



United States: The Thirty Years “Hyper-Empire”?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to establish the status of hyper-empire attained by the United States during the three decades spanning the unipolar moment. The word “empire” is used in the traditional territorial sense, in contrast to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s notion of faceless and nonplace empire. The article does so by addressing the imperial question in the United States, then charting and contrasting dominant views among deniers, proponents and denouncers of the existence, relevance and significance of the American empire. The examination of these arguments together leads to the evidence-based conclusion about the currently vanishing reality of the American Hyper-Empire, as a unique and relatively brief occurrence in World History.

Keywords: hyper-empire; imperialism; colonialism; international relations; unipolar moment; great power competition.

Introduction

There is almost a determinism in the behavior of great powers that once they reach a given critical mass in terms of economic wealth and military might, they become empires. As George Friedman (2015) puts it, “Most empires do not plan to become one. They become one and then realize what they are. Sometimes they do not realize what they are for a long time, and that failure to see reality can have massive consequences” (n.p.).

Drawing on the expression “hyper-power” coined by Hubert Veldre in 1996, the aim of this paper is to establish the status of “hyper-empire” attained by the United States during the three decades spanning the unipolar moment, i.e., from the end of the cold war until the re-emergence of Great Power Competition on the eve of the third decade of the 21st Century. The word “empire” refers here to the traditional and territorial meaning of the term, with its associated subjecting practices, exactions and atrocities. It is used in contrast to the notion of faceless, nonplace empire, which was conceptualized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in 2000, i.e., before the fulgurant rise of neoconservatives to power within the George W. Bush Administration.

Hardt and Negri (2000) had, in fact, argued that contemporary “empire” is different from past “imperialism” in the sense that the latter tended “to spread its power linearly in closed spaces and invade, destroy, and subsume subject countries within its sovereignty” (182), while the former operates as a faceless power which is only “expansive in networks” and “has nothing to do with imperialism, nor with those state organisms designed for conquest, pillage, genocide, colonization” (166). However, subsequent neoconservative hubristic ideologies and militaristic policies in the Middle-East and central Asia have proven that empire in the 2000s has not only been clearly American but also gigantic in scale and stretch, retaining or at least reverting to the modes and practices of past empires, where both presence and influence count.

The present article begins with a discussion of the imperial question which gained significant traction in the public and intellectual debates when the United-States achieved the position of the mightiest empire in history, reigning supreme over the international system during the unipolar moment. The paper then moves to discuss and contrast the dominant views about this imperial character, namely among its deniers, proponents and denouncers. In light of this examination, the paper, finally, establishes the quality of Hyper Empire of the United-States, during the unipolar moment, as a unique and brief occurrence in World History.

The United States and the imperial question

Even if the unipolar moment spanned over three decades following the demise of the Soviet Union, it is only after the 9/11 events, the subsequent military campaign in Afghanistan and the markedly unilateralist war on Iraq, that there has been a significant debate about the idea of an “American empire” in public and academic spheres. Although the 90s already witnessed interventions that could arguably fall within the realm of empire,¹ it was the dramatic developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the rise of a bellicose political elite, the “Neocons”, that raised once again the question, as Edward Said (2004) put it in 2003, of “whether modern imperialism ever ended, or whether it has continued in the Orient since Napoleon’s entry into Egypt two

¹ Under the guise of promoting democracy, territorial integrity or humanitarianism, the US waged a series of interventions during the 90s, including in Iraq, Somalia and former Yugoslavia, to name just the most salient ones. Availing the unipolar moment, it sought to entrench Pax Americana, while at the same time furthering its economic and geopolitical interests.

centuries ago” (xvi). The militarist enterprises in Iraq and Afghanistan have actually taken place in the 21st Century, in the context of a long-established worldwide consensus that colonialism/imperialism is a stigma of a bygone era. This consensus had been formally enshrined in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, adopted by the UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960. The declaration proclaimed then the “necessity of bringing a speedy and unconditional end to colonialism in all its forms and manifestations.” It also stated that “the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and co-operation.”²

Against the backdrop of the long expeditionary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the overstretch of the broader “Global War on Terror,” the true nature of the “American hegemony,” a commonly accepted expression, was put into sharp scrutiny. In fact, during the period extending from December 2002 to May 2003, a study noted that the expression “American empire,” which was nearly absent from “common parlance,” has recurred more than 1,000 times in news stories (Daalder and Lindsay 2003). The central issue for the debates in US political and academic circles was about the way to come to terms with the idea of the “American Empire” which was gaining currency and even spreading across the country and the world at large. “Empire,” a dirty word, given the atrocities historically associated with it (G. Friedman 2015, n.p.), does not resonate well with the American ethos which prides itself on championing democracy, self-determination and universal human rights and which used to regularly brandish these lofty values in the face of Communism and totalitarianism. This ambivalence is reflected in the reluctance of the United States to recognize itself or at least its behavior on the world stage as that of an empire. This “disjuncture in American history,” as Frederick Cooper calls it (2005, 195), between image and reality, discourse and practice can be traced to the fact that United States itself came to existence as a result of an armed revolution against the British Empire.

