

Akira Iriye

Beyond imperialism: the new internationalism

Much has been said about the United States having become, or having to become, an empire. To provide the chaotic world, especially in the wake of the Cold War, with some semblance of law and order, it has been asserted, the international community needs a new world order, a global empire, a superpower that can speak on behalf of all countries and all peoples, a power willing to use its military and economic resources to protect all against the forces of violence and anarchy. There is only one nation that can fulfill the task: the United States. In the twenty-first century, therefore, humankind may be forced to choose between continued disorder and imperial governance instituted by the United States.

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So one side of the argument goes. But others dispute this contention, insisting that for practical or moral reasons the United States should never take on an imperial role.

A historian can only contribute to this debate by historicizing it – that is, by noting what empires and imperialism have meant in the past, and by examining what these might mean in today’s world. This essay seeks to put empires and imperialism in the context of modern world affairs and to discuss how they contributed, or failed to contribute, to stabilizing international order.

It cannot be denied that there was a time when empires provided some sort of world order. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the globe was dotted by huge territorial empires, including the Ottoman, Persian, Mughal (Mogul), Russian, and Chinese (Qing). They presided over large, multiethnic populations and kept (with varying degrees of success) local tensions under control. These were traditional imperial states under the rule of dynasties whose origins went back several centuries. They governed essentially contiguous territories, thereby establishing some semblance of regional order. One might include the United States in this list as

well: it, too, grew as a territorial empire during the nineteenth century, expanding northward, westward, and southward, with the central government establishing its authority over all parts of its territory, at least after the Civil War.

These landed empires were joined by the maritime empires of Britain, France, Spain, and other European nations that superimposed a commercial regime over the vast, traditional empires of the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. The relationship between the landed and maritime empires was sometimes violent – for example, in India during the 1850s when Britain displaced the Mughal Empire with its own colonial regime. On the whole, however, the traditional empires continued to function, even as merchants, sailors, and missionaries from the maritime powers infiltrated their lands.

Until the last decades of the nineteenth century, these territorial and maritime empires constituted an international order. The system of international law that had originated in Europe in the seventeenth century steadily spread to other parts of the world, and all these empires, as well as other independent states, entered into treaty relations with one another. This was an age of multiple empires. When we talk of empires today, or of the United States having become an empire, we obviously do not have in mind such a situation. Rather, many observers draw the analogy between empire today and the British and other maritime empires that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century when a handful of colonial regimes established near-total control over most of the world's land and people. This distinction is important, since much depends on what historical antecedent one is referring to when one talks about an empire.

Likewise significant, in contemporary discussions the 'imperialism' that is most relevant is the 'new imperialism' that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century and persisted only through the first decades of the twentieth. A handful of nations whose empires were both territorial and maritime exercised the new imperialism; great military powers such as Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the United States, and Japan incorporated overseas territory into their respective domains, thereby emerging as world powers. Most of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific were carved into their colonies and spheres of influence. Once acquired, these lands were governed by cadres of administrators recruited both at home and in the colonies; and these colonial regimes were in turn protected by officers and men sent from the metropolises and by troops and police recruited locally. The new imperialists vied with one another for control over land, resources, and people, and in the process they fought many colonial wars. Instead of producing global chaos and anarchy as a consequence, however, these empires at times managed to establish some sort of world order. They did so both by seeking to stabilize their relationships with one another and by making sure the people they controlled would not threaten the system.

The Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905) and its aftermath serve as a good illustration. Ignited by Russia and Japan's clashing ambitions in northeast China (Manchuria) and the Korean peninsula, this first major war of the twentieth century was a typically imperialistic war. When negotiations to define their respective spheres of domination failed, the two countries fought on land and at sea, but not on Russian or Japanese soil; the Chinese and Koreans themselves had no say

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in this war that would determine their nations' futures. Victorious, Japan won control over Korea and southern Manchuria, turning the former into its colony and the latter into its base of operation on the Chinese mainland. The other Great Powers, assuming their own imperial domains would not be directly threatened by the conflict or its eventual outcome, did not intervene, but in the end the United States offered mediation with a view to preventing further bloodshed and regional disorder. Within two years of the war's end, moreover, Russia and Japan reconciled and agreed to divide Manchuria (and later, Inner Mongolia) between them.

