

UNITED STATES AND IMPERIALISM: A PARADOX OR REALITY?

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Abstract

Since the dawn of 21st century, American role has been predominant in shaping and influencing the course of international relations. The American ideals grounded in the “American Dream” have also been very much popular and the projected image of these ideals and the dreams precipitate as a democracy, equality, freedom and justice. Once the American global power reached its zenith in the post-World War II, the successive American regimes felt the urge to take the reins of global order in their hands which was also complimented by the interplay of various factors ranging from historical, religious, and political to economic. Leadership also played a role in encouraging the spread of “American Ideals”. This led to massive American intervention in the affairs of other states. The article takes into account the historical process of America’s transformation into an imperialist power, which provides an alternate approach of looking at American state behaviour in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Imperialism, Latin America, Foreign Policy, Mercantilism, Naval Policy, Isolationism, European Rivalry.

Introduction

Soon after getting rid of the colonial yoke of the Britain, Americans were faced with enormous problems at domestic level. The issue of slavery was one of those issues which literally consumed their resources and energies for decades. America, due to issue of slavery was virtually cut-off from the rest of the world in terms of foreign relations. However, at the same time America was busy in number of issues such as slavery, civil war and the post-civil war reconstruction. America avoided entanglements in other areas over the plea that it was against the American principle of government to govern without the consent of the governed. America was preoccupied with her domestic, economic, political and ethnic issues to take active part in international politics. It was generally said that the United States was lucky to have wide oceans to its East and West and weak neighbour to its North and South. But almost after 20 years of civil war, American interest in overseas imperialism got revived. The domestic taming and extermination of Indians now had to be translated outside the geographical boundaries of the United States.

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Causes of US Imperialism

Historians have listed many causes of US imperialism. Following are the main factors, which led to the expansion of United States outside its territory; but these causes can in no way, justify the occupation of foreign lands no matter whatsoever titles are applied to make that crime palatable.

Economic Causes

The very first cause of the desire of USA in foreign occupation and imperialism was due to the post-civil war economic development in America. The last decade of 19th century had made United States a great giant in terms of economy who now started looking outside USA. American inventions have contributed to this economic growth. "Americans probably patented more numerous and more ingenious inventions than any other between 1860 and 1900, no fewer than 676000 patents were granted by the United States patent office. Since that time the number has reached almost astronomical figures. Important inventions dated back to the end of the 18th or the early years of the 19th century. Eliwhitney's cotton gin, Robert Fulton's steam boat, Elias Howe's sewing machine, Charls Goodyear vulcanized rubber, the harvester was invented by Abed Hussy. But the large scale production of new appliances awaited the development of the steel industry and the application of electricity to industry"¹

The main purpose was to look for foreign markets and trading areas. America not only had to sell her economic goods but had to see the raw material around the world, which was the basis for her economic development at home. "Only in this way it was realized that a satisfactory labor supply could be guaranteed, necessary raw materials and minerals produced, the expanding market for goods developed and the maximum fruits of imperialism garnered"². This economic imperialism was caused by many factors "The last decade of the 19th century found imperialists sentiments running high in most great nations. The partitioning of Africa was being concluded, China seemed about to be torn in pieces for the benefit of the powers. Some of the routes of imperialism were economic because growing populations and expanding industrial systems demanded new markets"³ America needed areas so as to invest her surplus wealth. United States during these years invested in Cuba and Hawaii especially in commercial enterprises and sugar plantations. "In Hawaii where Americans had obtained control of the sugar growing industry, the United States obtained in 1887 the exclusive right to use the priceless Pearl Harbor as a naval base. Six years later an effort to effect the annexation of Hawaii was on the verge of success"⁴. After exploiting her own resources she now turned outside United States.

European Example

All the European states were striving for land around the world. Spain and Portugal had colonies in Southern America and Britain at that time was in possession of huge Asian and African colonies. So America also joined the race. Britain, France and Germany were rivals of one another in that race of occupying foreign lands “in 1880s, it was observed that great Britain, France and other powers began on a large scale to “stake out claims for posterity” in Africa and attempted to monopolize resources and markets⁵. America thought that she was lagging behind in this race and had to join it.

