

# Towards a Multipolar World? Does “Global Realignment” Provide an Opportunity for Nations to Exercise Self-Determination? The Case of Puerto Rico

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*Do the emergence of a seemingly multipolar world and the declining power of the US (mainly its constant economic crises, falling rates of profit, recession, excessive debt, etc.) provide an opportunity for Puerto Rico and other nations to achieve self-determination?*

*The US state has been the world’s hegemon and has largely ruled with unipolar supremacy since the aftermath of World War II (the exception, during the Cold War, from the late 1940s to the late 1980s). The ascendance of the US to the global position of power was established by developing international political and economic institutions (e.g., the IMF, WB, GATT, and the UN) that stabilized the capitalist economy and legitimized the US state.*

*What anchored the US state hegemony was its conversion to a permanent war economy, which developed its military capacity and militarism used to enforce this international system and to hinder forces who opposed this order, which included socialists and national liberation forces. As a result, it has been next to impossible for colonies, neo-colonies, and other nations to achieve autonomy and self-governance. Efforts to bring resolutions went largely unabated because many nations had bent to the pressures and belligerence of the US state. Therefore, the question is: does a realignment of the global order allow Puerto Rico and other nations to exercise their self-determination?*

## GLOBAL AND REGIONAL REALIGNMENT

The emergence of a multipolar world has been in the works for some time, with states forming associations based on mutual respect, trade, and trading in their currencies as a deliberate means to sidestep US dominance, efforts at establishing fair trade, and autonomy.

One example of this effort can be seen in BRICS nations (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which comprise over 40% of the world population, a substantial amount of trade, and roughly 32% of global GDP.

The BRICS is considered a rival to the G-7 economies and has announced an initiative to develop a New Development Bank (alternatives to the IMF and WB) and de-dollarization initiatives. The goal of the union is to promote cooperation and dialogue among themselves proactively, pragmatically, incrementally, transparently, and openly. The focus is also on building a peaceful, harmonious world with shared prosperity that serves the interests of all the people and nations that belong to it. Many other developing nations are interested in

joining the BRICS, and many nations are trading in their own currencies.

Another clear example of how the US is being challenged is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development strategy implemented by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in more than 150 countries and international organizations.

BRI is said to be one of the most significant infrastructure and investment projects in history. The initiative defines five major priorities: policy coordination; infrastructure connectivity; unimpeded trade; financial integration; and connecting people. Some criticisms view that countries are swapping out one imperialist power for another. In addition, a preponderance of media, primarily US-based coverage, equates the Chinese BRI with expansionism and debt-trap diplomacy. However, the Chinese have not sought to superimpose their political system on other nations.

There have been concerns by anti-capitalists that China continues to operate within the framework of the Western capitalist economic order. Yet, the current conditions may change this reality, especially with the US provocations regarding Taiwan's sovereignty and arming neighboring nations (e.g., the Philippines, Guam, Australia, and Japan) against China. But the issue we are most concerned with is whether a multipolar world provides an opportunity for nations to work together in a mutually beneficial way and not be under the control of the US state.

Yet, the BRI has worked with many nations from East Asia to Europe to the Caribbean on essential infrastructure projects such as constructing roads, water pipelines, and railways and providing loans to many historically underdeveloped nations. According to the World Bank, by improving infrastructure and reducing trade costs, BRI investments could help lift nearly 40 million people from poverty.

In addition, US dollar supremacy and US global control have been increasingly questioned since the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, which originated in the US with worldwide ripple effects. In addition, the accelerated de-dollarization has been largely driven by the US-imposed lead sanctions placed on Russia for invading Ukraine, which signaled to other nations, such as China, the need moves away from the dollar. As important de-dollarization is to the US hegemony, many nations are invested in the dollar, the global reserve currency, which continues to be reliable. The idea or forecast of a new global currency is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, the Chinese yuan international transitions have increased, with Russia, the other BRICS, plus Iran, Bangladesh, and Southeast Asia nations, to name a few. Iran has been using the yuan for some time. Even President Macron of France, a key US ally, “warned against the ‘extraterritoriality of the US dollar,’” suggesting that Europe should cut its dependence on the dollar to maintain France’s “strategic autonomy” and not become vassals should tensions between US and China heat up” (Tan 2023). For many nations, the dollar, the internationally reserved currency backed by the US government, is increasingly viewed as a control mechanism.