Paradoxically, historical evidence shows that as soon as the United-States started to wield enough military power and diplomatic clout, it sought by virtue of the Monroe Doctrine, articulated as early as 1823, to secure its exclusive sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere, irrespective of the volition of the States concerned. It did so by considering any “interference” by European powers in the affairs of the states of Latin America as a threat to its own national security. Later, it resolutely sought its share of overseas conquests in the same period as did other contemporaneous colonial powers (Cooper 2005,195), i.e., during the period that came to be known as the New Imperialism, between 1881 and 1914.³ Indeed, as contended by historian William Appleman Williams (Cit. in Heiss 2002, 519), as of 1898, direct U.S. involvements abroad increased dramatically, first with the annexation of Hawaii and then with the Spanish-American War. The spree resulted also, during the same year of 1898, in the conquest of the Philippines, the annexation of Puerto Rico and Guam, and the occupation of Cuba (McAlister 2000, 29-30).

With the beginning of the Twentieth Century, in addition to the conquest of the Philippines and formalization of the Cuban protectorate in 1903, the US sought to consolidate its presence as a major power in the Pacific Ocean around China and Japan, through a combination of military and diplomatic efforts. One example is the Open Door Policy, which under the guise of promoting free trade for all countries in weak and “humiliated” China, was used as a tool to undermine the dominance of other imperial powers and as a cover for imperialist designs by the United States in China, based on unequal treaties and extraterritoriality (Scott 1981, 147). In support of these intrusive policies, the United States expanded its naval presence in the Pacific through the construction of new battleships and the establishment of naval bases in the newly annexed Hawaii and Guam.

In the Middle-East, however, until World War II, successive US administrations starting with Wilson’s carefully avoided being drawn into European imperial rivalries and political arguments over the Persian Gulf (Little 2008,44). They were instead content with securing access to Middle East petroleum for US firms such as Standard Oil of New Jersey and Texaco. Thus anecdotally, “as late as 1939, U.S. oil executives wielded more influence in Baghdad and Riyadh than did U.S. diplomats” (Ibid.).

Later, in the aftermath of World War II, in its efforts to counteract the spread of Communism, the United States which emerged as the victorious and most undamaged great power from the ravages of the war, resorted to forms of indirect rule and patron-client relations in ideologically disputed territories. Underpinning the conditional self-determination it granted to these territories, particularly in the non-European world, were “Orientalist and racist assumptions about the relative capacity of different peoples for self-government” (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 340). In order to enforce this new hegemonic format, it did not hesitate to resort to military intervention, invasion and occupation in certain indeterminate contexts in order to establish favorable governments such as in South Korea (1950), Vietnam (1964), Cuba (1961), Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), Libya (1986) and Panama (1989), to cite just the most military intensive cases among the 51 overt US military actions.⁴

Again, as far as the Middle-East is concerned, the US had a broad official involvement there since 1945. Such involvement, as demonstrated by Douglas Little (2008), had both political and strategic dimensions with deep cultural and psychological underpinnings. In *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*, Little uses the concept of Orientalism, which is consubstantial with colonialism, rather historically to identify the four major eponymous doctrines (Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon and Carter) through which the US has managed to exert influence over this region while containing the Soviet Union there:

Preoccupied with a series of crises in Central Europe and East Asia, Harry Truman hoped to prevent fresh Kremlin encroachments in the Middle East by blending U.S. dollars with British ingenuity to launch collective security organizations such as MEC and MEDO. Once Britain’s high-profile role tainted such initiatives with the scent of colonialism, Dwight Eisenhower pressed Whitehall to limit its responsibilities to the Persian Gulf and embraced a policy

2 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-granting-independence-colonial-countries-and-peoples>

3 Historian Walter LaFeber (1963) did not shy from titling one of his most best-selling books *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*.

4 For an extensive and officially sanctioned repertoire of US foreign military engagements see Richard Grimmett’s *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2009* (2010).

of unilateral U.S. military intervention to block Soviet gains elsewhere in the region. After the Eisenhower Doctrine tarred the United States itself with the brush of imperialism, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson turned toward regional proxies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia to thwart Russian-backed radicals, laying the groundwork for what became the Nixon Doctrine. When Islamic upheavals jeopardized those proxies and provoked Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Washington invoked the Carter Doctrine and stood alone against Moscow in Southwest Asia (154).

