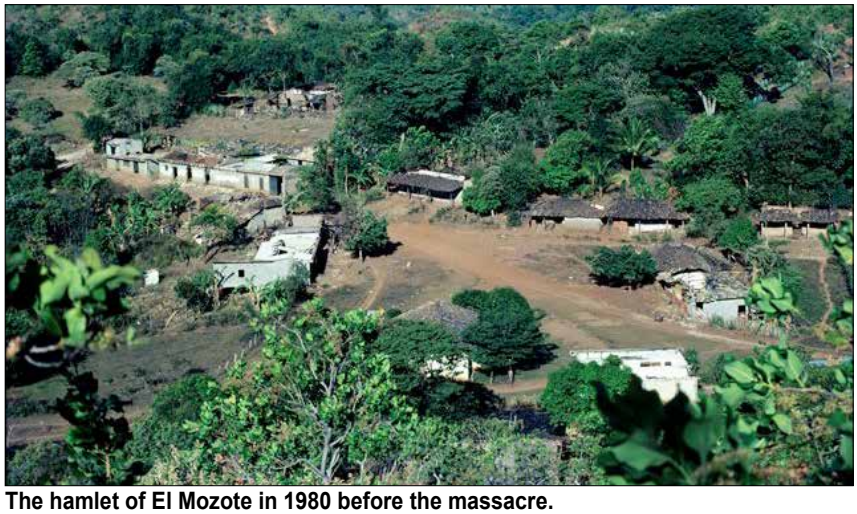
The massacre

On the evening of 11 December 1981, amidst a brutal armed conflict between the Salvadoran state and the left-wing guerilla insurgency known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the US-trained Atlácatl Battalion entered the village of El Mozote in the eastern department of Morazán in search of guerilla insurgents. Over the course of 48 hours, the battalion massacred upwards of 1,000 men, women and children.

After the massacre, the battalion moved on from the village, leaving behind Rufina Amaya, a survivor whose account informed the immediate details about the massacre. In the following days, the FMLN got news that the military had scorched a whole village and its people. Carlos 'Santiago' Consalvi, the voice of the FMLN's rebel radio station known as Radio Venceremos, heard about what happened on 17 December and soon after went on air and told the world about the atrocities committed by the Salvadoran military. Though Washington received news about the massacre in the immediate days after, the Reagan administration stayed silent and eventually denied the reports in order to keep providing the Salvadoran military with over $1 billion during the war. It was not until 26 January 1982,

when articles were published in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, that the news reached mass audiences in the United States.

After the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, Tutela Legal, a human rights legal office affiliated with the Archdiocese of El Salvador, filed a formal criminal complaint before the United Nations for violations of due process in the case of El Mozote. Tutela Legal won the case to invite an Argentine forensics team to excavate El Mozote. Their findings were published in the United Nations Truth Commission report, confirming that the Atlácatl Battalion carried out the massacre of up to 1,000 civilians in El Mozote and the town's surrounding hamlets. The report also provided wider details on the conflict, concluding that the Salvadoran military was responsible for upwards of 85% of the 75,000 people killed during the conflict.



ElCaudilloDeCuscatlan (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The hamlet of El Mozote in 1980 before the massacre.

The film's plot and production

Luciérnagas en El Mozote tells a different story of the events. The film opens with the massacre carried out by the Salvadoran military in El Mozote in December 1981. The only survivor is an 8-year-old boy who is rescued by unidentified guerilla fighters. The film then goes on to centre the boy in a daring guerilla operation that, though based on true events, calls into question his innocence and departs from the real story of Rufina Amaya.

Following several confrontations between the guerillas and the military, the guerillas orchestrate a trap to kill Colonel Montenegro – based on the figure of Atlácatl Battalion commander Domingo Monterrosa – by planting a bomb in a fake Radio Venceremos transmitter and allowing Salvadoran soldiers to discover it after an ambush. At the behest of the guerillas, the boy plays a key role in the operation, identifying Montenegro's helicopter and eventually detonating the device. In the final scenes of the film, the boy comes to a realisation that the guerillas are no different than the military, depicting both sides as perpetrators of the violence being carried out against innocent people throughout the country.

