

Power, Interests and Ideology: A Revisionist Analysis of the Dynamics of US Imperialism in the Asia-Pacific

WALDEN BELLO

Economic expansion, strategic extension, and missionary democracy. These are the three main driving forces of the American imperialist enterprise which made its dramatic entry in the Philippines in 1898 with the exit of Spain as the colonial master. Unlike the US escapades in Latin America, the strategic extension of American power was a far greater determinant than protection of American corporate interest for the annexation of the islands. The US being far less straightforward than the other imperialist powers, required a sugar coating of missionary democracy for its crown jewel in the Pacific. The Filipino elite became eager students of representative democracy because it afforded them to compete, relatively peacefully, for political office and alternate in power. Democratic institutions legitimized American imperial expansion and afforded the Filipino non-elite, who welcomed political participation, an illusion of choice which did not apply to the distribution of income. This cemented friendly relations between the US and the Philippines beyond the granting of independence in 1946. Unfortunately for the Americans their Asian experiment was nonduplicable. One hundred years later they are still trying to make history repeat itself.

The 100th anniversary of the United States' bursting into the Asia-Pacific as an imperial power provides an opportunity to look more deeply at the dynamics of an imperialism that continues to be extremely dynamic not only in Asia but everywhere else.

The dynamism of US imperialism stems not only from the aggressive push of its corporations for markets and resources. It also comes from the complex interplay of its three fundamental drives: economic expansionism, the extension of the strategic reach of the US state, and an ideological mission of "exporting democracy."¹

Strategic Extension and Corporate Expansion in the Asia Pacific

Imperialism is often explained as being mainly driven by the search for markets and resources by corporations. Now, this is probably largely true of US imperialism in Latin America, as in the case of United Fruit in Guatemala and ITT in Chile, where political and military initiatives were largely undertaken to support the interests of particular corporations or

to create the political climate for the expansion of US economic interests as a whole.

The case in Asia was different. Here US strategic interests were paramount. Indeed, commercial rationales were formulated to support strategic rationales, that is, to support the extension of the strategic reach of the US state. This was the case ever since Commodore Matthew Perry brought his ships to Tokyo Bay in 1853 to open up Japan to commerce.

It was not unusual that it took a naval officer rather than a merchant to push the opening of Japan, for in America's century-long drive to the western Pacific, trade followed the flag more frequently than the flag followed trade. At the time the US made its next major move in the western Pacific — its 8000-mile leap to the Philippines in 1898 — less than 10% of US trade crossed the Pacific, while 60% crossed the Atlantic. China, Korea, and Japan were sources of exotic imports rather than significant export markets. And investments in the region were negligible; indeed, "American capital for the exploitation of China [was] being raised with difficulty."²

What lay behind the great leap westward was not a business cabal but a "strategic lobby" of naval and political expansionists who were mainly interested in extending the reach of the US state. Entrepreneurs operating in Hawaii, the Philippines, China and the interstices of the dominant European empires vociferously supported the expansion, but they did not constitute the center of gravity of US business. That center was in New York, which was oriented far more towards Europe than Asia.

The US Navy, in particular, became particularly adept at invoking commercial rationale to promote US strategic extension, and thus its own role as the cutting edge of that mission. Acquiring bases in the far reaches of the Pacific would, among other things, provide a powerful impetus to the creation of the "two-ocean navy," which would be necessary to achieve the goal of "maritime supremacy" envisioned by the fleet's leading strategic thinker, Captain Alfred Mahan.

Led by the influential Mahan and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, the US Navy was the main force behind the acquisition of Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines, following Admiral

George Dewey's victory over the Spanish squadron in Manila Bay in May 1898. The small island of Guam in the Marianas and the Philippine archipelago were depicted as stepping stones to the riches of China to justify their annexation in the face of significant domestic opposition, but Washington desired mainly their strategic positions for the projection of American power. Hawaii had been under the control of American planters for over a decade, but it was not until the Spanish-American War of 1898 that its strategic importance was fully appreciated. During the war, the naval base at Pearl Harbor was instrumental in protecting US naval power to the western Pacific; following the war, moves were made to annex Hawaii.³

Ironically, the Navy's thinking was most succinctly captured by an Army man, Gen. Arthur MacArthur, father of the more famous Douglas. Chief of the colonizing army that subjugated the country, MacArthur described the Philippines as:

The finest group of islands in the world. Its strategic location is unexcelled by any other position in the globe. The China Sea, which separates it by something like 750 miles from the continent, is nothing more nor less than a safety moat. It lies on the flank of what might be called several thousand miles of coastline; it is the center of that position. It is therefore relatively better placed than Japan, which is on a flank, and therefore remote from the other extremity; likewise India, on another flank. It affords a means of protecting American interests which with the very least output of physical power has the effect of a commanding position in itself to retard hostile action.⁴

So important, in fact, was a western Pacific presence for the institutional expansion of the Navy that even when key Army officials favored withdrawal from the region in the 1930s, owing to the fact that the Philippines and other Pacific possessions of the US had become a "strategic liability" in the face of Japan's growing might, the Navy blocked any consideration of leaving,⁵ thus setting the stage for the American defeats in the early days of the Second World War.