It appears from the above analysis that the four doctrines have gradually led to the United States stepping into Britain's shoes. One of the turning points, which signaled that Britain had handed over the imperial torch to the United States, was the US position during the 1956 Suez crisis that opposed the military action by Britain France and Israel (Little 2008, 131). Britain's failed armed intervention to retake the canal was interpreted by the then British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan, as "the last gasp of a declining power" (Ibid.). Reacting to "Washington's diplomatic coup against London," Macmillan reportedly told John Foster Dulles, the erstwhile US Secretary of State "Perhaps in two hundred years the United States 'would know how we felt'" urging the Americans "to think up some big, imaginative plan for the Middle East" (Ibid.). Since then, Washington became the predominant actor in Middle-Eastern affairs, including during the crucial moments in the region's recent history such as the 1967 war, the 1973 October war with the subsequent oil embargo, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 with its hostage crisis – whose root causes are traceable to the US instigated anti-Mossadegh 1953 coup. After taking over the region from the British empire, the US strived to put progressively the Persian Gulf outside the sphere of Influence of the Soviet Union. Jimmy Carter and his successors, namely Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior, managed to further advance this strategic approach to the Middle East that would ultimately secure a foolproof control of the region's resources and stakes (Ibid.). With the first Gulf War of 1991 which coincided with the imminent demise of the USSR, United States dramatically expanded its actual military presence in the Middle-East region. The 1991 war represented a historic opportunity for the US to set foot and boot in several Gulf states and to establish permanent military bases for the first time in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait. This Military presence was further consolidated with the establishment of a US Central Command forward headquarters in 2002 in Qatar.

On the other hand, beyond the Middle-East and the defining campaigns of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, there are other compelling elements which may contribute meaningfully to the debate about the imperial character of the United States. Well into the third decade of the 21st Century, the US, like other former colonial powers, still retains several territorial possessions, with the status of unincorporated territories,⁵ where "fundamental rights apply as a matter of law, but other constitutional rights are not available" (U.S. General Accounting Office 1997, 24). These include the Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa. The last three entities still figure on the UN list of non-self-governing countries since the 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (Lutz 2006, 595).

Critics such as Amy Kaplan (2005) have linked the rationale of the unincorporated territory to "U.S. colonialism and racism," since "the designation of territory as neither quite foreign nor domestic was inseparable from a view of its inhabitants as neither capable of self-government nor civilized enough for U.S. citizenship" (842). However, the imposition of this construction upon the populations of these territories could also be viewed as another blatant indication of US ambivalence vis-à-vis its status as an empire.

More recently, on the occasion of US military enterprises in Afghanistan and Iraq, this ambivalence about empire has become more salient in public and academic debates. As Michael Walzer (2003) notes, "The war in Iraq has given new urgency to the debate about 'American imperialism'" (27). There are in fact three distinctive attitudes towards the notion of American Empire; those who clearly reject any imperial implications of US actions, those who denounce the imperial drives of US successive administrations culminating with barefaced "empire" under the Bush II Administration, and finally those who go as far as to call on the US to assume its "responsibility" more forcefully as befits the "empire" it is indeed.

Debating the American imperium

The idea of the American empire is a highly contentious one, which has sparked heated debates among scholars and policymakers, particularly during the era of the unipolar moment. This section will explore three perspectives on this issue: Deniers of empire who argue that the US does not constitute a true empire, often pointing to the absence of formal colonies and emperor, Denouncers of empire who view the US as an imperial power and critique the methods and consequences of American global influence, and lastly the Proponents of empire who argues that the US does function as an empire, albeit it is a modern one which is distinct from its historical forerunners.

Deniers of Empire

The dominant discourse entertained at the official level and endorsed by affiliated academic and think tank circles is one which represents the foreign interventions and involvement of the US throughout the 20th Century and the beginning decade of the 21st Century as a benevolent dissemination of American "civilized values." This discourse feeds on the deep-seated idea of American exceptionalism. Confronted with the increasing accusations of imperial behavior in the run up to the Iraq war, top US officials have consistently rejected them stressing instead US commitments to the advancement of the lofty ideals of democracy and progress. President George W. Bush, addressing graduating cadets at West Point in June 2002, declared, "America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves -- safety from violence, the rewards of liberty, and the

⁵ For the Supreme Court decisions issued between 1901 and 1922, these territories 'belonged to' the United States, but without having been 'incorporated,' thus creating the legal and political category of the 'unincorporated territory' (Tolentino 2013).

hope for a better life.”⁶ Bush also claimed, addressing veterans in November 2002, that “America has no territorial ambitions. We don’t seek an empire. Our nation is committed to freedom for ourselves and for others.”⁷ Similarly, vice President Dick Cheney sought to allay views about imperial America by claiming at the Davos 2004 World Economic Forum, that “if we were an empire, we would currently preside over a much greater piece of the Earth’s surface than we do. That’s not the way we operate” (Qtd. in Schmitt and Landler 2004, 10). Along the same line, Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld stated in an interview on Al-Jazeera in April 2003: “We don’t seek empires. We’re not imperialistic. We never have been. I can’t imagine why you’d even ask the question” (Qtd. in Lake 2007, 48). Yet it is noteworthy that off the record information confirms that the Bush administration was consciously acting as an empire, despite official denial by top leadership. For instance, Ron Suskind reported that a “senior advisor,” in the George W. Bush administration,⁸ told him “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we’ll act again, creating other new realities” (Suskind 2004).

