

Compare Iraq with Ukraine. It's Clear the Era of US Global Supremacy is Over

Description



US soldiers stationed inside one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces in Tikrit, Iraq in 2004.
Photograph: Stefan Zaklin/EPA



by Jonathan Steel via [The Guardian](#)

Washington's power is suddenly threatened by a newly confident China and disquiet among leaders in the global south

It's a useful coincidence that the 20th anniversary of George W Bush and Tony Blair's illegal attack on Iraq falls only a matter of weeks after the anniversary of Vladimir Putin's illegal attack on Ukraine. Neither war was authorised by the UN. Both are marked by massive destruction and huge loss of life.

[The Bush/Blair invasion and occupation of Iraq, and its chaotic consequences, have taken the lives of more than a million Iraqi civilians, according to one survey.](#) US forces committed innumerable war crimes, not least the torture of captured soldiers. At the [Abu Ghraib](#) detention centre near Baghdad, US officers humiliated Iraqi prisoners in violation of the Geneva conventions. The invasion provoked widespread resistance, but US counter-insurgency tactics involved raids on villages that led to [massacres of unarmed civilians](#).

The world reacted to the Bush/Blair war with disapproval, but almost no action was taken against them. There were no state-imposed sanctions on the US or Britain. No investigators from the international criminal court took evidence to substantiate prosecutions for war crimes. A few individuals and some human rights organisations called for Blair to be indicted on the charge of [committing the crime of aggression](#), but no government approached the UN with a resolution to open a criminal case against them.

Now consider the very different reaction to Vladimir Putin's illegal war on Ukraine. Virtually every western government, following the US's lead, has slapped sanctions on Russia's exports. Russia's financial holdings in US banks have been frozen. Putin's friends have had their yachts and other property [impounded](#) – and then a few days ago the international criminal court [issued an arrest warrant for Putin](#) for war crimes involving the illegal deportation of children from Ukraine.

The contrast in the global reaction to the two wars is instructive. Nothing better illustrates the differential between Russia's meagre international authority and that of the US. For Putin it is humiliating. He may like to think of his country as a superpower, but in reality, beyond holding a massive nuclear arsenal, [Russia](#) has little global clout and few foreign friends. Putin is widely criticised for trying to recreate an old-fashioned empire by seizing land and intimidating states on Russia's western and southern borders.

The US, for its part, runs a new style of non-territorial empire with great success. It enjoys enormous political and economic influence on every continent, dominates the international financial system, and operates 750 military bases in more than 80 countries. Most of the world dare not oppose Washington's writ.

Some analysts argue that if Russia is defeated in its current war on Ukraine, Europe will be able to enjoy a post-imperial system of peaceful relations and autonomy on the continent for the first time in history. They forget Nato. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization began in 1949 and [still continues](#) in part as an instrument for US hegemony in Europe. Allies may decline to participate in US military operations, as France and Germany [boldly did](#) over Iraq in 2003, but they do not publicly denounce them as illegal or call for sanctions.

Europeans and some Americans, including past and present senior officials, who argued against the expansion of Nato after the demise of the Soviet Union – or even advocated the alliance's dissolution now that the enemy was gone – were never going to achieve their goals. The Baltic states and Poland craved the protection of the imperial American umbrella, which the US military-industrial complex was not going to give up in any case.

Equally unattainable was the proposal that Nato should invite the Russian Federation to join, thereby promoting post-cold war reconciliation. It was not to be. Even though Russian leaders, both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, were keen to end the division of Europe, Washington would not open the alliance to a new member who could match the US's nuclear potential and might question its political priorities.

Now, 30 years after the demise of the Soviet Union, there are signs that the unipolar world of US dominance may be coming to an end. The main challenger is not Putin's Russia, but an increasingly confident China. Leaders in the global south are also stirring. In the first flush of shock over Russia's aggression against [Ukraine](#) in February last year, more than 140 UN states voted to condemn it. But only around 40 countries in total have joined the US in imposing sanctions on Russia. As the west floods Ukraine with military hardware, the notion that it is merely helping to defend Ukraine looks questionable to many Asian, African and Latin American states who suspect the end goal to be regime change in the Kremlin.

A [survey](#) by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) reveals a significant shift in public

opinion in several key countries. People want to see a quick end to the war in Ukraine, even if it means Ukraine giving up western-supported aspirations to victory and accepting the temporary loss of some territory. It is not only citizens of authoritarian China who think this way. So do citizens in India and Turkey.

Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, told the Munich Security Conference last month: "I see how powerful the Russian narrative is, its accusations of double standards." France's Emmanuel Macron said he was "shocked by how much credibility we are losing in the global south".

Some fear a new cold war, this time between the west and [China](#). Looking 10 years ahead, others expect to see a multipolar world in which states will not be pressured to align themselves with one side or the other. Either way, in spite of the resurgence of US power in Europe as a result of the war in Ukraine, the era of US supremacy in the rest of the world may soon be over.

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