Projection of strategic power was the central impetus behind US policy in the Asia Pacific after the Second World War. "Forward Defense" and "Containment of Communism" were the articulated rationales, but the imperative was strategic extension of the power of the US state. Just

as his father had most succinctly expressed the Navy's rationale for acquiring the Philippines, it fell to Army General Douglas MacArthur to express most cogently and candidly the US military's strategic imperative in post-War Asia: "The strategic boundaries of the United States were no longer along the western shore of North and South America; they lay along the eastern coast of the Asiatic continent."⁶

Projecting US strategic power necessitated the creation of a network of more than 300 bases that were formally located in the territories of seven Asia-Pacific countries but which in reality formed an autonomous transnational garrison state. Power projection was the principal determinant of US military intervention in Korea and in Vietnam, though of course, ideological considerations, that is, stopping the spread of Communism, also played a role. In this regard, counter-revolutionary ideology was the handmaiden of strategic *realpolitik*, a point underlined by George Kennan's containment strategy itself, which saw as the threat to be neutralized not messianic Communism but the Russian state's expansionist eastward and westward thrusts, which in Kennan's view antedated the Soviet seizure of power in 1917.

Corporate interests hardly played a role either in the decisions to intervene in Korea or in Vietnam, and even attempts to play up the economic dimension of imperialism were hastily constructed rationales about the importance of Southeast Asia's raw materials cooked up by Pentagon officials eager to push policies of deeper intervention in regional affairs. Indeed, the priority of the strategic and the political was underlined by the fact that the US government turned its eyes the other way and allowed Japan and other East Asian countries to follow policies of protectionism, investment discrimination, and strong state support for local business during the Cold War period. These policies severely disadvantaged US corporations and US traders, but Washington judged these costs to economic interests to be worth the strategic political and military alliance it was able to extract as a quid pro quo from the Asian elite. It was only when the Cold War began to wind down, during the Reagan presidency in the 1980s, that corporate and trade interests began to dominate the US agenda for the region in the form of "Super 301 diplomacy." Pressures for this shift had, of course, been building for years, and it was based on the growing — and accurate — perception of both US corporate executives and trade officials that the prosperity of

Japan and the so-called “newly industrializing countries” (NICS) had been purchased at the expense of US interests.⁷

Missionary Democracy

But whether pushed principally by strategic motives, as in Asia, or by corporate interests, as in Latin America, US imperialism has been, as suggested earlier, accompanied by a strong streak of missionary idealism. It was an idealism born out of the United States’ own coming into being as an anti-colonial country with a democratic ideology just fewer than 125 years before 1898.

Anti-colonialism and democracy thus coexisted in often sharp tension with the strategic and economic imperatives of US imperialism. Indeed, the ideological dimension would play a far greater role in the American imperial enterprise than it did in the case of the European imperial powers. *Mission civilatrice*, for instance, was an afterthought that served as a fig leaf for French economic expansionism. But imperialism had to be legitimized among the American people, and the emergence of the Anti-Imperialist League with which Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) was associated, served as a warning that neither the rationale of “Christianizing” the (already Roman Catholic) heathens of the Philippines, which President McKinley articulated, nor that of “Manifest Destiny” promoted by people like Albert Beveridge was sufficient to gather popular support for the imperial adventure.

The Philippine Experiment

The annexation of the Philippines, which the US military saw as a base for the protection of US power, exemplified the American dilemma. And the solution was classically American: “Preparing the Filipinos for responsible independence” by exporting the institutions of American democracy became the formula for legitimizing imperial expansion, that is, building consensus around expansionism among both Americans and Filipinos.

■ Corporate interests hardly played a role either in the decisions to intervene in Korea or in Vietnam, and even attempts to play up the economic dimension of imperialism were hastily constructed rationales about the importance of Southeast Asia’s raw materials cooked up by Pentagon officials eager to push policies of deeper intervention in regional affairs.

