

‘The 20th century ended imperialism as a viable practice’. Discuss.

By Junia Riggs

From ancient to modern history, Babylon to the Soviet Union, humans have organised themselves within an imperialist framework. The hegemonic structure of territorial, economic, and socio-political domination has controlled the distribution of wealth, resources and humanity across the globe. Indeed, world history could easily be considered synonymous with the history of empire; with empire being the lynchpin of almost all past events. With this in mind, it seems almost impossible that a mere 100 years could eradicate a core ideology which has dominated the world order for thousands of years. Despite this, many believe ‘the age of empire’ has indeed ‘ended’.¹ Proponents of this idea argue that in precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union and Europe’s colonial enterprise, the 20th century ended territorial domination over sovereign nations as a viable practice. This, however, fails to consider the varying forms of imperialism, such as the exertion of hegemony through an economic or political forum, which I would argue continue to this day. In the 21st century imperialism has manifested itself through other ideologies (particularly economic ones) in conjunction with the emergence of two dominant continental entities – the United States and China.

For the purpose of this essay, the ‘viability’ of imperialism will be considered by the extent to which it is legitimate and acceptable, as well as practical, to exert hegemony since the end of the 20th century.

Determining the ‘viability’ of imperialism requires understanding its meaning in adequate depth. The term covers significant ideological breadth and has been the subject of intense debate amongst historians. For example, English economist J.A. Hobson argued that capitalism serves as a natural predecessor to imperialism as it generates surplus profits which cannot be re-introduced into domestic markets². In this vein, it can be argued that the prevalence of capitalism today will inevitably correlate to the dominance of imperialism, as

¹ Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman. *American Umpire*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London, Harvard University Press, 2013.

² Wolfe, Patrick. “History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism.” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 2, Apr. 1997, pp. 388–420, www.jstor.org/stable/2170830, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2170830>.

Lenin argued in *'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism'*³. Yet though capitalism remains the dominant economic model, territorial empires have all but vanished. This argument is further limited by solely focusing on economic factors, overlooking the social and cultural spheres of imperialism. This nuance is reflected most in postcolonial theory which highlights how imperialism both affects and centres itself around the triptych of gender, class and race - evidencing the intersectionality of imperialism⁴. For example, the works of Joan Scott demonstrate that gender is used to legitimise and 'encode' power relations, where it is deployed to assert male dominance over supposedly subordinate female entities,⁵ thereby contributing to the societal construct of the female as inferior. Another example is provided by Said's *Orientalism*⁶ which studied the use of gendered language in colonial discourse. When referring to colonial territorial ventures, phrases such as 'waiting to be penetrated' or 'made fertile' show female anatomy was employed to describe the acquisition of land, therefore dehumanising and objectifying the female body. This demonstrates that imperialism is predicated upon and sustained by societal inequalities and cannot be understood solely as the product of ideological conviction or lucrative economic venture, but also as being a deeply embedded social and cultural construct. It is therefore incorrect to argue the fall of European Empires and the Soviet Union discredit imperialism as a viable practice since both liberal capitalism and postcolonial theory are correctly considered forms of imperialism despite not necessitating direct territorial control.

It is undeniable that the 20th century saw the emergence of international institutions that rendered imperialism an increasingly untenable practice. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights influenced the way in which nations felt they could act as it 'granted moral

³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: VII. IMPERIALISM as a SPECIAL STAGE of CAPITALISM." *Marxists.org*, 2019, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch07.htm.

⁴ Wolfe, Patrick. "History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 2, Apr. 1997, pp. 388–420, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2170830>, 10.2307/2170830.

⁵ Joan Wallach Scott. *Gender : A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*. Washington, American Historical Association, 1986.

⁶ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1978.

priority to the individual over the nation state'⁷. This meant that, for the first time, nations would likely give consideration to how other global powers perceived their actions and ensure that they - at least seemed to – uphold the principles of state self-determination. As with the Suez Crisis in 1956, where Britain and France secretly colluded with Israel in an attempt to regain control over the Suez Canal, countries could now be punished, primarily through economic sanctions, if the UN did not condone their behaviour. As a result, the exercise of imperialism through direct territorial control was greatly limited. In practice, however, only overt manifestations of control were effectively curbed while more subtle forms of economic, social and political hegemony persisted without significant scrutiny or constraint.