This selective framing of the conflict was surprising to members of the film crew. A member of the team, referred to as 'El Chele' due to their fear of professional and political repercussions, said that the production team initially believed that the film would be historically accurate. 'We were surprised when we saw that the government had a hand in the film. Once we saw that the armed forces were involved, we realised that it was going to be from their point of view.'

The Salvadoran state played a role in all stages of the movie's creation. During the production, director Ernesto Melara – who passed away in March 2025 – producers and actors were invited to the presidential palace. In a video posted by the Salvadoran government capturing this moment, Melara boasted about shooting the film in El Salvador, saying, 'The main reason we can carry out this production in the country is because of the climate of security that has been achieved by this government.' This message was echoed by the film's producers and actors, shifting the focus away from the horrific massacre at El Mozote and towards the country's security.

In an interview with La Tribu FM, a Salvadoran radio show, producer Elías Axume stated that the budget for the film was $1.4 million, noting that, 'in another country, it would have cost $5 million'. He made clear the film could not have been made without the support of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Armed Forces. This, however, was not shared with the film team. According to El Chele, 'We realised Elías had contacts in the government when we got free access to Deininger National Park and the Armed Forces showed up – it's usually difficult to film them.' According to Axume, the Armed Forces supplied helicopters, soldiers as extras, and security, while the Ministry of Culture and Tourism provided free transportation and access to national parks around the country. In this sense, *Luciérnagas en El Mozote* was a project to 'project the country' and, as producer Carlos Figueroa told La Tribu FM, 'promote the country as a destination for [future] productions'.

Long struggle for justice

The commercialisation of the massacre as a means to pitch El Salvador as a filmmaking destination, as well as the direct

role of the Armed Forces in the production of the movie, was not well received by Salvadorans who have struggled to hold the state accountable for its violence. This fight has unfolded over decades.

In 1993, five days after the publication of the Truth Commission report, the Salvadoran parliament passed the 'General Amnesty Law for the Consolidation of Peace'. The bill granted amnesty to soldiers responsible for war crimes, including the atrocities committed against the people of El Mozote. The law was denounced by legal activists as they continued to fight for national and international courts to reopen the case.

Casa Presidencial El Salvador

President Nayib Bukele has attempted to reframe the armed conflict of the 1980s, advancing a narrative that absolves the country's armed forces of atrocities committed during the 12-year civil war.

A significant step towards justice came in July 2016, when the Salvadoran Supreme Court overturned the amnesty law, declaring it unconstitutional. The decision came in response to a 2013 constitutional challenge by the Institute of Human Rights of the Central American University, located in San Salvador. The ruling came after the 2012 decision of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights which concluded that the amnesty law did not apply to the case of El Mozote, ordering El Salvador to investigate the massacre and seek justice. Thereafter, Jorge Guzmán, Judge of the First Instance of San Francisco Gotera, reopened the investigation for criminal prosecution, gathering evidence and oral testimonies from the survivors of surrounding hamlets.

However, hope was shortlived. In 2019, the political landscape surrounding the case of El Mozote shifted dramatically with the election of Bukele as president of El Salvador. Despite pledging to provide full transparency of military archives, Bukele denied Judge Guzmán access to military documents pertaining to the massacre in 2020. He also went out of his way to challenge the conventional narrative of the massacre and reframe broader understandings of the armed conflict itself.

During the president's first visit to El Mozote for the 39th anniversary of the massacre in 2020, Bukele stood before the families of victims and said that he was 'not there to apologise or cry' because 'those responsible for the massacre should be the ones asking for forgiveness'. Instead, he accused past governments of exploiting the massacre for financial and electoral benefits. He also called into question the country's wider peace process, stating that the Peace Accords signed between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN were a 'farce'. In Bukele's retelling, the victims of El Mozote and the wider war itself were collateral damage in a battle between two opposing sides.