At the academic level, renowned scholars such as war historian Victor Davis Hanson, political theorist Michael Walzer, and historian Jeremi Suri toed the line of the political establishment. Victor Davis Hanson, for instance, plainly derides the idea of the American empire: “If we really are imperial, we rule over a very funny sort of empire. We do not send out proconsuls to reside over client states, which in turn impose taxes on coerced subjects to pay for the legions. Instead, American bases are predicated on contractual obligations — costly to us and profitable to their hosts” (Hanson 2002). However, contractual obligations do not necessarily exclude imperial relations. In the past, as the term “protectorate” implies, empires used to force territories to enter into “contracts” by way of big stick or gun-boat diplomacy. Hanson’s argument is largely undermined by Nexon and Wright’s definition of Empire: “Empires, we argue, are characterized by rule through intermediaries and the existence of distinctive contractual relations between cores and their peripheries” (Nexon and Wright 2007, 253).

Seeking to dilute the meaning of empire in the notion of “contemporary global politics,” Michael Walzer, the most influential scholar of just war theory, prefers the term “hegemon” to “Empire.” According to him, “‘hegemonic’ is simply a less vivid way of saying ‘imperialist’... Hegemony rests in part on force, but it rests also, even more so, on ideas and ideologies” (2003). Walzer’s conception of hegemony ignores the fact that past Empires in their most crude manifestations, have also rested partly on force and partly on ideology and culture as demonstrated in Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*. Otherwise, how else could a minority of imperial administrators and troops govern millions of natives. They had indeed relied on an effective ideology to base their imperial hegemony. Walzer, however, concedes that George W. Bush’s excessive unilateralism may verge on a semblance of empire since it appears as “a bid for hegemony without compromise; perhaps he [Bush] sees America playing an imperial -- perhaps also a messianic -- role in the world” (Ibid.).

As for Jeremi Suri, his approach to the issue of empire is rather original, as the signified is made more fleeting through an artful play between two signifiers; empire and nation-building:

How can we differentiate American nation-building from empire? First, the United States has never developed institutions or resources for the permanent occupation of other societies... When nation-building begins to slide into empire, America has consistently recoiled... Nation-building is the more accurate way to describe American efforts at spreading influence without control... our continued sense of mission and the need for a renewed commitment to nation-building. (Suri 2011)

Here, Suri constructs “nation-building,” a highly presumptuous and colonially-laden process,⁹ as a pre-imperial stage. He is clearly contradicted by Michael Ignatieff (2003) who sees it as imperial: “The nation-building enterprise . . . is imperial because its essential purpose is to create order in border zones essential to the security of great powers – and because armed force, an instrument only great powers can use with impunity, is critical to the task” (109). In addition, nation-building inevitably echoes a self-assigned “civilizational mission.” It is predicated on a teleological narrative of progress, consisting of undoing and redoing nations, which is characteristic of past empires. Moreover, Suri’s argument that the United States leaves the nation it undertakes to “build” to its fate for the sake of not sliding into empire is absurd. It implies that once a nation-building project, which is based on military power to undo/destroy a weak, “rogue” or “failing/failed” state in order to reconstruct/rebuild it anew, begins to falter, the United-States irresponsibly leaves the job unfinished in order to whitewash itself of any suspicion of empire.

This US ambivalence about its status as empire is well rendered by British historian Niall Ferguson: “The great thing about the American empire is that so many Americans disbelieve in its existence... They think they’re so different that when they have bases in foreign territories, it’s not an empire. When they invade sovereign territory, it’s not an empire” (qtd. in Lake 2007, 49). In the meantime, incalculable disfigurements are visited, by uncalled for US military incursions, upon the destinies of countless peoples for several generations to come, over vast geographical areas including the Middle-East. If, as in medical science, a disease is determined from its symptoms, then the effects of American intrusions are certainly those caused by empire.

Denouncers of empire

As part of this intense debate, there have been several works by notable scholars who not only affirm the imperial character of US power but also address the “macroscopic” working of the U.S. empire and the changes in the forms of imperial practice after the US came to reign supreme on the world stage

6 <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html> .