When one contrasts the overwhelming 85% of Earth which, in 1914, was dominated by the colonies of Great Britain, France and Germany⁸ to today's scattered territories, the difference is undoubtedly striking. It is undeniable that this collapse of colonial enterprise led to the delegitimisation of empires as a governing structure; while the ascension of democracies in previously colonised nations signified a new world order. By the 1970s, the collapse and dissolution of empires⁹ seemed to serve as clear evidence of a new egalitarian age.

Furthermore, the rise of nationalist movements saw the emergence of prominent figures such as Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt) and Mahatma Gandhi (India) who spearheaded a global movement campaigning for the rights of all colonised peoples. With this, concepts such as a right to self-determination and sovereignty became increasingly accepted and respected. Also to be considered is the dramatic collapse and dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991. The loss of its satellite states marked the disintegration of one of the 20th century's largest imperial structures, underscoring the declining viability of maintaining territorial empires.

However, such examples neglect the historical ubiquity of imperialism and its various forms which transcend the boundaries of strict territorial domination. In the 21st century, the term imperialism seems to have become synonymous with the concept of empire, however

⁷ Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman. *American Umpire*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London, Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁸ Gems, Gerald R. "Sport, Colonialism, and United States Imperialism." *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2006, pp. 3–25, www.jstor.org/stable/43610447.

⁹ Mahajan, Sneha. "Sectional President's Address: IMPERIALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE TWENTYFIRST CENTURY TWIST." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 73, 2012, pp. 1025–1041. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44156303, <https://doi.org/10.2307/44156303>.

imperialism should not be correlated with direct territorial control and the termination of colonial governance should therefore not be conflated with the end of imperialism. When deliberating over the current existence of imperialism, we cannot ignore the role of the 20th century as the lynchpin for the demise and demolition of European colonies, however it is not tenable to claim that imperialism is no longer ‘viable’.

The 20th century saw the emergence of the US as a global superpower which dominated world affairs without directly controlling large overseas territories. Proponents of US imperialism and hegemony often consider the triptych of political, economic and social dominance, where the US seems to excel - ticking all boxes. Militarily, the US has vast power. With 750 overseas bases in around 80 countries, the US possesses an extraordinary physical presence globally¹⁰. Moreover, government military spending is exorbitant, making the US the top military spender in the world by an enormous margin,¹¹ thus allowing the US to exert unrivalled power through military intervention and alliance. The economic and political imperialism of the US can be evidenced through the US Treasury control of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund which allows the US to exert influence over international loans and debt repayment (both vital to the growth of developing nations). The capacity to exert influence over the economies of sovereign nations represents a clear form of economic imperialism¹², as it enables the US to prioritise their own economic and geopolitical agenda at the expense of other states. The US also wields tremendous soft power globally through its cultural diplomacy. They are able to ‘export’ ideological values based on self-determination and human rights as well as materialistic ones through TNCs (Trans-National Corporations). This cultural dominance has established the US as the preeminent global power. The argument of the US as a contemporary empire is, however, widely disputed. Many historians argue that American intervention has been misconstrued as an

¹⁰ Haddad, Mohammed, and Mohammed Hussein. “Infographic: History of US Interventions in the Past 70 Years.” *Www.aljazeera.com*, 10 Sept. 2021, www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive.

¹¹ Haddad, Mohammed, and Mohammed Hussein. “Infographic: History of US Interventions in the Past 70 Years.” *Www.aljazeera.com*, 10 Sept. 2021, www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive.

¹² Mann, Michael. “The First Failed Empire of the 21st Century.” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2004, pp. 631–653, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097942>.

attempt to expand its sphere of influence when, in reality, the US had altruistic intentions and merely assumed the mantle of global protector. As argued in her book 'American Umpire'¹³, Joan Scott points out that by the end of the 20th century the Soviet Union had been 'contained' and 'World War III [had] not materializ[ed]'. Despite being an oversimplification of conflicts during the 20th century, completely ignoring both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the flaws in this argument are also evidenced by the growing number of military conflicts, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran War of 2026. Moreover, a presupposition of benevolence does not justify interference in sovereign countries.

