

# The New American Empire?

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The phrase “American empire” has reentered the popular lexicon but remains contested. What does it mean to say that the United States is an empire? Why has this term resurfaced after so many decades to describe the United States in the new millennium? What does this mean for American foreign policy? I attempt to answer these questions by making three interrelated points. First, empire is a particular authority relationship between two polities constituted by extreme forms of both security and economic hierarchy. Second, the United States today is not an empire but it does exert substantial authority over other states in a range of hierarchical relationships. Third, although not an empire, the United States is acting in an imperialist fashion and, paradoxically, is undermining the international authority that it has cultivated and nurtured over the last century.

**Keywords:** empire, hierarchy, authority, imperialism

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The phrase “American empire” was last used by critics of the Vietnam War to place the foreign policy of the United States and the nation’s role in the world into a larger historical and political context.<sup>1</sup> During the 1980s, “empire” was more often used to refer to the Soviet Union. With the Iraq war, the phrase has reemerged as a descriptor of the United States. Writing in May 2003, Daalder and Lindsay (2003) observed that the phrase had appeared more than 1,000 times in news stories in the previous six months. A quick look at the current affairs section in any bookstore reveals a shelf of new releases on this theme.<sup>2</sup>

The phrase remains contested. To many Americans, it is inconceivable that their country, born in anticolonial struggle, could be an empire. When asked by the Arab news network al Jazeera if the administration of George W. Bush was bent on empire building, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reflected this common view in responding, “We don’t seek empires. We’re not imperialistic. We never have been. I can’t imagine why you’d even ask the question” (quoted in Schmitt 2003). Conversely, that the United States is an empire is all too evident to others. On the same day as Rumsfeld’s news conference, British economic historian Niall Ferguson took a diametrically opposed view in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations. “The great thing about the American empire is that so many Americans disbelieve in its existence,” he observed. “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” (quoted in

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<sup>1</sup>On American imperialism in the Vietnam era, see Williams (1972) and Magdoff (1969).

<sup>2</sup>For a sampling of this literature, see Bacevich (2002), Calhoun, Cooper, and Moore (2006), Ferguson (2004), Harvey (2003), Hoffmann (2004), Johnson (2004), Lal (2004), Mann (2003), Norton (2004), and Odom and Dujarric (2004).

Dowd 2003). What does it mean to say that the United States today is an empire? Why has this term resurfaced after so many decades to describe the United States in the new millennium? What does this mean for American foreign policy?

In this brief essay, I endeavor to make three points in serial sections below. First, empire is a particular authority relationship between two polities constituted by extreme forms of both security and economic hierarchy. Second, the United States today is not an empire but it does exert substantial authority over other states in a range of hierarchical relationships. Third, although not an empire, the United States is acting in an imperialist fashion and, paradoxically, is undermining the international authority that it has cultivated and nurtured over the last century.

### **The Meaning of Empire**

Empire is a political relationship in which a dominant state exercises political authority over a potentially independent or sovereign polity. Its root is the Latin word *imperium*, which though defying precise translation can be understood as the right to command or exercise authority. Over time, the term acquired a spatial component as a relationship between a core “homeland” and one or more peripheral or distant territories (Howe 2002:13–14).<sup>3</sup>

Political authority, in turn, is most simply defined as rightful rule.<sup>4</sup> When political authority is exercised, the dominant state commands a subordinate state to alter its behavior, where command implies that the former has the right to order the latter to take certain actions. This right, in turn, implies a correlative obligation or duty by the subordinate state to comply, if possible, with the dominant state’s order. As Richard Flathman (1980:35) observes, “If A has authority X, those persons who are in A’s jurisdiction therefore have an obligation or obligations Y.” In short, the subordinate “surrenders judgment” and accepts the force of the dominant state’s command. The subordinate state’s obligation implies a further correlative right by the dominant state to enforce its command in the event of noncompliance. As John Day (1963:260) notes, “those who possess authority in political life, the rulers, are authorized not only to make laws and take decisions but to use coercive power when necessary to ensure obedience to those laws and acquiescence in those decisions.” In an authority relationship, the subordinate state recognizes both that the dominant state has the right to issue certain commands and that it should, within the limits of its abilities, follow those commands or suffer appropriate consequences. In short, the subordinate accepts the dominant state’s commands as rightful or legitimate. Thus, authority is a form of power—a rather special one—but it is a possible form, a point often missed by scholars of international relations.

