

Learning the Hard Way: the Follies of History

by Pepe Escobar via ned - Asia Times *Monday, Aug 19 2019, 12:43am*

international / prose / post

'There must be some way outta here, said the joker to the thief ..'

Nothing beats the beguiling, stony smiles at the Bayon temple near Angkor Wat in Cambodia's Siem Reap to plunge us back into history's vortex, re-imagining how empires, in their endless pursuit of power, rise and fall, usually because they eventually get the very war they had sought to avoid.

The Bayon was built as a state temple at the end of the 12th century by the undisputed superstar of Khmer empires, Jayavarman VII. Its magical narrative reliefs convey a mix of history and mythology while depicting daily life in Khmer society.

We still don't know today the identity of the faces shown on the temple's giant stone carvings. They could be a representation of Brahma, or of Jayavarman himself – a practicing Buddhist. What we do know is that the glorious Khmer empire – incomparable in art and architecture, and even benign in the sense that the mandate for power was based on the king's relationship with the gods, started to fade after the 15th century, dismembered by war against the Thai and later the Vietnamese.

Stony smiles “all along the watchtower”, displayed as a living commentary on the rise and fall of empires, could easily connect, geopolitically, with a touch of Buddhist impermanence, to our turbulent times of Hybrid War. And to the current American empire.

It's always amusing to observe how US think tanks, such as CIA outlet Stratfor, constantly celebrate success in undermining Russia via this strategy.

Hybrid War on Russia was engineered in 2014 on two fronts: ordering the Persian Gulf petro-poodles to crash the oil price while imposing sanctions after Russia opposed the coup – actually a color revolution – in Kiev. Hybrid War was engineered at a Deep State level as a tool to try to smash Russia's outstanding recovery since Vladimir Putin was elected to the presidency in 2000. The undisguised Zbigniew “Grand Chessboard” Brzezinski-style goal with the Kiev coup was to draw Russia into an Afghan-style partisan war.

Of course, Russia suffered economically – but then slowly recovered, diversifying production and boosting its agricultural capacity. Yet hybrid warfare always ensures that once economic hardship is engineered, a government necessarily becomes unpopular. Then fakes and traitors are unleashed: Alexei Navalny in Russia, or “protests” in Hong Kong that the Deep State dreams would lead to an uprising in Beijing.

A small, radical nucleus of agents provocateurs in Hong Kong, using copycat methods from the Maidan in Kiev, sticks to a single-minded road map: force Beijing to commit a Tiananmen 2.0, thus elevating the all-out demonization of China to the next level.

The inevitable consequence, according to the privileged scenario, would be the “West”, as well as vast sectors of the Global South, boycotting the New Silk Roads, or Belt and Road Initiative, a complex, multi-layered strategy of economic integration that has expanded well beyond Eurasia.

Hong Kong, an irrelevant asset

In Hong Kong, everything is about money and then, on a secondary level, about China.

China's annual GDP per capita is in the range of \$9,700. Hong Kong's annual GDP per capita is in the range of nearly \$49,000 – higher than Germany and Japan. It is no wonder that no one in Hong Kong wants to be “like China.” So money is a key factor for Hong Kongers to fear “Chinese domination.” Only a few outsiders, such as Thai economist Chartchai Parasuk, highlight this.

Hong Kong is becoming increasingly irrelevant for China. At the time of the World Bank-lauded “Asian tigers,” in the early to mid-1990s, Hong Kong's share of China's GDP was a hefty 27%. Today it's a paltry 2.7%.

Capital has been steadily moving to Singapore, whose annual GDP per capita is now even higher than Hong Kong's. Real wages are now lower than at the start of the decade. And wealthy Chinese mainlanders are buying everything in sight, thus excluding the average Hong Konger from an upwardly mobile trajectory.

Up to now, Hong Kong's allure, for China, was its unique position as a free-trade mega-port, the proverbial gateway to the mainland, and one of the world's top financial markets. But that's increasingly in the past. Shenzhen, across the border, is already China's top tech hub, and Shanghai is being slowly but surely configured as the top financial center.

China is also being hit, hybrid war-style, with a rolling trade war plus sanctions. The ultimate American imperial “dream” is to engineer a Chinese vassal. This has nothing to do with trade. There's no logic of avoiding a trade deficit with China only to see the same products produced in Thailand or India. What's goin' on is rather hybrid war all over the spectrum: attempts to destabilize and possibly defeat Russia, China and Iran, the three key hubs of Eurasia integration.

New hybrid politics

The Hybrid War strategy has created our current state of financial warfare. And that inevitably implies blowback. The weaponization of the US dollar is leading Russia, China and Iran as well as Turkey, Syria and Venezuela to seriously turbo-charge their drive towards alternatives. They could be anchored to a basket of commodities, or it could be all about gold. Wily investor Jim Rickards defines Russia, China, Iran and Turkey as the “New Axis of Gold.”

Everything that happens geopolitically and geoeconomically in our turbulent times has to do with the US' do-or-die imperial struggle against the Russia-China strategic partnership. Only total “victory,” by any means necessary, would assure the continuation of what could be defined as the New American Century.

And that brings us to the necessity of reconstructing Clausewitz's axiom, according to which, originally, war is a continuation of politics by other means.

Clausewitz argued that war is a real political instrument. Now, Clausewitz remixed should read: Hybrid War is Politics by Other Means.

The means now go way beyond conventional war, as in Khmer empire times. They mix irregular and cyber war; fake news; lawfare (as in Brazil); electoral intervention; and even “diplomacy” (of the gunboat or economic blockade variety, as applied against Iran and Venezuela).

All Along the Watchtower, the song, as written by Dylan and delivered by Hendrix as a hurricane approached, is an ominous portent of Apocalypse Now. Hummed along the stones of the Bayon smiling cryptically at us out of centuries of impermanence-defying history, it seems so fitting for our times of Hybrid War.

Watch out: 'Pale riders are approaching, as the wind begins to howl.' [*Good one, Pepe.*]

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