When considering contemporary manifestations of imperialism, many focus attention on capitalism, which is the most prevalent and legitimised global economic system. It is moreover a system predicated upon systemic inequality, dominated by the US and China. Economic historians such as Dev Nathan convincingly argue that global value chains and production networks are the forms through which imperialism manifests today¹⁴. These include the 'export of capital', which Lenin argued served as a defining characteristic of imperialism. The growth of TNCs is vital to this system, some of whom have a 'GNP that overtakes that of some smaller countries'.¹⁵ These entities wield extraordinary economic power, allowing them to exert influence on socio-political issues as well as the economy. Therefore, they possess the ability to manipulate, coerce and control supposedly sovereign territories due to the huge economic benefits they can bestow or, conversely, withhold. Although nominally independent, these TNCs are subjugated to influence from the two major continental empires of our time – China and the US. These two giants are able to exert hegemony via their presence within TNCs, which allow them to dominate the world economy as well as international political organisations (for example the UN) where both China and the US are permanent members of the security council. Also providing indisputable evidence for imperialism is globalisation - the increasing interconnectedness of our world. At its core is the huge growth in global trade, exacerbating the interdependence of nations. This is central

¹³ Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman. *American Umpire*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London, Harvard University Press, 2013.

¹⁴ NATHAN, DEV. "Imperialism in the 21St Century: Global Value Chains and International Labour Arbitrage." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 32, 2018, pp. 33–39. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26700576>, 10.2307/26700576.

¹⁵ McLellan, David. "Globalization in the 21St Century." *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, vol. 106, no. 106, 2005, pp. 119–127, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41803819>.

to reinforcing the inequality and inferiority between nations. For example, the Prebisch-Singer thesis demonstrates how global trade has inhibited the development of nations¹⁶, with ‘primary commodities’ (along with fluctuating prices and instability in demand) often being relegated to less developed nations, whereas ‘manufactured goods’ (which maintain exorbitant prices and are reliable) being predominantly traded by affluent global powers. With countries on the periphery being subjected to economically inferior trade opportunities, there is clear evidence to suggest that imperialism is woven into the fabric of our economic system.

More recently, contemporary imperialism has gained an extra-terrestrial dimension. Akin to the space race during the cold war, where two opposing ideologies vied for success, the primary difference today is that, rather than nation states, it is the massive, power-hungry technology corporations which dominate the competition. A pertinent example is SpaceX-CEO Elon Musk, whose ‘Occupy Mars’ t-shirt was a prominent symbol during Donald Trump’s presidential rallies¹⁷. Despite showing how private corporations have blurred the lines between state and enterprise (recalling an earlier age of imperialism with corporations like the East India Company), it also provides incontrovertible evidence of how colonisation can extend beyond the confines of our planet. An even more recent phenomenon is the battle over sovereignty of AI software. The US government’s interdiction of Anthropic’s (a global AI company) most advanced models for all foreign users is an example of the US exploiting its power to achieve its own interests. The superiority of US technology will allow it to supersede almost all other nation states given that the use of AI has become integral to the functioning of our world. Nations worldwide use AI to enhance military capabilities, increase efficiency of healthcare and aid education. Therefore, the ability to control a nation’s access to AI can hugely impact the extent to which a nation can grow and develop.

To conclude, while it is indisputable that the 20th century saw the rapid termination of European colonialism and the insurgence of a nationalist movement which brought about the creation of nearly 150 countries due to decolonisation,¹⁸ it is wrong to proclaim the age of imperialism as having ended. Not only because the focus on territorial domination precludes

¹⁶ NATHAN, DEV. “Imperialism in the 21St Century: Global Value Chains and International Labour Arbitrage.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 32, 2018, pp. 33–39. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26700576>, 10.2307/26700576.

¹⁷ Rosengren, Pejstrup Trine, and Ian Klinke. *Decolonisation in the Second Space Age*. Danish Institute for International Studies, 2025.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman. *American Umpire*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London, Harvard University Press, 2013.

the possibility of more informal control, but also because of the self-evident exertion of hegemony over sovereign nations (predominantly by China and the US) which continues today. Particularly in terms of economic imperialism, both capitalism and globalisation can be understood as systems that perpetuate the structural subordination of developing nations, enabling wealthier states to maintain exploitative relationships to serve their own financial and military interests. Therefore, it is undeniable that the 21st century continues to witness the exercise of power in ways that reinforce relations of political, economic and social inequality, meaning that imperialism very much continues to be a 'viable practice'.