Hierarchy exists when one actor, the dominant state, possesses authority over another actor, the subordinate state. Authority is never total, of course, but varies in extent. A dominant state may possess authority over a subordinate and issue commands regulating possible actions 1–5 but not on actions 6–*n*, which remain beyond its ability to rightfully command. In other words, the subordinate state may recognize the legitimacy of the dominant state’s rule over actions 1–5,

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<sup>3</sup>Doyle (1986:13) provides a now standard definition. My definition differs in its emphasis on political authority rather than just “control” of the periphery by the core. Ferguson (this symposium) describes four approaches to defining empire. The approach here is, perhaps, a fifth, deductive undertaking that roots empire in the concept of authority, develops a continuum of hierarchy, and then derives a category and behaviors of empire.

<sup>4</sup>The literature on authority is substantial. For a useful guide, see Simmons (2002). For a more developed statement of the role of authority and hierarchy in international relations, see Lake (2007, forthcoming).

but not that of commands it may issue on other possible actions. In this case, a partial hierarchy exists; the dominant state possesses some limited authority over the subordinate state. In turn, hierarchy increases with the number of the subordinate's actions the dominant state can legitimately regulate. If the dominant state expands its authority from issues 1–5 to include 6–8 as well, the relationship is more hierarchical. So defined, hierarchy is a continuous variable defined by the number of actions over which the dominant state can legitimately command and expect compliance.

Authority can be disaggregated and hierarchy constructed in any number of ways. Following common practice in international relations, I first distinguish between the broad issue areas of security and economics, across which the same states often construct relations with different degrees of hierarchy. I then disaggregate these broad issues into the near infinite number of actions that states might perform that constitute security or economic policy to produce two continua (see Figure 1).

Security relationships (the horizontal axis in Figure 1) vary from diplomacy, at the anarchic end of the continuum, to protectorates, at the hierarchic end (Lake 1999:24–41). In diplomacy, polities interact while retaining complete authority over their own actions—including the right to interpret the terms of agreements into which they may enter. This is the ideal of Westphalian sovereignty. At the other extreme, one state cedes complete authority to another over its security policy. Such extreme authority relationships, however, seldom exist. Following tradition, I use the term “protectorate” for security hierarchies in which a dominant state exercises authority over many (but not necessarily all) of the subordinate state's possible security policies. Examples of protectorates include Great Britain's relationships with the monarchies in the Persian Gulf and South Asia in the nineteenth century and the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany immediately after World War II (Lake 1999:176–180). Between these ideal types lie a range of security relationships of increasing hierarchy.