Role of Leaders and the Myth of American Isolationism

Almost all American leaders systematically believed in Westward expansion. This Westward expansion was a source of monetary solace to the poor immigrants who had migrated to the New World. As stated by A.J Bacevich:

“Only by the loosest conceivable definition of the term however, could isolation be said to represent the reality of the US policy during the first century and a half of American independence. A nation that by 1900 had quadrupled its land at the expense of other claimants, engaged in multiple wars of conquest, rigorously pursued access to markets in every quarter of the globe and acquired by force an overseas empire, could hardly be said to have been isolated in any meaningful sense”⁶.

Those leaders who believed in the new version of manifest destiny wanted to promote American imperialist designs. Theodore Roosevelt was important in giving America an imperialist foreign policy. “His three most significant acts—interventions in the Morocco crises of 1905, mediation in Russo-Japanese war and the intrigue that led to the Panama Canal Zone were marked by considerable noise and a fine show of activity, but no long range accomplishments from the stand point of national interest”⁷. Roosevelt committed USA to the construction of Panama Canal and encouraged separation of Panama from Columbia and acquired the Canal Zone. These leaders intervened in other countries on the plea of protecting US national interest.

Racial Doctrine

US intervention in other countries was sometimes justified “in order to secure to them the due observance of justice and the protection of their rights, to promote the spread of civilization among them, and to lead them to the peaceful and voluntary reception of the Christian religion”⁸. The domestic United States policy to manifest destiny which originally aimed at economic prosperity of the U.S farmer, later was given the basis of superiority of American people and their institutions. The American dream of freedom and liberty was declared as a result of Westward expansion not the

constitution be asserted conditions for free-land and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people made the democratic type of society in America⁹.

US Naval Policy

Inspired by the writing of Alfred T. Mahan, who pleaded the need of a new navy in order to look after the American interests, for which the United States focused especially on building her naval power. His writings focused on nations, who controlled sea and he was of the view that only those nations could win and dominate, who controlled sea. Mahan wanted to build a chain of naval bases and he pointed out the role of US navy in winning 1812 war. "The last decade of 19th century found imperialist sentiments running high in most great nations. The partitioning of Africa was being concluded, china seemed about to be torn in pieces for the benefit of the powers. Some of the routes of imperialism were economic, for growing populations and expanding industrial systems demanded new markets. Some were political, for rival nations sought strength in overseas dependencies. Some were naval; Alfred T. Mahan's books had emphasized the value of chains of naval bases"¹⁰. Theodor Roosevelt who intervened in Latin American countries modernized the US navy due to Mahan's writings. Even domestically, America needed a strong navy as for Westward expansion the national government could not rely upon state militia but must instead had to have a strong army. Similarly a strong navy was essential in order to protect American commerce on the seas. So navy was essential for the territorial and commercial ambitions of America¹¹.

Religion and Superior Civilization

Religion alongwith other theories exalting the race and genetics of the United States was used to justify the US involvement in other countries. Americans were hailed as the peculiar chosen people and the Israel of its time¹². The missionary doctrines of the clergy and the role of bible in baptizing the savages were the propositions on whose premises the imperialistic designs of United States were nurtured. "In the early modern period when Europeans first came into contact with backward peoples across the seas, the later were conquered, there lands appropriated and their lives exploited for the most part in brutal disregard of the rules of international intercourse laid down by theologians such as Grotius"¹³.

US Intervention in Latin America

United States in the early 20th century made interventions in Latin American countries. As these countries are geographically smaller as compared to United States, who could easily extend her hegemony to these countries under one pretext or the other. America during the time of Monroe doctrine, clearly stated that any attempt to colonize these smaller countries would be considered an intervention in America

itself. Involvement of the U.S Government and American business in Latin American region, which was experiencing decolonization, nation building efforts by independent states, and considerable political instability-resulted in constant American military intervention and occupation, especially after the turn of the century. As proclaimed by secretary of state, Richard Olney in 1895, the United States is practically sovereign on this continent and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its inter position. The Olney proclamation reinforced the original purpose of the Monroe Doctrine that the United states had the right and now the power to intervene and dominate its own backyard"¹⁴.