The two empires had fought an imperialistic war and, just as quickly, had decided to preserve their imperial spheres through cooperation. Such behavior was typical in the age of the new imperialism. The other imperialists essentially stood by, accepting the new status quo in Asia, although the United States, with its empire in the Pacific, began to view Japan's growing power with alarm. Still, the United States and Japan reached agreement that they would not challenge their respective empires: the United States would not dispute Japanese control over Korea or southern Manchuria, and Japan would not infringe on U.S. sovereignty in the Philippines, Guam, or Hawaii. The Japanese also accepted French control over Indochina and Dutch control over the East Indies, despite the movements against colonialism that were developing in those colonies. Some of these movements' leaders looked to Japan, the only non-Western Great Power, for support, but Japan chose to identify itself with the other imperialists.

At least for the time being, the imperial powers colluded with one another to keep their respective colonial popula-

tions under tight control. The world order they established entailed a division of humankind between the ruler and the ruled, the powerful and the weak, the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized.'

The world of the new empires had its heyday at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it disintegrated rapidly following the Great War. The German, Austrian, and Ottoman Empires collapsed after the four years of fighting, while the Russian Empire, on the opposite side of the conflict, was undone by the revolutionaries who came to power during the war. The empires of Britain, France, Japan, and the United States did not disappear, but they were no longer capable of providing the globe with system and order. They might have tried to cooperate with one another to preserve the new imperialism, but they had neither the will nor the resources to do so. Imperialistic collusion broke down, and Japan began challenging the existing empires in Asia and the Pacific in the 1930s. Under Nazi leadership a new German empire emerged, and Japan and Germany in combination collided head-on with the remaining empires of Europe and the United States.

In that sense, World War II was an imperialistic war, but it was also the beginning of the end of all empires, new and old. By seeking to destroy each other, the empires had committed collective suicide – but that was only one reason behind the demise of imperialism. More fundamental was the emergence of anti-imperialism as a major force in twentieth-century world affairs.

Anti-imperialistic nationalism had many sources – ideological, political, social, and racial – but above all, it was fostered by the development of the transnational forces that are usually identified as globalization. The age of the new impe-

rialism coincided with the quickening tempo of technological change and of international economic interchanges; more and more quantities of goods and capital crossed borders, and distances between people of different countries narrowed dramatically, thanks to the development of the telegraph, the telephone, the steamship, the automobile, and many other devices.

These advances in science and technology at one level facilitated imperialistic control over distant lands – and for this reason most historians tend to claim that imperialism and globalization went hand in hand. Without the international order sustained by the imperial powers (in particular, by the British Empire), it is often argued, economic globalization would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to develop. The empire provided a political and legal framework, backed up by military force, for the economic transactions and technological developments of the day. The imperial administrators built roads, established schools, and helped eradicate diseases in their colonies and spheres of influence, thereby modernizing these areas and incorporating them into an increasingly integrated globe. Thus, if one accepts such a perspective, it is possible to say that imperialism and globalization reinforced one another, even that they were two sides of the same phenomenon – something like the development of a stable and interdependent world order.

But it is also clear that globalization facilitated the growth of colonial resistance to imperialist domination. To the extent that globalization was an integrative force, bringing people of all countries closer together, it undermined one essential condition of imperialism: the rigid separation of colonizer and colonized. The blurring of the distinction took many forms: mixed marriages be-

tween these two groups of people, compradors acting as middlemen between colonial administrators and the native populations, and the education of colonial elite in the schools and universities of the European metropolises. Imperialism would have ceased to function if such blurring continued – and that was why, even while colonizer and colonized were intermingling at one level, at another a system of rigid social and cultural distinction was maintained. Such distinction in turn aroused resistance and opposition from the indigenous populations, reinforcing anticolonialist sentiments.

If globalization, in short, facilitated the new imperialism, it also provided favorable conditions for the emergence of anti-imperialism. And in the end, anti-imperialism proved to be a far stronger imperative than imperialism.

Before the Great War, anti-imperialists in Tunisia, Egypt, India, China, Korea, and elsewhere were already aware that modern transportation and communications technology could serve their interests as well as they had served those of their colonial masters. Anti-imperialists could use railways and steamships to travel long distances and organize resistance movements; they could use the mass media and circulate handbills and newspapers among an increasingly literate populace; and they could even establish transnational connections and convene international congresses against imperialism.

Although some in the metropolises supported the anti-imperialist movement, before the Great War it had not significantly weakened or altered the structure of imperial governance. Yet even as large numbers of colonial troops were recruited to fight for their respective masters, the war experience did nothing but encourage the growth of anti-imperialism.

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Both the Bolshevik revolutionaries' anti-imperialist ideology and Woodrow Wilson's conception of self-determination indicated that even among the victorious Allies the ranks of the imperialist powers were breaking down. The processes of globalization that had facilitated imperialism were now encouraging the spread of anticolonial nationalism. If empires had defined the nineteenth century, then nationalism would define the twentieth.