7 <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/11/20021111-2.html>.

8 ‘The senior advisor’ has been identified since by Robert Fisk (2007) as the ‘happily departed’ Karl Rove.

9 As Dongen, Hoeneveld and Streefland (2015) hold it, ‘One should take care not to overlook the colonial overtones of such [nation-building] projects. To a considerable extent, nation-building and colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted flip sides of the same coin of modernist developmentalism’ (197).

since 1990 (Lutz 2006, 593-4). These include David Harvey's *The New Imperialism* (2003), Michael Mann's *Incoherent Empire* (2003), and Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Decline of American Power* (2005). After 2005, an entire book series, published by Metropolitan Books and named *The American Empire Project*, has been devoted to the critique of imperialist and exceptionalist tendencies in contemporary U.S. foreign policy and to the discussion of "alternatives to this dangerous trend." It includes contributions by renowned authors such as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Chalmers Johnson.

Another unsung denunciation of the American Empire has come from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's, *Empire* (2000), whose postmodern reading of modern-day manifestations of empire is an indirect charting the non-military facets of the unnamed American empire and the structures it put in place. Instead of distinguishing between colonialism and imperialism, Hardt and Negri (2000) have been more interested in outlining the difference between Imperialism and Empire:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. (xii)

For these two scholars, the latest manifestation of empire, as already mentioned above, is one which is increasingly "deterritorialized" and "decentered." It is one that operates in the form of hegemonic networks --fostered by the overlooked hegemon of the day-- of transnational companies and other powerful states whose vested interests are maintained through the various mechanisms of transnational regulation that consist, namely, of the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and non-governmental organizations. However, such a description seems to ignore US foundational and normative role within these regulations institutions as well as its continuous involvement in military and disciplinary campaigns which clearly put an American face on the no face, no place empire, "governance without government" (13) that they have conceptualized. Moreover, while there is an aggressive de-territorializing of global capitalism, as restrictions on the movements of capital, culture and commodities flowing from the global North to the global South are steadily abolished, there is conversely an increasing territorialization of poverty and misery through the increasing restrictions on the movements of emigrants and refugees from developing countries most of whom flee political instability, conflicts and lack of economic opportunities that are in large part driven by globalization itself. Such severe restrictions are establishing new territorial fault lines between the have and have-not, "us" and "them", "civilized" and "less-civilized."

Even when empire is "abroad again, revived, and hideously emboldened" with a bare American face, after 2001 and 2003, Hardt and Negri (2004) are still adamant to acknowledge the concrete nature of the hyper empire:

Empire is not a structure or a static organization but rather a dynamic and diffuse apparatus of rule that operates on a global scale. It is ... rather an immense network of social relations and exchanges that encompasses the entire planet. Empire is an order that is constantly being produced and reproduced anew through the functioning of its machinery. (xii)

In contrast to those scholars, particularly within The American Empire Project series, who have been keen to cast critical looks at what they called "the imperial ambitions" of the United States, a number of advocates of assertive American foreign policy have unreservedly embraced the term "Empire," even if it is still a politically charged word (Nexon and Wright 2007, 253).

Proponents of empire

As Michael Cox (2004) maintains, in the past the expression Empire was used primarily by left-wing critics opposed to American hegemony, whereas it is nowadays employed with increasing regularity by those who want the US power to be deployed with much ruthlessness, in order to build a stable new world order (589-90). This marked intellectual current, far from criticizing these discernible propensities under the Bush administration, urged for a more pronounced form of empire; an empire which assumes its status and exerts its political economic and military powers accordingly. It seems to echo Voltaire's adage popularized by the Spiderman movies of the 2000s and 2010s that captured Washington's mood and spirit of the times "with great power come great responsibility."

For the proponents of empire, the imperial dynamic was already at work but "it calls for more explicit acknowledgement and a more solid commitment" (Harvey 2003, 4). Therefore, they have been openly advocating for more aggressive and assertive policies on the part of America. The most influential among these are those same authors who have been theorizing the metanarratives of the "clash of civilization" and the "end of history," namely Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama and other Neoconservative intellectuals.

In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), Huntington clearly makes his argument for an imperial United States. He suggests that the latter, in what sounds like a roadmap for governing the world, should anticipate a chaotic order and "impose [its] own values, culture and institutions" on those "states and groups from different civilizations" -- namely Islamic and Asian ones¹⁰-- before they "do that to you" (129). To complete the circle, he urges the US to reinforce its ascendancy among Anglophone states and Europe and to "Westernize" Latin America, in order to fortify its posture and "technological and military superiority" over Islamic and Sinic civilizations (312). By singling out these Oriental civilizations as de facto adversaries, Huntington was professing an orientalist discourse that sought to re-invent the Other under a menacing light in an empire-serving perspective. In his rebuttal to Huntington's thesis, Edward Said (2001) takes Huntington to task for overlooking human commonalities between global communities,

10 In this regard, Huntington (1996) affirms that: "The dangerous clashes of the future are likely to arise from the interaction of Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and Sinic assertiveness" (183).

while instrumentalizing their cultural differences for unholy purposes. According to Said, to further his imperialist vision, Huntington “wants to make ‘civilizations’ and ‘identities’ into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities” (Said 2001).

