

# Age Of Empires

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*Forerunner*, "WorldWatch," November-December 2014

Scientific discovery coined a phrase that has become axiomatic: "Nature abhors a vacuum." In short, when a vacuum is created by whatever means, unless the seal is diligently maintained, gaseous or liquid matter will expand to fill the space. We can see this principle at work when we break the seal of a vacuum-packed container: Air rushes into and fills the space, equalizing the interior pressure with that outside the container.

The political world also hates a vacuum. However, in the political world the missing medium is power, influence, control. When political players realize that another has relinquished control over an area or a people, they move with sometimes-frightening speed to assert their own control over what has been abandoned. For instance, on a small scale, when a metropolitan government no longer has the means to police certain areas of its city, gangs will soon move in to claim the territory for themselves.

This vacuum-filling happens on a grand scale too. When empires begin to decline, whether for lack of funds, military weakness, or plain weariness, local chieftains on the periphery begin carving fiefdoms out for themselves. Sometimes these fiefdoms grow to become kingdoms and nations in their own right, and they may even garner enough power to challenge the old empire or even preside over its death throes.

The dominant empire of our day is the United States of America. It has never been imperial in the traditional sense of the term, that is, it has never deliberately set out to conquer all the nations around it and rule over their peoples. In fact, compared to those of Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, Japan, and even Great Britain, America's imperialism has been soft. Its dominance has been mostly economic and cultural, backed by a large, powerful, and innovative military that has protected its vital interests yet without resorting to direct rule in most cases.

American power, though, is not what it once was. Over the course of the Obama administration, its economic, political, and military hegemony has eroded significantly. It has dropped behind China as the world's chief economic power. It has ceded vast amounts of political influence around the globe, and it has effectively surrendered to terrorists and jihadists in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Under Obama, who believes that his legacy depends on undoing as many of his predecessors' "militaristic misadventures" as he can, the U.S. has abandoned much of its former leadership and thus power.

America's global retreat has already had profound consequences. Regional powers in unstable parts of the world, once held at bay by the will and might of the world's sole superpower, are becoming more aggressive toward their neighbors and have no qualms about throwing rocks at the retreating back of Uncle Sam. He has made it clear to them that he is not likely to return anytime soon, so they are free to pursue their own ambitions.

Five powers in particular have rushed to fill the vacuum, and all five are anti-American, militaristic, and reactionary autocracies: Iran, Turkey, the Islamic State, Russia, and China. Note that three of them—Iran, Turkey, and the Islamic State—lie in the powder keg of the Middle East, while Russia and China are perennial adversaries of the U.S. From the American point of view, these quintuplets

are all bad guys. The situation makes perfect sense: Once what has been keeping the bad guys down is removed, and the bad guys will get up again and return to the fight.

Iran is a Shiite Islamist theocracy. It wants one thing: to be the dominant Islamic sect in the world. To do this, it aims to defeat its Sunni rivals and carry jihad to the rest of the planet. For these reasons, it desires to build nuclear weapons, which, due to American laxity over the past six years or more, it nearly has. The Obama administration thinks “talks” will make it see reason.

Turkey is the quasi-secular, democratic descendant of the Ottoman Empire, and its current leader, Recep Erdogan, would like nothing more than to return his nation to both its political and religious heights. In fact, he wants the nations on his periphery to repudiate the West in everything and look to Turkey for guidance—and, of course, to wipe Israel, America’s only truly democratic ally in the region, off the map. At the moment, his odds are improving.

As chronicled here in the July-August issue, the Islamic State sees itself as the seed of a new caliphate that aims to span the Arab world. Having fought Bashar Assad’s Syria to a standstill, it has reveled in the spotlight of Islamic terrorism, gruesomely slaying non-Muslims and Muslims alike on a regular basis. It will continue its bloody rampage until eradicated by a stronger force.

Additionally, all know the rundown on Russia and China: major nations with a perpetual, adversarial rivalry with the U.S., both determined to dominate and expand their spheres of influence, globally, if possible. Russia seems to be picking on and picking off its neighbors one by one, reintegrating them into its traditional buffer zone of states. With its economic growth, China is aggressively expanding its military capabilities as well as its financial stranglehold on the Asia-Pacific region. Both still want more.

As historian Victor Davis Hanson writes in a recent article, “Barack Obama, Empire Builder” (National Review Online, January 27, 2015), all five of these emerging empires believe they can continue doing these things without fear of “an intrusive American global cop sticking its post-colonial, imperialist nose where it has no business.” They are right. With the American eagle molting on its roost, by turns preening and brooding, who can stop them?