In 2021, the legislature – controlled by Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party – passed the Judicial Career Law, which dismissed Judge Guzmán, putting a temporary stop to the efforts to take the case of El Mozote to trial. Nevertheless, on 9 December 2025, leading human rights NGO Cristosal reported that the judicial court of San Francisco Gotera ruled to take the case to the initial stages of a trial. During the hearing, Defence Minister Guillermo García, who was identified as the person ultimately responsible, and 12 officers of the Atlácatl Battalion were slated to take the stand. A few weeks later, however, the San Francisco Gotera court reported that the defence attorneys of the military personnel had appealed the decision, placing another obstacle in the pursuit of justice and leaving the ultimate decision to the Criminal Court of San Miguel. As of writing, the Court has not ruled on the appeal.

A historic step forward

The film, which is scheduled to debut in the United States in March 2026, has been celebrated with state support. Meanwhile, survivors and activists continue to wait for justice, forced to endure a system that has long denied them accountability. According to Cristosal, however, recent steps forward, like getting to a trial stage, have been 'profoundly historic' for the victims. Instead of a top-down effort led by the government, the case has been 'written by the victims and the organisations that stood with [the victims of El Mozote] … It's a victory for those who transformed their grief into moral strength.'

The breakthrough in the case marks a turning point in El Salvador's collective memory. It opens the door for hope that accountability may yet be achieved. As Cristosal notes, this moment is 'a reminder that even in the darkest chapters of Salvadoran history, dignity can open a crack through which light can shine'. ◆

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Women in war: Gendered violence and the politics of conflict

In times of war, violence against women becomes a means through which power is asserted and communities are terrorised.

Gazala Parveen

'Their musings about how and why people stayed in a country under such terrible conditions were what I hated most. I knew it was ignorance, not insight, that prompted these questions. They asked because they had not smelled the air raid smoke or the scent of singed flesh on their own balconies; they could not fathom that such a dangerous place could still harbour all the feelings of home.' – Sara Nović, *Girl at War*

UN Women / Allison Joyce (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

A Rohingya woman and her children at a refugee camp in Bangladesh. Globally, women and children comprise more than half of the world's displaced population.

WAR does not affect all bodies equally. Gender plays a decisive role in shaping how violence is experienced during conflict, determining who is protected, who is violated, and whose suffering is rendered invisible. Across history, women have been systematically targeted in war, not as accidental casualties, but as symbolic and strategic sites of violence through which power is asserted and communities are disciplined.

This reality is often obscured by narratives that frame women's suffering as collateral damage, rather than as a predictable outcome of militarised and patriarchal systems.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once described warfare as an invention through which societies legitimise violence in the pursuit of honour, land or revenge. Historically, it has largely been women's task to endure the consequences of this invention, sustaining life and meaning when violence erodes both.

Although often overlooked, gender fundamentally shapes experiences of suffering in both peace and conflict. In patriarchal societies, women are cast as custodians of communal honour and identity. When conflict erupts, this symbolism becomes dangerous.

The use of women's bodies as symbolic and literal battlegrounds is neither new nor accidental. Megha Majumdar's novel *A Burning* captures this grim continuity, illustrating how sexual violence functions as a mechanism of power rather than deviation. Women are punished not for individual actions but for the meanings imposed upon their bodies. Such portrayals mirror lived realities across societies where misogyny is embedded within social and political structures.

Journalist Sue Lloyd-Roberts's *The War on Women* documents how violence against women is routinely rationalised through appeals to tradition. In one recorded exchange, punishment, even killing, is described as necessary to restore a man's honour. What is striking is not only the brutality of this reasoning, but its familiarity. Across cultures, misogyny is repeatedly legitimised through the language of custom, morality and social order, obscuring

Adam Jones, PhD (CC BY-SA 3.0)

A genocide memorial site in Ntarama, Rwanda. During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, hundreds of thousands of women were subjected to rape and sexual violence.

its fundamentally criminal nature.

This justification of violence, rooted in patriarchal ideas of honour and control, does not recede during wartime; it intensifies.

In conflict zones, women and girls face heightened exposure to sexual violence, forced displacement and systemic deprivation. The collapse of legal and social protections enables gender-based violence to function both as a tactic of war and as a tolerated outcome. Women are dehumanised, reduced to instruments through which power is asserted and communities are terrorised.