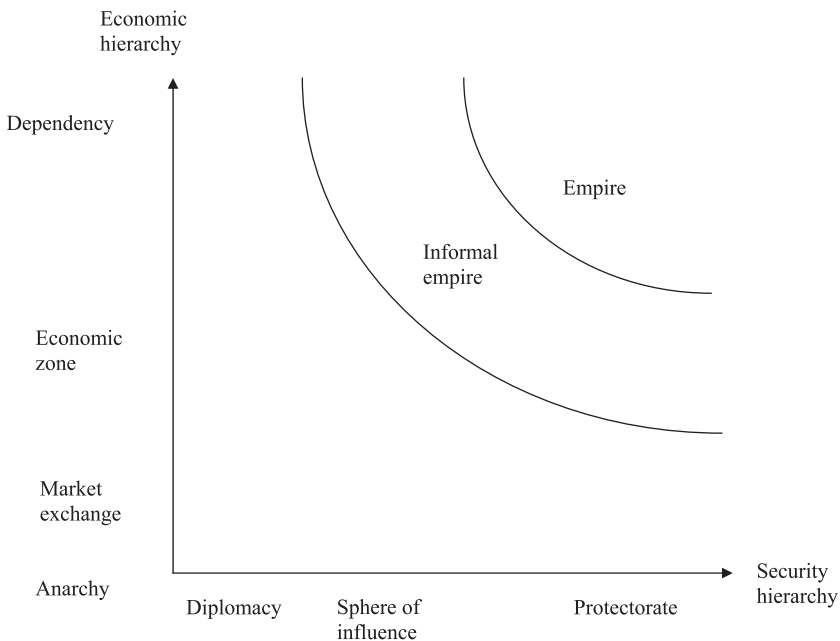


FIG. 1. Two Dimensions of International Hierarchy

Economic relationships between polities vary from market exchange, at the anarchic end of the continuum, to dependency, at the hierarchic end (the vertical axis in Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> Under market exchange, in a manner similar to diplomacy, parties choose to trade, invest, or otherwise engage in economic transactions while retaining full authority over their actions. Like diplomacy, market exchange approximates the ideal of Westphalian sovereignty. At the opposite end of the continuum, one polity cedes complete authority over all of its economic policies to another. Again, such extreme cases are rare, and I use the term “dependency” to cover a range of relationships with near but not necessarily total transfers of authority over economic policy. Relations between the United States and the Dominican Republic in the early decades of the twentieth century came close to a full dependency, in that the former controlled all customs revenues—the primary form of government financing—in the latter. “Dollarization” in which a subordinate cedes complete control over its monetary policy to a dominant state is a modern equivalent. As with security relationships, there is a range of intermediate forms.

When both security and economic hierarchies exist between two polities, the relationship becomes what is commonly known as either an informal empire or, at an extreme, an empire (see Figure 1). Informal empire combines moderate levels of both security and economic hierarchy, with the subordinate polity ceding substantial but not all authority to a dominant state in both arenas. Relationships between the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989 took the form of informal empire. Empire unites high levels of security and economic hierarchy with the subordinate polity retaining little or no independent authority over either policy area. The classic cases, of course, were the European overseas empires. The Russian empire was revealed clearly only when internal instability in 1991 allowed the constituent republics to break free and form independent states—many of which remain in at least partly hierarchical relationships with Moscow (Dawisha and Parrott 1997; Hancock forthcoming). As Spruyt and Nexon (this symposium) emphasize, empires come in many variants. Ancient empires are not exactly the same as modern ones, overseas empires function differently than continental empires, and so on. Nonetheless, all empires share a common core of extreme security and economic hierarchy in which one distinct polity exercises authority over another.

Empire, thus, is a particular authority relationship in which the rule of the dominant state over both economic and security policy is accepted as more or less legitimate by the members of the subordinate polity. Harkening back to Rome, which ruled most of its known world for centuries, and the British empire, which ruled the Indian subcontinent for hundreds of years, empire is similar to the relationship between a state and its citizens, with each bound by certain rights and obligations.

### American Hierarchies

To write of the United States or any country as *an* empire or *an* informal empire is an unfortunate generality. Rather, a dominant country can possess a range of different relationships with different countries, and they will change and evolve over time. The United States today possesses relationships of varying hierarchy across the globe.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Hancock (2001) was the first to develop a continuum of economic hierarchy in these terms. For a more complete discussion, see Lake (2003, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup>Nexon (this symposium) correctly emphasizes that empire is always a relational concept that exists only between two distinct polities.

The United States has maintained an informal empire over the states of Central America and the Caribbean since at least the turn of the last century. Between 1898 and 1934, the United States intervened militarily over 30 times to install or protect friendly and compliant governments in the region. It continues to station troops in Panama as a quick reaction force not only to protect the Canal but to intervene elsewhere in the region if necessary. States have also been prohibited from forming alliances with powers other than the United States, and those that have sought to escape the American sphere of influence have been punished by economic sanctions, as in the case of Cuba, or proxy wars, as in Nicaragua during the 1980s. As the current tension with Venezuela's President Hugh Chavez suggests, the United States continues to be suspicious of any challenge to its regional authority. Economically, regional states are highly dependent on the United States and most have fixed their exchange rate to the dollar, thereby importing Washington's monetary policy, or actually adopted the dollar as their primary currency. Although *de jure* sovereign, the states of the region have in practice highly compromised their status by accepting and sometimes actively supporting the authority of the United States over their international and domestic affairs. The United States has possessed a far weaker informal empire over South American for much of the last century as well.