Fukuyama, for his part, makes a strong case for regime change and nation-building in his book *State-Building, Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (2004). He presents these as unavoidable in the case of “weak governance” which undermines a state’s sovereignty, thereby weakening the post-Westphalian international order which was precisely built on this principle. In light of this reality, nation-building becomes vital to the maintenance of world order and intervention -- instead of deterrence and containment -- becomes not only permissible but also obligatory¹¹ in order to forcibly fix festering situations before they generate intractable problems for failed states and for other states (2004, 96, 121). Fukuyama’s arguments were extended against the backdrop of US foreign policy in the 1990s, “the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s led to an extension of a de facto international imperial power over the “failed state” part of the world” (97). They could only gain in force in 2004 with the advent of the Bush Doctrine of preemptive /preventive war and the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2P). Fukuyama’s stance on empire is in line with his “end of history” thesis which celebrates the triumph of the United States in the West (Capitalist) versus East (Communist) confrontation. Hence, these clash lines have to be redrawn as the West versus the Rest in the post Cold War world. It is in this context, that according to Fukuyama, who is described by Edward Said (2004) as a theorist and apologist of an exultant Western tradition (349), the United States has to impose its unique model of acceptable statehood, even by force when necessary.

Other empire-nostalgic scholars have been openly encouraging a straightforward exercise of imperial prerogatives. For instance, British historian Niall Ferguson (2003a) straightforwardly calls the process of “nation Building” “a euphemism for empire (empire with a human face, we could call it)” (n.p.). Noting the prevailing ambivalence as to the “American Empire,” he strongly recommends a sort of imperial coming out. For him, United States is “an empire, in short, that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial” (2003b, 317) -- an idea which is rendered differently by Frederick Cooper through the expression “the empire in spite of itself” (2005, 194). Ferguson Calls for a much-pronounced assertiveness of American power, since he deems this situation not only absurd but also dangerous: “How can you not be an empire and maintain 750 military bases in three-quarters of the countries on earth?” (2003a). It is dangerous in the sense that such “cut-price colonization,” -- or “McOccupation” as Derek Gregory calls it (2004, 251)-- can only generate chaos. Instead, Ferguson urges the United States to accept the long haul, in order for it to be successful in its foreign interventions: “why would you collaborate with an occupying power that says it is about to leave?” (2003a).

Another foreign scholar, Canadian historian Michael Ignatieff (2003), writing just before the 2003 war on Iraq, describes the American project as “empire lite”:

Hegemony without colonies, a global sphere of influence without the burden of direct administration and the risks of daily policing. It is an imperialism led by people who remember that their country secured its independence by revolt against an empire and who have once thought of their country as the friend of anti-imperial struggles everywhere. (89)

The aim of this conceptual gymnastics which “takes the United States closest to the idea of a power with a (global) sphere of influence” is to cleanse the American empire from colonial associations (Hast 2014, 10) at a time where “no assumption of property need ground the imperial relationship, and influence rather than presence is what counts” (Ho 2004, 225). The reason behind Ignatieff’s insistence on influence can be traced back to the fact that colonial associations are both pejorative and unpleasant for the American self-image. The expression “empire lite” has definitely less negative connotations, given the behavior of past empires, for a country which sees itself, through the exceptionalist prism, as entrusted with a lofty mission to democratize the world.

Still, Ignatieff calls for a more serious and more permanent role of the US since it can no longer favor “empire lite” or expect to do it “on the cheap,” but should rather be prepared “to stay for the long term to realize major transformative objectives” (qtd. in Harvey 2003, 3). Ignatieff (2002) further insists that “empires don't come lite. They come heavy, or they do not last” (n.p.). To drive home his point he maintains: “call it peacekeeping or nation-building, call it what you like . . . America's entire war on terror is [already] an exercise in imperialism” (Ibid.). However, in order to solve the apparent paradox of his advocacy of empire, Ignatieff (2003) makes his argument for a “humanitarian empire” which reconciles between all these contradictions:

It is at least ironic that liberal believers in these ideas [equality, sovereignty and self-determination] – like me, for example – can end up supporting the creation of a new humanitarian empire, a new form of colonial tutelage . . . The reason simply is that, however right these principles may be, the political form in which they are realised – the nationalist-building project – so often fails to deliver them. (122)