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most visible examples of systematic gendered violence in modern history. Estimates suggest that between 75,000 and 100,000 women were abducted, assaulted or forcibly married during this period.

These acts were not isolated incidents but organised strategies aimed at inflicting collective humiliation and long-term social rupture. Violence against women was central, not incidental, to the logic of Partition-era conflict.

A similar pattern emerged during the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Over the course of approximately 100 days, hundreds of thousands of women were subjected to rape and sexual violence as Hutu militias targeted Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Survivors such as Mukandoli, a widow who conceived a child through rape, continue to live with the enduring psychological consequences of the genocide. Having lost seven children during the violence, she struggled to raise the child born of it; a reminder that for many women, war does not end when fighting stops but persists through memory, trauma and social marginalisation.

Contemporary conflicts reproduce these same structural dynamics. In Gaza, sustained military violence has generated a humanitarian crisis with pronounced gendered consequences. Reports by UN Women and Human Rights Watch indicate that women and children constitute a significant proportion of those killed, injured and displaced. This reflects not an accident but the impact of warfare conducted in densely populated civilian spaces.

The degradation of healthcare infrastructure has had particularly severe implications for women. Thousands of pregnant women face childbirth amid shortages of medical supplies, electricity and trained personnel. Limited access to water, sanitation and privacy disproportionately affects women and girls, increasing health risks and vulnerability in overcrowded shelters. These conditions demonstrate how conflict systematically undermines women's bodily autonomy and reproductive safety.

Globally, women and children comprise more than half of the world's displaced population. Conflict environments strip women of autonomy while heightening exposure to exploitation, sexual violence and economic precarity. Yet women's experiences are frequently treated as secondary to military or geopolitical concerns, rather than recognised as central indicators of humanitarian and political failure.

Women, however, are not merely passive recipients of violence. They serve as journalists, healthcare workers, community organisers and, in some cases, combatants, sustaining social life amid institutional collapse. Despite this, women remain largely excluded from peace negotiations and post-conflict governance, their perspectives treated as peripheral rather than essential.

Acknowledging women's suffering without addressing the structures that enable it risks rendering such recognition symbolic rather than transformative. As long as women's bodies remain acceptable sites of violence, conflict will continue to reproduce entrenched hierarchies of power and domination.

When gender is ignored in the assessment of war, neutrality becomes a form of complicity. ◆

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Two Kenyan women rebuild libraries in a quietly powerful new documentary

The effort of two women to restore neglected public libraries in Nairobi extends beyond physical refurbishment; as a new documentary reveals, it also seeks to reclaim the library as a democratic space where knowledge and a sense of community are shared.

Tinashe Mushakavanhu

TWO Kenyan women – Wanjiru Koinange and Angela Wachuka – set out in 2017 to do something both ordinary and radical: rebuild neglected libraries in Nairobi. What began as a small community project quickly revealed the tangled politics of and access to knowledge in a major African city still haunted by its colonial architectures.

Their ongoing work to rehabilitate public libraries is captured in a new film, *How to Build a Library*, directed and produced by Kenyan filmmakers Maia Lekow and Christopher King. The film follows the protagonists as they navigate bureaucracy, gendered expectations and the structural decay of public institutions, while holding fast to a belief that libraries can still be sanctuaries of imagination and civic life.

I am drawn to this film because, as a scholar of African literary cultures, I have been thinking deeply about the infrastructures that sustain reading and writing. This film offers a perspective rarely given the attention it deserves.

Between empire and community

The documentary opens with the pair in a dusty library. This is Nairobi's library network as the

film first encounters it: forgotten, underfunded and yet still alive with potential. They eventually quit their corporate jobs to start a non-profit organisation named Book Bunk in 2017, with a mission to transform public libraries in Kenya. For Book Bunk, the project to refurbish and reopen these spaces to the public is an act of restoration and reclamation.