United States’ lead sanctions on Russia have contributed to de-dollarization and the rise of many nations utilizing their currencies and the yuan. The Russian invasion of Ukraine can be seen in the larger context as part of the US state’s provocation and response to its declining hegemonic position and an attempt to expand its influence in Ukraine, Western Europe, and Russia. It is essential to understand here how these events create opportunities for many nations, considered non-western and parts of the Global South, to form systems that are autonomous from the US state and its state system of allies. These statements are not

intended to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty but to only situation it in a larger context of US imperialism and global realignment. In the past many of these nations were reluctant to take principled political stances for nations either seeking national independence or redress for human rights violations because of the repercussions and the control that the United States and Western nations command over them.

However, a global realignment of power might allow nations such as Puerto Rico to develop associations based on mutual and equal partnerships and not remain under the domination and subordination of the United States. At least twenty-five countries in the Americas are not independent sovereign nations; they are, therefore, colonies to various official classifications, called constituent parts of sovereign states or dependent territories of sovereign states. Of course, the above represents the continued Western colonial rule of the most direct type in the Americas. This description is not too different from the rest of the world. As a result, these nations' colonial status forbids them from exercising fundamental national rights because of the continued legacy of the colonial rule of the imperialist West and the United States.

There has also been pushback from Latin America and the Caribbean to US hegemony and its underdevelopment strategies. These nations have historically formed alliances based on their shared histories of a multitude of direct and indirect rule from Western and US imperialist powers. An example of recent pushback from peripheral nations in this hemisphere can be seen in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), an example of an association and trading bloc operating autonomously from the US state. ALBA's primary goals are to alleviate poverty and to promote socioeconomic reform through trade agreements that meet each country's needs rather than through the neoliberal or free market. There is a long history of the US supporting military dictators and right-wing governments in repressing and overthrowing popular and leftist governments has been changing. Throughout the region, right-wing governments have been replaced by socialist and social democratic ones in the last four years. In addition, there has been a tide of leftist elected presidents in Latin America - e.g., Colombia, Chile, Peru, Honduras, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. The defeated presidents were largely supported by the US and failed to address the popular frustration in their respective nations with increased inequality and failed neoliberal economic policies. These political leaders reject the traditional US role in the region and are working to strengthen regional ties with their neighbors, such as Cuba and Venezuela.

A significant act of defiance from some Latin American nations came as the US refused to invite the socialist nations Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua to the Summit of Americas, held in Los Angeles, CA, June 6-10, 2022. In protest, President López Obrador of Mexico called for a boycott, stating, "I don't accept hegemonies.... Not of China, not of Russia, not of the United States. All countries, no matter how small they are, are free and are independent" (Norton 2022). On May 5, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) announced that if any American country were excluded from the summit, its fourteen member nations would likely not attend. Ultimately, López Obrador did not participate, along with others boycotting it, such as Bolivia, Honduras, and Guatemala. Many have seen this act as a defiant act against the US by some of its most loyal allies. Some have gone as far as to describe this as the end of US hegemony, the Monroe Doctrine of the Americas, making the Americas the domain of the United States. This act was especially significant, as it occurred while the US attempted to solidify its alliance against China and Russia. However, it appears that many nations in Latin America and the Caribbean are seeking to exercise their self-determination by

welcoming economic ties and associations with each other and with other nations such as China and Russia.

Just as the US state' ascendance involved imperialist expansion, the creation of colonies, the use of genocide, slavery, and with its military dominance in the post-WWII period, military invasions, the overthrowing of democratically elected political officials in the name of "the fight against Communism," its decline appears to be no different. For this, we only need a few examples to capture the continuity of this policy: the US' invasions, bombings, and incursions in Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Syria (2011), and Libya (2011). According to Jeffrey Sacks, since 1980, the US has been in at least 15 overseas "wars of choice" (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Panama, Serbia, Syria, and Yemen, to name a few), while China has been in none, and Russia only in one (Syria) beyond the former Soviet Union. The US has military bases in 85 countries, China in 3, and Russia in 1 (Syria) beyond the former Soviet Union (2022). According to the Military Intervention Project, the US has undertaken almost 400 military interventions since 1776, with half of these operations undertaken between 1950 and 2019; over 25% occurred in the post-Cold War period (Kushi and Duffy Toft 2023).[\[1\]](#)

According to John Ross, two powerful forces oppose US military aggression: China, whose economic development is not merely crucial for improving the living standards of its population, and the military as a deterrent to US military aggression and the emergence of several countries that are countering US aggression—including many in the Global South, comprising the majority of the world's people—not merely from a moral viewpoint but from direct self-interests (2022). However, the US state continues its worldwide dominance and expansion - e.g., the "War on Terror," the "Pivot to Asia," "AFRICOM" (i.e., an effort to recolonize Africa), and "regime changes" such as in Ukraine in 2014. Its consequent "proxy" war intended to destabilize Russia and its aggression towards China to undermine its development. In fact, the US is covertly and not so covertly attempting to impact the political processes in Pakistan and Turkey because of political forces in their nations trying to operate in our national interests, as opposed to the United States' interests. Many nations have been responding to the US imperialist policies and their attempt to prevent countries from achieving national independence and sovereignty.