This doctrine barred many European countries to topple the governments of these young states who had recently won freedom. In the 18th and 19th centuries, US had interest in expanding its land mass. In 18th century United States tried to retain her independence from Britain but in 19th century she tried to enhance its land mass by including many states in it. She got Florida which brought America to the Pacific Ocean, California and many other states. Interest in outer world was absent as United States was preoccupied with Indians in 18th century and in 19th century the slave controversy in United States had engulfed the whole nation in it. Slavery issue even once at the time of civil war questioned the territorial integrity of United States. So these issues did not allow the United States to look outside her territory for colonization or either for intervention. In the beginning of 20th century, United States adopted an active foreign policy. Her imperialistic ambitions had already been aided by economic thrive, religious and racial theories describing the superiority of United States and the naval race which allowed United States to improve her navy in order to boost her imperialistic designs. In Caribbean region, United States adopted a dramatic foreign policy; the chief aims were to establish her hegemony and to prevent any hostile power from searching for bases in this area.

Venezuela

The President of Venezuela asked for the help of United States mainly because he had borrowed money from England, Germany and Italy. As a failure to repay those loans Venezuelan coasts were blockaded and fired. "A little later Great Britain took a course upon the Venezuelan debt question which again pleased Washington. Three powers Britain, Italy and Germany had claims against disreputable government of President Castro. In the fall of 1902, failing to get payment in any other way, they agreed upon a line of cooperative coercion. Germany, Britain and Italy blockaded Venezuelan coast, seized some gun boats and bombarded two forts. The United States was willing to see Venezuela frightened but nothing more. And when Great Britain perceived that her course was irritating American opinion, she receded"¹⁵. Theodor Roosevelt intervened on the request of Venezuelan President and restrained these three powers from intervention. Venezuela was important for

American interest because the world was shifting to an oil based economy at that time. North America mainly the United States was the major producer of oil and remained so until 1970 but Venezuela was an important oil resource one of the biggest in the world-in fact the biggest single exporter of oil to United States until 1970 till today so kicking the British out of there was very important. Venezuela also had other resources such as iron and US corporations enriched themselves in Venezuela for decades and are still doing. The United States supported a series of murderous dictators to keep the people in line¹⁶.

Cuba

United States intervened in Cuba in the start of 20th century on the pretext of debt due to Spain. Spain had contracted upon a pledge of the island revenues and because of the American assurance, Cuba was reborn as a debt free republic¹⁷. At the end of the 20th century the actions of President Clinton had a devastating impact on Cuba. "A investigation by the American association of world health in 1992 found that this escalation of United States economic warfare had taken a tragic human toll causing serious nutritional deficits and a devastating outbreak of neuropathy numbering in the tens of thousands. It also brought about a sharp reduction in medicines, medical supplies and medical information leaving children to suffer in excruciating pain because of lack of medicines. The embargo reversed Cuba's progress in bringing water services to the population and undermined its advanced bio-industry, among other consequences. These effects became far worse after the imposition of CDA which cut back licensed sales and donations of food and medical supplies by 90% within a year. A humanitarian catastrophe was averted only because the Cuban government had maintained a health system that is uniformly considered the preeminent model in third world"¹⁸.

Santo Domingo, Haiti, Nacaragua

In Santo Domingo, American President Theodor Roosevelt intervened because of a series of toppling of governments. Europeans were considering the situation and they could intervene as well. United states made Santo Domingo a protectorate. US officials started collecting its custom duties to avoid rise in her debts. "Military intervention usually meant that the local customs houses were subsequently run by the United States government officials to guarantee that revenues from tariffs and duties were collected to repay American loans. Financial supervision for example lasted 13 years in Nicaragua, 25 years in Haiti and 36 years in Dominican Republic¹⁹.

Panama Canal

United States of America after war with Spain had acquired empire in both Atlantic and pacific oceans to protect new possession, so isthmus canal was essential.