Those, like Ignatieff, in favor of asserting the imperialist character of the United States see it as being indispensable to the maintenance of world order. They also hail the benevolent and the potentially altruistic character of American brand of imperialism. As Senator and former presidential candidate John McCain claims, the United States is unlike other “empire builders” because it deploys its “power for [a] moral purpose” (Qtd. in Muppidi 2004, 23). They show a particular resourcefulness at devising convenient euphemisms. For instance, Niall Ferguson labels it “liberal imperialism” (2004, 198), whereas Geir Lundestad coined in 1986 his famous and enduring expression of “Empire by invitation” in order to represent the US as a benign and consensual empire (Bew 2013). However, Geir Lundestad himself later conceded in a 1999 article that “all empires have elements both of imposition and of invitation,” and that “American foreign policy was determined primarily by America’s own interests, not by invitations from the outside” (Lundestad 1999,194).

¹¹ Fukuyama (2004) states that: “Under these circumstances, outside powers, acting in the name of human rights and democratic legitimacy, had not just the right but the obligation to intervene” (97).

The United States as a historically unique but vanishing hyper empire

In light of these divergent views, in whichever sense empire is conceived, the American Empire has become a well-established notion both in scholarly literature and reputable media vulgate, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Consequently, the United States, at the official level, appears not only as an “empire in deep denial” but also an empire in a state of denial. The whole issue of qualifying the United States as an Empire boils down to a semantic and ideological one which has to do with self-representation and representation of the others who undergo the effects of its actions. As Niall Ferguson (2003c) puts it, “the very concept of ‘hegemony’ is really just a way to avoid talking about empire . . . ‘Empire’ has never exclusively meant direct rule over foreign territories without any political representation of their inhabitants” (160). In defense of his country against suspicions of imperial drift, Michael Walzer makes an interesting yet problematic justification of Rudyard Kipling’s famous expression “the White Man’s burden.” For Walzer (2003), when Kipling referred to Empire in these terms, he was simply “stating, in the ideological idiom of his time, a simple fact: power brings responsibility with it” (n.p.). Walzer’s whole case in favor of viewing US behavior as hegemony rather than empire could be overturned by the argument that he himself is expressing Empire in the ideological idiom of his time “hegemon.”

Edward Said (1993) has already noted, since the end of the Cold War, a repetition of old imperialist practices since “each great metropolitan center that aspired to global dominance has said, and alas done, many of the same things” (xxiii). He also noted the iteration of a pattern of constant intervention in the 90s, though at the time, American expansion was principally economic (286-89). However, the imperial inclination of the United States has become more pronounced in the first decade of the Twenty First Century as demonstrated by its unilateralist behavior as a hyper- power on the world stage. If the numerous military interventions and invasions could be justified during the cold war on grounds of ideological strife against the Communist Bloc, how could these be accounted for after the demise of the Soviet Union? More to the point, as American geographer Zoltan Grossman notes, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 up to 2006, the US has established a string of 35 new bases between Poland and Pakistan, not including the Iraqi bases. The obvious explanation, according to Grossman, is that the US was establishing or rather reinforcing a military-backed sphere of influence (Qtd. in Francis 2016). As a result of this imperial stretch, according to the Base Structure Report: Fiscal Year 2007 Baseline Report, over 190,000 troops and 115,000 civilian employees are massed in 909 military facilities in 46 countries and territories around the world (Lutz 2009, 1). In another statement to the Independent.co.uk, Grossman maintains that “The new string of bases stretch from Kosovo and adjacent Balkan states, to Iraq and other Persian Gulf states, into Afghanistan and other central Asian states . . . The only two obstacles to a geographically contiguous US sphere of influence are Iran and Syria” (Qtd. in Buncombe 2006).

This quest for extended spheres of influence in faraway lands and vast continental areas is an undeniably pattern of imperialist powers’ behavior. The United States has, in fact, more overseas military bases than every other country combined, “more than any other people, nation, or empire in history” (McBrien 2023). It has been consistently outspending the next 10 countries combined since the beginning of the 21st Century. This proliferation of military bases and exorbitant military spending is taking place against the backdrop of the Pentagon’s military partitioning of the whole world into six military geographical unified commands, the latest of which is United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM), established in 2007. As United States’ foreign behavior has taken on imperial properties, it becomes clear that it is unmistakably an overextended, overinvested empire and that the debate is more about signifiers than about signifieds. As the popular American duck test has it, “If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck”!