#### PUERTO RICO IN THE UNIPOLAR US-IMPERIALIST STATE WORLD

Millions of people in the US, its colonial territories, and worldwide are influenced by the US imperialist states' self-image. The US military and economic dominance have resulted in it achieving global hegemony. The US- state's dominant position is constructed by various factors such as state officials, corporate media, and its global network of other capitalist states, corporate elites, and international organizations such as the WB, IMF, WTO, and the United Nations. The US-state has a history of pressuring member states at the UN to either vote with the US or to abstain from voting on the issue of Puerto Rico's right to self-determination and to become an independent nation. Although the UN has passed some important resolutions such as the UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV), Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People) in 1960 and most recently in 2017. The 2017 resolution by the UN Special Committee on Decolonization was to the General Assembly calling on the US "to assume its responsibility to expedite a process that would allow the people of the island to fully exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence." Yet, many see international organizations like the UN, the WB, and IMF that developed after 1945 (the post-WWII era), a period in which the US reached its apex of

power as a 'super imperialist nation,' as instruments of the most domination nations (Harvey 2003).

The US essentially created the world in its image following WWII with the Bretton Woods Agreement in 1944, which provided the groundwork for the IMF, WB, and the GATT (recognized today as the WTO) and the creation of the United Nations. To varying degrees, these international organizations were designed to establish peace and stability among western and capitalist states. According to Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf (1990), "The US-State achieved military, economic, financial, and political dominance over the rest of the world and was able to use dollar diplomacy, the CIA, and other means to thwart off populist and socialist challengers to capitalism abroad" (in Volscho 2017:251). We must consider the US dominance and hegemony when considering the UN as an honest broker. Many of these capitalist nations formed an entity of stakeholders who have a vested interest in continuing the global capitalist system. The US hegemonic position has allowed it, in many instances, the ability to hide much of its imperialist behavior and the ability to disseminate its ideas, values, and beliefs that present itself as "the leader of the free world" and as a liberator, are but some examples of its ability to influence or win over many of the people of the world. However, when the US-imperialist state's hegemony fails, it resorts to the violence and coercion of the military might of its state.

With some exceptions, many do not refer to the US as an empire. An empire for good (e.g., Ferguson 2004; Kagan 2003), or as the world's "policeman," etc. and debate its strategic course, soft power vs. hard power and unipolarism vs. multilateralism (Ikenberry 2004; Nye 2002). These views tend to reflect a patriotic academic scholarship and an adherence to Western political realist justifications. Yet, what is missing is the fact that imperialism is what empires do (Parenti 2011), and these representations of a US empire are void of the carnage and the meddling in the political affairs of the sovereign nations and peoples that the US-imperialist state as a long history of inflicting (see Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback*, 2004, who argues that much of these actions have been kept hidden from the US public, however, see Ward Churchill's *The Justice of Roosting Chickens*, 2002, who argues that the public is well of aware of this).

The various favorable views of the US empire persist and continue to be propagating by the media and US political officials. A current rendition holds that the US must rule - i.e., maintain dominance and uphold the international order because, without its military and economic backing, the world would collapse into chaos or authoritarianism. This sentiment was recently expressed by the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who spoke about Russia's invasion of Ukraine as tearing at the rules-based international order that "keeps us all secure." Yet, Chomsky and Prashad argue that there are two rules-based international order, one supported by the US, which defines the system as, if you follow the US, then you are following the rules; the other is grounded in the UN Charter (2022:185).

James M. Blunt explains how imperialist states dealt with the anti-colonial struggle in the 1960s by viewing decolonization as a "smooth evolution of colonies from the condition of colonial 'tutelage,' through the graduation ceremony of decolonization, to the mature, adult, colonial economic and political dependency as continued evolution toward 'modernity' and as the only road to economic development" (1987:38). Blaut further explains how decolonized nations remain subordinated within some system in which dominant states continue to manage their affairs. This essentially is the continuation of "the principles of colonial and semi-colonial rule, along with the counterpart of this as practiced by the United States, namely gunboat diplomacy and periodic invasion and occupation of small

neighbouring state plus a dollop of ordinary colonialism in countries like Puerto Rico” (Blaut 1987:38-39). Therefore, one needs to situate UN resolutions on decolonization within the context of dominant nations like the US maintaining their control over Third World nations through various means.