It reduced distance between Newark and San Francisco by two third and enabled United States to transfer her fleets from one ocean to another. "Although, most American historians have condemned the deal on grounds of national expediency and international morality"²⁰. In the absence of canal, United States needed two navies, one for Atlantic and other for Pacific Ocean. "American leaders so badly wanted a canal to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans that in 1903, President Roosevelt actively supported and instigated Panama independence from Colombia. He then immediately recognized the new country and signed a treaty giving Panama 10 million dollars plus \$ 250000/ a year for rights in perpetuity for a ten mile wide strip which became the Panama canal zone that cut the new country literally in half"²¹. Under Clayton Bulwark treaty of 1850, Britain had equal rights with Americans regarding any canal to be constructed. "To deal with the substantial British interest in America, Secretary Clayton negotiated in 1850 the Clayton Bulwark treaty where by the US agreed to joint control of any canal that was constructed across the Isthmus and Britain gave up her territorial rights in Central America"²².

In 1878, a French company got concessions from Columbia to whom the region of Panama then belonged. Due to lack of finances it abandoned the project after 8 years. Panama Canal Company got rights from bankrupt French company and was willing to sell it to the United States by a law enacted in 1902, Congress authorized the President to buy up the rights of French canal digging company in Panama to obtain from Columbia, the perpetual control of a strip of a land in that state from the Atlantic to the Pacific and to begin digging the great ditch. Negotiations were opened with Columbia but that republic knowing that Panama was one of its greatest assets was unwilling to part with it for a mess of pottage. A treaty drawn up in Washington for American control of a six mile strip was defeated by Senate in Bogotá.

Such defeats had been common enough in United States, where the US Senate had made mincemeat of more than one important compact. Roosevelt denounced it as an outrage characterizing the Columbian politicians as greedy and corrupt"²³. Under 1903 U.S Columbia pact U.S had to pay 10 million dollar in cash at an annual rent of 0.25 million dollars for lease of Canal Zone. Columbian Senate refused to ratify the treaty and America considered it a breach of faith. Roosevelt wanted Congress to sanction the proposal that canal be taken by force. It was considered that there was a probability of revolution in Columbia. Some say this revolution was financed and fomented by the U.S.

United States prevented Columbian troops from landing and putting down revolution. United States of America then recognized Panama. It signed a treaty with Panama and forever got a lease of 10 miles wide strip across Isthmus. This showed

Theodore Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. It revealed the big stick policy of Roosevelt²⁴ and showed how US could set aside international law and norms accepted by civilized nations and commit its breaches in the name of civilization and national interest. In the 1920s the judgment of diplomatic historian William Cohen the United States had become a great power and acquired a formal and informal empire. As he stated in *Empire without Tears*, “it controlled an empire that included not only the Caribbean basin but stretch across the Pacific North and South, through Hawaii and Alaska, Midway, Guam, Samoa, and the Aleutins, to East Asia and the Philippines manufacturers nurtured markets and sired multi-national corporations in Europe while mining and lumber interests scoured North and South America. American entrepreneurs and missionaries wandered across the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. It was the dawning of what Henry Lude would later call the American century”²⁵.

Conclusion

The American rise into new horizons of power and influence not only put it at the helm of global affairs but also put great responsibility on its actions and policies affecting the international political order and the fate of global peace and security. It is from this point of view that American rise to power, its glory, its magnificent scientific and technological advancements, its military might, its vision of democracy, global order and perceptions about other nations and civilizations is to be assessed and scrutinized, as it is generally accepted maxim that with power comes responsibility and that power must never go unchecked. In its crux, democracy also demands that power should never be misused and never be left without democratic institutional control which requires rule of law to be ensured at every level and hence, the American tradition of exceptionalism in this regard is no more admissible.

NOTES

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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Russel, *American Revolution in the Southern Colonies*
- ⁶ Albert K Weinberg, "The Historical Meaning of the American Doctrine of Isolation " *American Political Science Review* 2, no. 1 (1940).
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- ⁹ Carl N Degler, *Out of Our Past, the Forces That Shaped Modern America* (USA: Harpor and Row Publishers, 1962).
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