Since World War II, the United States has built a sphere of influence and a weak economic zone over Western Europe and Northeast Asia (Lake 1999). Throughout both regions, states are not permitted to ally with great powers other than the United States, and extensive troop deployments lock states into the American sphere. In some dyads, the authority of the United States is broader and deeper, giving it extensive control over the security policies of West Germany, Japan, and South Korea—especially in the early postwar years. In Western Europe, economic dependence and the role of the dollar steadily declined over the years as Europe integrated with itself, ultimately leading to the withering away of the economic zone. In Northeast Asia, the major states remain more firmly within an American-led economic sphere. In the case of Japan, subordinate in both security and economic relations, the relationship approximated a weak informal empire through the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States attempted to extend its authority over broader regions of the globe. The administrations of George H. W. Bush and William Clinton were often criticized for not having a grand strategy during this period.<sup>7</sup> Yet they pursued a largely consistent and effective policy of expanding the authority of the United States into new areas. The Eastern European and Baltic states eagerly embraced the United States' sphere of influence. The United States took on responsibility for preserving the territorial status quo in Kuwait and the Middle East more generally and rebuilding failed states in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia. It also sought to protect others from and to isolate so-called rogue regimes—states that had little in common except their shared resistance to American authority. Under the auspices of globalization, the economic authority of the United States was extended to new parts of the world as well. Although it had not fully succeeded before 2001 and the advent of the global war on terror, the United States through the 1990s sought not to build a new empire but to broaden and deepen its range of economic and security hierarchies.

In only a very few dyads today does the United States possess anything approximating an empire—a conclusion on which nearly all the other essays in this symposium agree. Panama, the Federated States of Micronesia, and its formal dependencies may fall into this category. Under the occupation, Iraq might have

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<sup>7</sup>For one among many, see Kupchan (2002:11–26).

been considered a subordinate in an American empire, but relations were contested and, therefore, not authoritative. Even if the United States lacks many dyadic relationships that reach a full, imperial form, however, it does possess extensive authority relationships with a range of countries around the globe.

### American Imperialism

If the United States today is not an empire, it is nonetheless imperialist. The common root of the terms empire and imperialism often creates confusion. As suggested by the other authors in this symposium, most who decry the new American empire are actually criticizing the policy of imperialism pursued by President George W. Bush. Explicating the differences in the meaning of these concepts helps reveal the difficulties currently faced by the United States.

Empire, as we have seen above, is a type of authority relationship. Imperialism, on the other hand, was first used to describe the policies of Napoleon III and especially his ill-fated attempt to emulate the expansionist foreign policies of his illustrious and perhaps infamous namesake. As Stephen Howe (2002:23, italics in original) describes it, “for most late-Victorian users of the word, imperialism did not mean the *facts* of dominance, conquest, or overseas expansion, but a policy, a philosophy, or just an emotional attitude of enthusiasm for such things....It was thus entirely self-consistent to say that one was opposed to imperialism, but a great friend of the British empire.” Imperialism was a term of opprobrium then as now. Similarly, it is possible to support the hierarchies created by the United States over the last century and believe they have contributed to peace and prosperity in today’s world (see Mandelbaum 2005), but still oppose the imperialist policy pursued by the Bush administration toward the world in general and Iraq in particular.