Regardless of the Iraq and Afghanistan episodes, the American style of empire seems to be inspired by its British forebear’s “indirect form of crown rule,” which was built on colonies with “responsible” governments (Spurr 1993, 5), that would comply with the dictates of the metropolis. Imperialism in its modern expression can be said to have mutated from older forms of domination with colonialism being just the “specific most spectacular, mode of imperialism’s many and mutable states” (Ibid.). In the process, it has become, as described by Engseng Ho (2004), “the projection of political power across large spaces, to include other states whatever the means: colonies, mercenaries, gunboats, missiles, client elites, proxy states, multilateral institutions, multinational alliances” (225). Canadian Geographer Derek Gregory (2004), considering the umpteen tentative conceptualizations of empire and imperialism, qualifies the most dramatic developments of the unipolar moment through the eloquent expressions of “the colonial present” and “the colonial modernity” (253).

On the other hand, American imperialism, in its simplest manifestation, resembles what Gallagher and Robinson (1953) call “the Imperialism of Free Trade,” that is a kind of “informal empire” based on the principles of free trade that was practiced by the British since the 1880s. The British favored informal empire over formal imperial control unless circumstances made such a rule impossible. In such a case, military coercion -- whether implied or actual -- remained part of the Metropole’s policy, either to “open markets or to keep them open or to bring down political ‘walls’ that hindered the encroachment of capitalist goods” (Gat 2006, 546). Such a form of empire not only avoids the stigma associated with colonialism but is also cost effective since it secures the acquiescence of “a sovereign yet variably dominated periphery—economically and politically—” while maximizing economic profit and minimizing the costs of intervention, conflict, and direct rule (Ibid.). While nostalgic historians like Niall Ferguson and Michael Ignatieff have recognized this pattern of “imperialism by free trade” in the behavior of the United States, they have urged it, on the wake of 9/11 events to “make the transition [back] from informal to formal empire” (Ferguson 2001). This means to revert to more forceful and direct forms of rule in order “to establish a Pax Americana that can bestow the same benefits upon the world as the Pax Britannica secured in the last half of the nineteenth century” (Harvey 2003, 4).

Conclusion

The fact that the US has been exclusively labeled and recognized as “hyper-power” instead of simply as another great power is indicative of the magnitude of its unprecedented stature in world history, in all realms of imperial might. And from the moment it set out to invade Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, it has been behaving overtly as an Empire of old and therefore crystallized its category of “hyper-empire.” In so doing, it cast aside the imperial shades of grey by reverting, at least temporarily, to rank military force, territorial control and direct rule in both former British colonies. And had it not been for its failed enterprises there, this would most probably have become a consolidated pattern of its foreign policy. In fact, as General Wesley Clark revealed in a 2007 interview, the Pentagon had initially (in 2001) planned to invade and take over seven predominantly Middle-Eastern countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia and Sudan) in five years; a plan that would have been carried out fully, had it not been for the quagmire in Iraq.

During its “hyper-empire moment,” the USA committed its share of atrocities that are consubstantial to the condition of empire, as around 4.5 million deaths are attributable to the war on terrorism and its far-reaching ripple effects across conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen (Berger 2023). But contrary to previous empires, it did so through cold and “rationalized violence” (Gol 2016). This violence has been taken to the highest degree of lethality, under the euphemizing/ “de-semanticizing” banner of concepts such as smart weapons, surgical strikes and targeted assassination drones. At the same time, like its predecessor, the hyper empire sought to win -- actually control -- hearts and minds through methods that reek of colonial overtones, such as Human Terrain System, counterinsurgency and influence operations. As such, imperialism and empire can be said to have shown superb resilience, during the unipolar moment, after the formal ending of colonial rule in the 20th Century.

Now, contrary to the expectations of “Unipolar optimists” (Layne 2006, 134), the Unipolar Moment did not materialize into a Unipolar Era, Century or even mellenium, as planned for by the Neoconservatives through their manifesto: The Project for the New American Century–PNAC. The 2022 National Security Strategy (Biden 2022) has officially elevated China from a “near peer competitor,” to a “Great Power Competitor” “with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it” (23). Furthermore, the coalescing BRICS are incrementally gathering steam and clout on the world stage to challenge the economic and diplomatic might of the USA, namely by pushing for the de-dollarization of the world economy. These challenges to the US supremacy, enjoyed undisputably since 1991, over the international system and the “rules based order” signal the end of the hyper-power status, for all its intents and purposes. It would be interesting to further examine the implications and insights to be derived from the vanishing reality of the thirty years hyper-power. Further studies might tackle more in detail the various aspects of this unique occurrence in world history. So much so that even if the United-States emerges as the winner from the looming competition, it will most probably remain, at least for the foreseeable future, too hobbled by sharp domestic divisions and fiscal/budgetary realities to retrieve its newly lost status.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the journal’s anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a draft of this article.

Funding

The author received no funding from any institution for the submitted work.

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0000-0001-5692-1210

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