Kenya's public libraries have long been undermined by chronic underfunding, outdated infrastructure and policy neglect, leaving many to function as symbolic spaces rather than living civic institutions. This is a pattern across Africa where libraries have been failed by a lack of sustained public investment and vision.

At the centre of the film stands the McMillan Memorial Library, a vast stone edifice built in 1931 by Lady Lucie McMillan in honour of her husband, Sir Northrup McMillan, one of the city's early colonial settlers. Once the pride of Nairobi, the library's grand neoclassical pillars and reading rooms were designed to mirror the libraries of London. Like so much colonial infrastructure, the building was not meant for everyone. It was initially for the exclusive use of the white colonial settler community, but is now a public institution run by Nairobi County.

The film treats McMillan as both protagonist and antagonist: a physical site of memory and a metaphor for the lingering hierarchies of knowledge. The building is in disrepair, and in some rooms there are masses of broken furniture. The two women's efforts to rehabilitate it – what they call 'the ultimate prize' – become entangled in questions of ownership and authority. Who controls public heritage? Who decides what deserves preservation? Their mission takes them from city offices to private boardrooms, confronting a web of interests that guard the library less as a commons than as a monument. The film also includes perspectives from librarians,

city officials and the governor of Nairobi, and even captures a visit by King Charles.

What could have been a straightforward tale of civic renewal evolves into a more complex meditation on the politics of cultural labour. *How to Build a Library* refuses to sentimentalise its subjects. The camera lingers on the exhaustion of Koinange and Wachuka after yet another fruitless meeting, or the frustration of dealing with indifferent officials, the tension between idealism and pragmatism. But through it all, there's an insistence that this kind of work, slow, unglamorous and often invisible, is precisely what sustains a society's intellectual life.

One of the film's most charged sequences unfolds during a visit to the library, where Koinange and Wachuka engage the librarians in a discussion about the collection and its reliance on the Dewey Decimal System. What begins as a thoughtful critique of how African knowledge is misclassified, marginalised or rendered invisible within colonial cataloguing structures gradually becomes tense. The librarians perceive this as an undermining of their expertise. The scene resists easy resolution. In this moment, the library becomes a site of friction, revealing how deeply colonial knowledge systems remain embedded, even as they are questioned.

Bahnfrend (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The McMillan Memorial Library in Nairobi.

Politics of care

Visually, the documentary is striking for its attention to texture and detail. The camera lingers on decaying staircases, on fingers tracing dusty book spines, on shafts of light cutting through broken windows. These are not merely aesthetic gestures; they register the passage of time, the erosion of care and the persistence of those who refuse to give up on the public sphere. The filmmakers use these images to pose a broader question: what happens to a city when its libraries fall into disrepair?

Throughout the film, the act of rebuilding emerges as a metaphor for a larger cultural project. In repairing shelves and repainting walls, the women are also trying to repair the idea of the library itself as a civic institution, as a symbol of collective memory, as a space where knowledge might circulate freely again. Their work gestures towards a radical politics of care: an understanding that maintenance, too, can be revolutionary.

There is a subtle feminist thread running through *How to Build a Library*. The protagonists' labour, emotional, logistical and physical, contrasts sharply with the masculinised power structures they must navigate mostly run by men. Their insistence on dialogue, collaboration and community foregrounds a different mode of leadership, one rooted not in authority but in empathy. In this sense, the film also challenges how cultural infrastructure is imagined and sustained: who builds it, who funds it, who is allowed to dream through it.

By its conclusion, *How to Build a Library* does not offer easy closure. The McMillan remains in limbo, its future uncertain. Yet the film resists despair. Instead, it finds meaning in the process itself, in the act of showing up, of cleaning, of painting, of listening. It suggests that building a library is not merely about erecting walls or cataloguing books; it is about creating the conditions for dialogue, for the slow and ongoing work of citizenship.

The verdict, if one is needed, is not triumph but endurance. In an age when attention spans have dwindled and public culture is increasingly privatised, the film insists that libraries still matter. They remain among the few truly democratic spaces where people can gather without having to buy or belong. To build a library, the film suggests, is to build a future, one in which knowledge, however precariously, remains a shared inheritance. ◆

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