This became quite evident after the Great War, when economic globalization resumed, buttressed by such technological inventions as the airplane, the radio, and the cinema. Imperialism, however, was not reinforced by this process but, on the contrary, was eclipsed by an ever-more vociferous clamor for national liberation all over the world. When the remaining imperial powers failed to respond in unison to such voices, or to prevent another calamitous war from breaking out between themselves, anti-imperialist movements grew so strong that by the end of World War II, nationalism had come to be seen as a plausible alternative to imperialism as the basis for reconstructing world order.

Instead of a handful of large and powerful empires providing law and order in the world, now, after World War II, sovereign states were expected to act as both the constituents and guardians of the international system. The former empires that were now shorn of colonies, the newly decolonized countries, and the countries that had been independent but noncolonial states – all would be equal players in the postwar world order. They would ensure domestic stability while at the same time cooperating with one another through the United Nations, an organization whose basic principle is national independence and sovereignty. The so-called West-

phalian system of sovereign states that had provided the normative framework for European international affairs since the seventeenth century would now be applied to the entire globe, as country after country achieved independence in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere. Global governance would no longer be based on a vertical division of the world into the ruling powers and all the rest, but instead established through a horizontal system of cooperation among nations of presumably equal status.

The history of the world in the second half of the twentieth century was to show, however, that sovereign states were no more capable of producing stable international order than the empires had been: nearly as many lives were lost in interstate and civil wars after 1945 as in World War II. With rare exceptions, the United Nations proved incapable of preventing such conflict when national interests collided, and few countries were willing to give precedence to the principle of international cooperation.

It is often argued that the postwar international system was defined by the cold war in which the United States and the Soviet Union effectively divided the globe into two counterbalancing spheres of influence. The two countries, which controlled the domestic affairs of their allies and client states to maintain local order, managed to prevent a third world war from erupting. If we accept this view, we are in effect saying the United States and the Soviet Union behaved like erstwhile empires, as providers and sustainers of local and international order. But it must be recognized that unlike the nineteenth-century empires, they did not discourage nationalism.

The United States, after all, continued to espouse the principle of national self-

determination, and the Soviet Union, for its part, preached ideological anti-imperialism. Both superpowers supported colonial liberation movements, although in practice they did not always find them compatible with their global strategies. Meanwhile, the independent states of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America often refused to heed the dictates of the Cold War antagonists. Nationalism, once unleashed, could not be contained even by the Cold War's new empires.

Globalization proceeded apace after World War II, but this was not because of the Cold War or postcolonial nationalism, but rather in spite of them. Economic, social, and cultural bonds of interdependence were strengthened across nations by supranational entities (especially regional communities) and by non-state actors (such as multinational enterprises and international nongovernmental organizations). Regional communities, most notably the European Economic Community, sought to subordinate separate national interests to considerations of collective well-being. The idea had always been there – after all, it was well recognized that globalization implied some sort of transnationally shared interest – but it was not put into practice until a group of European countries agreed to put an end to their history of internecine wars and to give up part of their respective sovereign rights for the sake of regional peace and solidarity.

The number of non-state actors grew rapidly after World War II. Whereas in the quarter century after 1945 the number of independent states nearly doubled, international nongovernmental organizations and multinational enterprises increased even more spectacularly. While the superpowers worked to advance their own geopolitical agendas,

and independent states continued to look after their own parochial interests, these non-state actors together promoted globalization and a sense of transnational interdependence.

The question, then, was whether the non-state actors would be able to provide global order if this task could not be entrusted to the superpowers or the sovereign states.

This was the key question that had to be addressed in the last three decades of the twentieth century – and it remains the key question today. Indeed, it is the question at the heart of the contemporary debate on empire.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as Cold War tensions abated, fresh national rivalries were unleashed, fracturing Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. At the same time, forces for transnational interconnectedness were strengthened. The European Economic Community, now joined by Britain, steadily effected regional integration, and its success encouraged similar, if smaller-scale, arrangements elsewhere, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the North American Free Trade Area.

Whether such regional entities would, by themselves, succeed in establishing a new international order remained to be seen. If such communities developed as exclusionary groupings, pursuing only their internally shared interests, they might end up dividing the world. But other developments in the last decades of the century tended to encourage international and interregional cooperation and to generate conditions for the emergence of a new, stable order. During the 1970s, for instance, issues such as environmental degradation and human rights abuses were becoming so serious that they would have to be solved

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through transnationally coordinated action. The United Nations sponsored conferences to deal with them, and it was joined by newly formed nongovernmental organizations that were transnational in character, such as Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International. Acts of international terrorism also aroused global awareness, evoking calls for collective response.