Imperialism is not inherent in American culture or society or in the current position of unipolarity enjoyed by the United States. During the 1990s, the United States generally acted to bolster and expand its authority over others, but it did not (often) act imperialistically. Central to any hierarchy is the contract between ruler and ruled through which the former creates a social order of value to the latter, and the latter agree to the extractions and constraints on their behavior necessary to that order (Lake forthcoming). After the end of the Cold War, as noted above, the United States sought to extend the Western order of collective security and economic globalization to new areas in contracts with its nascent subordinates. Although some were skeptical, most countries appear to have accepted this expanded American role as legitimate.

Equally important to any hierarchy are clear and credible constraints on the authority of the ruler (North and Weingast 1989). For subordinates to yield authority to a dominant state, they must be confident that the dominant state will not abuse that power (Lake forthcoming). Again, through the 1990s, the United States benefited from its democratic and anti-imperialist tradition, which allowed others to see its limited political ambitions at work, and its commitment to multilateralism, which granted other states a say over American policy and, more important, signaled its willingness to work within existing international norms. One of the great mysteries of the post-Cold War era is why there has been no balancing coalition against the United States.<sup>8</sup> The answer, I believe, lies in the United States being an authoritative rather than imperialist state for much of this period.

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<sup>8</sup>On the puzzle, see Mearsheimer (1990) and Layne (1993). For a response similar to that here, but less focused on relations of authority, see Walt (2002, 2005). On the debate over “soft” balancing against the United States, see Pape (2005), Paul (2005), Brooks and Wohlforth (2005), and Lieber and Alexander (2005).

Empire and imperialism are not complements but substitutes—or at least there are acute tensions between the relationship of rule over others and enthusiasm for this role. Enthusiasm for the domination of others undermines hierarchy by breaking the fetters that make commitments to limited authority credible. Unlike Jennifer Sterling-Folker (this symposium), I do not think that all forms of power are the same, or are perceived as the same by those subject to its effects. Rather, accepting limitations on one's power is a costly signal of how and to what ends a dominant state intends to use its ability to command others.<sup>9</sup> From its earliest days, the Bush administration made clear its unwillingness to be bound by others in its rejection of the Kyoto agreement, its “unsigned” of the treaty creating the International Criminal Court, and its general hostility toward multilateralism. In consigning the United Nations to irrelevance and undertaking preventive regime change in Iraq without broad international support, the administration in the eyes of many transformed American authority into American imperialism. In embracing Caligula's motto of *oderint dum metuant* (let them hate as long as they fear),<sup>10</sup> it undermined the authority that had been carefully nurtured by past administrations and slipped from hierarchy into imperialism.

Once restraint has been overthrown and ambition revealed, authority is lost—and is difficult to reclaim. The duty to comply with commands dissipates and all that is left is direct coercion. Not only is Iraq a policy disaster, largely because of an imperialist hubris that led to a failure to contemplate or plan for a postwar nationalist insurgency and religious civil war, but when the United States finally extricates itself from that quagmire it will be less able to realize its interests on the world stage. It will not be any less powerful in a material sense. Rather, it will be weaker because it has squandered its authority in an entirely avoidable fit of imperialism.

### Conclusion

Words matter not because naming something explains the phenomenon or object. And words matter not just because names are political acts. Words also matter because classifying things forces us to be precise about commonalities and differences. Calling the United States an empire does not make it so or itself provide greater understanding. Rather, by association with imperialism, a term of disdain for all possible targets of a misplaced enthusiasm, calling the United States an empire reveals a disquiet with the unilateralist policy of preventive action championed by the Bush administration and its global war on terror. At the same time, the term calls attention to hierarchies in international relations and prompts analysts to specify more fully how contemporary manifestations differ from historic precursors. The discipline of international relations has largely ignored variations in international hierarchy. Accepting that the system is anarchic (see Waltz 1979), it has by and large assumed that all interesting and important relationships between states are likewise anarchic. The debate over the American empire calls attention to international hierarchies and demands greater efforts at understanding these ageless phenomena.

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<sup>9</sup>Here, I agree with John Ikenberry (2001) and Daniel Deudney (2007) on the importance of strategic self-restraint.

<sup>10</sup>The phrase was resurrected by John Brady Kiesling, a foreign service officer who resigned in protest over the Bush administration's policy in 2003.

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