The hegemony of the US imperialist state must be addressed if the aim is to understand the US and its continued colonialism in Puerto Rico because of the US’ ability to shape the parameters of the discourse for the Puerto Rican national question. One significant issue before us is explaining why the Puerto Rican national question has yet to be resolved. After all, Puerto Ricans fit the definition of a culturally distinct people from a nation that is “a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself” (Guibernau 1996:47). However, according to Blaut, five well-known conditions define the national question or the national struggle and how they occur within the context of another nation – i.e., a more powerful nation. Puerto Rico fits the first condition that captures the efforts of “a colony to win independence from the occupying colonial power, and counter-efforts by the colonial power to prevent the colony from gaining its independence” (1987:13). The objective here is to centralize the US imperialism state’s role in Puerto Rico’s right to self-determination.

To understand hegemony in the colonial context, we refer to the literature from such political theorists as Franz Fanon 1961, 1959; Albert Memmi 1955; and Aimé Césaire 1950. These political theorists have analyzed how imperialist states have used counterinsurgency; racial ideologies that foster inferior psychologies, dependent on the colonial arrangement; and an intermediate native elite that serve as a buffer between the colonized and the colonizer. According to Ángel Collado Schwarz, the term “Stockholm Syndrome” describes much of this colonial psychology...where the captive colony begins to identify with, and then embrace, the will of their masters” (2015). Even with the US’ history of counterinsurgency against Puerto Ricans with its strategies at indirect rule (i.e., “commonwealth”), gain complete intelligence information (neutralized those who support independence), and having a hearts and minds program (e.g., co-optation in the administration of indirect rule, incorporation of the oppressed into the repressive apparatus, and the distribution of social aid provisions, and employment). Yet, even after the political repression of the National Party in the 1930s-1950s, the national liberation movement, both in Puerto Rico and in the US (1960s-1980s) (Montes 2003), that struggle for real national sovereignty continues and can be seen in the victory to remove the US military from Vieques (2003), the removal of corrupt and pro-statehood Gov. Ricardo Rossello from office in 2019.

The declining influence of the US-imperialist state has been felt in Puerto Rico for some time; its ability to shore up the colony with employment and social aid while it held a captive market, source of cheap labor, control of lands it used as part of its military geostrategic operations, and a supply of soldiers due to having no control over political or economic matters, had been evident for some time. The consequences of recent events, such as the imposition of the Fiscal Control Board in Puerto Rico’s financial affairs in 2017 (because of the colonial debt crisis), and the effects of Hurricane Maria, have exposed many Puerto Ricans to the actual colonial status of Puerto Rico.

The dominant view holds, with its various interpretations, that Puerto Ricans are (or should be) eternally grateful to the US for saving them from Spanish tyranny and for its civilizing mission, and assuming the “white man’s burden” (Hitchens 2004:63-97). In more current times, the US is viewed as a modernizing force, saving Puerto Rico from Third World poverty

and establishing the “Commonwealth Government” in 1952, supposedly meeting the UN’s decolonization requirement. The legal basis for the UN involvement in Puerto Rico’s national question is Article 73 of the United Nations Charter (1946); this article states that it is to administer territories that have not obtained a “full measure of self-government” (Persusse 1990:59). However, these views that Puerto Rico in some unique and mutual political agreement with the US government and being shattered, with more Puerto Ricans learning the lessons from the Hurricane Maria with the growth of mutual aid and self-sustainable collectives.

Puerto Rico must not be analyzed based on the US-imperialist state’s hegemonic self-image as a liberator, civilizer, modernizing agent, or mutual partner but as an imperialist power that employs various repressive and facilitative modes of co-optation and appeasement to maintain and conceal its dominance (Montes 2009). The global realignment of global forces will likely present viable options for Puerto Rico’s autonomy in self-governance by opening opportunities to engage in mutually beneficial associations with other nations. Of course, this is predicated on the continued decline of the US, which appears to be occurring, as discussed above, and as such, will not be able to keep the colony afloat, causing Puerto Ricans and other colonized, oppressed, and exploited peoples to rely on themselves and form more mutual aid relations. Currently, Puerto Rico cannot enter trade and development arrangements based on its own national interests because of its colonial relationship with the United States.

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