These issues were no longer confined to specific countries or regions. It was no accident, then, that international organizations of all sorts, but especially of the nongovernmental variety, grew spectacularly in the last decades of the century. At a time when sovereign states were proving incapable of constructing a viable international order, and when the Cold War was ebbing, regional communities, international organizations, and non-state actors were actively seeking an alternative – a global community that did not rely for its viability on the existing governments and armed forces, but on the transnational activities of individuals and organizations. These were all aspects of the globalizing trend of international affairs.

Can such transnational forces and activities somehow manage to combine to establish a global structure of governance? That is the major challenge today.

A hundred years ago, globalization had coincided with the new imperialism. By the late twentieth century, nineteenth-century-style imperialism had long since disappeared from the scene, but the postcolonial states had proved no more capable of establishing a stable world order than the older nations that had been in existence for a long time. Would the regional communities provide the answer? If not, would transnational non-state entities such as non-

governmental organizations and multinational enterprises be able to construct a global civil society? How could non-state bodies establish any sort of governing structure to provide law and order? How would they define their relationship to the existing states?

These were serious questions to which no satisfactory answer was readily available. It may have been for this reason that some began to look back fondly on empires as providers of international order. Two developments at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first made the question of effective world governance extremely urgent. One was the frequency and geographical spread of international terrorism, and the other, the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons across national boundaries.

Both were serious challenges to the whole world, requiring an effective response from all – states, international organizations, regional communities, and non-state actors. Such cooperation, however, would take a long time to develop, so in the meantime the United States took it upon itself to punish terrorist groups and the ‘rogue states’ suspected of harboring weapons of mass destruction. For those who believed that international order must be buttressed by a great military power willing to use its resources for this purpose, the United States provided the ready, and possibly only, answer. The nation would carry out the functions that the earlier empires had performed. It would be the empire for the twenty-first century.

But today there is little tolerance for any sort of imperialism anywhere in the world. Although old-fashioned imperialism is far from dead, it has no legitimacy in the international community, which is, at least in theory, constructed on the

principles of national self-determination and human rights. Moreover, the Atlantic world, which dominated modern international relations and of which the United States was an integral part, can no longer claim the same degree of hegemony in world affairs.

On one hand, European countries have tended to move within the framework of their regional community, quite independently of the transatlantic ties. On the other hand, China, India, and some Latin American and Middle Eastern countries are likely to develop as centers of economic and even military power. To the extent that the new imperialism of a hundred years ago was largely a product of Western civilization, today we must reckon with the fact that non-Western civilizations have grown in strength and self-confidence. If a new empire were to emerge, therefore, it would not be able to function if it were identified solely with the West. Such an empire would have to accommodate different civilizations from all regions of the Earth, and it would need to be mindful of the transnational networks of goods, capital, ideas, and individuals that constitute global civil society.

In other words, a new empire for the new millennium would not be an empire in any traditional sense.

What may have worked briefly a hundred years ago cannot be expected to reappear and function in the same way today. There is, however, another nineteenth-century legacy that might, in its twenty-first-century incarnation, provide a more relevant solution to today's problems: the legacy of internationalism.

It is sometimes forgotten that the age of the new imperialism was also a time when modern internationalism was vig-

orously promoted, by governments, private organizations, and individuals. The Olympic Games were one example, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, another. The internationalists established transnational organizations and convened world congresses. They sought an alternative to a world order that was dominated by the imperialists. Yet the contest for influence between imperialism and internationalism appeared to be decided in the former's favor when, despite the internationalists' ardent pleas for peace and understanding among nations, the world powers chose war.

But the Great War proved to be the swan song of empires, and their certain demise was implicit in the establishment of the League of Nations, an internationalist project par excellence. Although the League did little about the existing empires besides placing Germany's former colonies and those of its wartime allies under a system of mandates, and while it proved powerless to check the aggressive imperialism of Germany and Japan in the 1930s, its internationalist vision never died. The international body, assisted by a host of nongovernmental organizations, kept up the efforts – even during the dark days of World War II – to define norms of behavior for nations and individuals, efforts that laid the ground for conceptions of human rights, crimes against humanity, and universal equality and justice under the law. The United States and Great Britain, even as they fought against the Axis Powers, without hesitation embraced this internationalist legacy that became the basis of the United Nations.

Even if somehow a new empire were to emerge, that empire would have to embody principles of human rights and justice for all. It would have to be an em-

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pire of freedom in support of the emergent transnational institutions of global civil society.

Since such a development is highly unlikely, we would do better to explore the alternative. After all, there actually are other ways of securing international order. And there is no reason why the internationalist legacy, rather than the legacy of the briefly dominant new imperialism, should not serve humankind today.