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# THE CONVERSATION

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## How Putin, Xi and now Trump are ushering in a new imperial age

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Over the past few weeks the new US president, Donald Trump, has repeatedly claimed that the United States should “take back” the Panama Canal and that it should assume control of Greenland – one way or another. He has talked of Canada becoming America’s 51st state and now he even wants to “take over” the Gaza Strip to convert it into a “Riviera” on the eastern Mediterranean.

It’s as if the US president believes that his country should be an empire. In this Trump seems to be emulating China’s Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin of Russia, leaders he has said he admires and who have themselves shown some clear imperial tendencies in recent years.

Under Putin, Russia has supported secessionist regions, such as Transnistria and Abkhazia, fought wars in Georgia and Ukraine and actively interfered in the affairs of Syria and assorted African countries. In 2022 Russia even launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, claiming that Ukraine was historically inseparable from Russia, but that hostile western influences were trying to destroy that unity.

China, meanwhile, has militarised a number of small uninhabited islands in the South China Sea. It has built 27 installations on disputed islands in the Spratly and Paracel island group that are also claimed by other countries including Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines and Malaysia. This has prompted a flurry of development, as other countries in the region have raced to establish their own footholds in the disputed, but very resource-rich, region.

Beijing also maintains its claim over Taiwan, which it says is an inalienable part of China which it wants to "come home".

## Empires and nation states

Most people assumed that the age of empires had been relegated to the dustbin of history. But this is by no means a straightforward proposition. Until relatively recently, the rise and fall of empires had dominated much of recorded history. Nation-states only appeared at the end of the 18th century. And as those states rose to prominence many too displayed imperial inclinations.

So the US, fresh from throwing off the yoke of the British empire, wasted little time in expanding its borders westward, acquiring – whether by conquest or purchase – large swaths of new territory in what effectively turned a small group of east coast states into a continental empire.

Meanwhile other newly minted nation-states such as Italy and Germany also aspired to acquire overseas empires and involved themselves, with varying success, building what turned out to be relatively shortlived colonial empires in Africa and elsewhere.

Most traditional dynastic empires, meanwhile, began to adopt various aspects of the nation-state model, such as conscription, legal equality and political participation. The decades following the second world war are often seen by historians as a period of decolonisation by traditional imperial powers such as Britain and France. But the transition from empire to nation-states was far from smooth. Most imperial governments hoped to transform their empires into more egalitarian commonwealths, while retaining a degree of influence.



Apex and ending: Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897. Argent Archer / London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company - Royal Collection RCIN 2924799

This they did with varying degrees of success and often under extreme duress, as with France in Algeria and Vietnam, or under great economic pressure, such as with [Britain and India](#). The real age of the nation-state didn't begin until the 1960s.

## **The return of empire?**

Today, the world consists of about [200 independent countries](#), the overwhelming majority nation-states. Nonetheless, one could argue that empires – or at least imperial tendencies – have never totally disappeared. France, for instance, frequently interfered in many of its former colonies in Africa. However, these military interventions were not meant to permanently occupy new territories.

Today, imperial tendencies seem to resurface around the world. The past, however, tends not to repeat itself. Massive wars of conquest or attempts to create new overseas empires are unlikely in the immediate future. Most imperial expansions are currently sought close to home.

What is striking is that Putin, Xi and Trump all use fierce nationalist rhetoric to justify their imperialist designs. Putin, as we have seen, claims the indivisibility of Ukraine and Russia and [blames “Nazis”](#) for trying to turn Russia's sister state towards the west. He used it as a justification for invading Ukraine in February 2022.

Xi, in turn, often maintains that Communist China has finally overcome the [century of humiliation](#), in which the country was the plaything of foreign powers. They both seem to yearn for past imperial greatness. The Russian Federation aims to undo the dissolution of the Soviet Union, communist China [looks back to the Qing empire](#). Interestingly, under its increasingly authoritarian leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey – another regional power with imperial inclinations – similarly [finds inspiration in the Ottoman Empire](#).

The US case seems to be more complex, but in fact is very similar. Thus, Trump argues that the Panama Canal, which has long been administered by the US, was foolishly returned to Panama by Jimmy Carter and claims that it is now controlled by China. He will, he says, [return it to the US](#).

Trump also refers to America's [“Manifest Destiny”](#), the 19th-century belief that American settlers were destined to expand to the Pacific coast. These days his aspirations are northwards rather than to the west. The president also wants to plant the US flag on Mars, taking his imperial dreams into outer space.

If the US joins China and Russia in violating recognised borders, the international, rights-based order could be in danger. The signs are not very positive. Taking steps to illegally annex territories could blow up the entire international edifice.