A wholesale transplant of formal political institutions began shortly after the conquest, with US colonial authorities and missionaries serving as instructors and the Philippine elite playing the role of student. By the time of independence in 1946, the Philippine political system was a mirror image of the American, with its presidential leadership, separation of powers, two-party system, and its Lockean emphasis on private property as the foundation of liberty.

In terms of the actual exercise of power, the Philippine democratic system was a marriage between the feudal paternalism of the Philippine elite and Chicago-style machine politics of the 1920s. Electoral politics was enthusiastically embraced by the regional landed elite that the US had detached from the Philippines anti-colonial struggle both against Spain and the US and formed into a national ruling class. But it was hardly a belief in representative democracy that made the elite eager students. The main incentive was that democratic elections provided a means for a fractious class to compete, relatively peacefully, for political office and alternate in power. For the poor majority of Filipinos, elections afforded the illusion of democratic choice, that is, the ability to choose among different elite candidates and elite political parties. Democracy did not extend to the economic sphere, and the play of electoral politics unfolded above an immobile class structure whose distribution of income was one of the worst in Asia.

Nonetheless, having created the local elite, having tied that elite to the US economically by providing access to the US market for its agricultural products, and having socialized both the elite and the population at large toward formal democratic practices, the US felt confident that formal independence would not result in an unfriendly country.

The Philippine Paradigm and the Cold War

With the onset of the Cold War, the Philippines provided a paradigm for America's approach to other countries in the region. For the contradiction that the US experienced 50 years earlier upon its annexation of the Philippines — the conflict between America's disdain for colonialism and its desire for real control — was now reproduced on a global scale. "The US," Neil Sheehan has pointed out, "did not seek colonies as such."

Having overt colonies was not acceptable to the American political conscience. Americans were convinced that their imperial system did not victimize foreign peoples...It was thought to be neither exploitative, like the nineteenth-century-style colonialism of the European empires, nor destructive of personal freedom and other worthy human values, like the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and China and their Communist allies. Instead of formal colonies, the United States sought local governments amenable to American wishes and, where possible, subject to indirect control from behind the scenes. Washington wanted native regimes that would act as surrogates for American power. The goal was to achieve the sway over allies and dependencies which every imperial nation needs to work its will in world affairs without the structure of old-fashioned colonialism.⁸

And as in the case of the Philippines, a formal democracy controlled by US-allied elite structured along classically Lockean lines provided both the mechanism of influence and the justification for intervention in the affairs of a Third World country. As Frances Fitzgerald pointed out in her classic book *Fire in the Lake*:

The idea that the mission of the United States was to build democracy around the world had become a convention of American politics in the 1950s. Among certain circles, it was more or less assumed that democracy, that is, electoral democracy combined with private ownership and civil liberties, was what the United States had to offer the Third World. Democracy provided not only the basis for American opposition to Communism but the practical method to make sure that opposition worked.⁹

In both Korea and Vietnam, many US officials tried to set up systems of representative democracy that they thought would serve as the best antidote to communism. That they were working through reactionary elite that did not believe in democracy in the first place was overlooked. The CIA officer Edward Lansdale, for instance, saw in the feudal patriarch Ngo Dinh Diem a reformist democrat in the mold of Ramon Magsaysay, with whose collaboration he had crushed the communist insurgency in the Philippines in the early 1950s.¹⁰ But neither Vietnam nor Korea was the Philippines, where the elite had been socialized toward electoral competition by the American colonial authorities over a 50-year period. The Korean and Vietnamese ruling groups had collaborated with despotic

colonial powers — Japan in the case of Korea, France in the case of Vietnam. In two intensely nationalistic countries, the Americans were perceived as stepping into the shoes of the old colonialists and their “democratic” clients — Rhee Syng-Man in Korea, Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam — were mocked as reactionaries masquerading as democrats.

The Crisis of Democratic Legitimation

The failure to implant formal democratic regimes that would stabilize Asian societies caught up in nationalist revolution left many US officials disenchanted with the ideology of missionary democracy. Thus anti-communism soon overshadowed democratic credentials as the key criterion for choosing allies — a process that culminated with the firm and unstinting support the US gave, invoking largely the strategic security rationale, to strongman regimes, the most prominent of which were those of Park Chung Hee in Korea (1962-79), Marcos in the Philippines (1965-1986), and Suharto in Indonesia (1965-1998).

The imperial enterprise, however, had to have an ideological rationale consistent with the values of the American system of governance to sustain popular support for it in the US. But ideological alternatives to “building democracy” to legitimize imperialism, however, failed dramatically. When the Vietnam adventure began to be justified mainly as an effort to save an ally or to secure “peace with honor,” the war was lost. In the 1970s and 1980s, all attempts to formulate substitute rationales failed to be effective in securing legitimacy for American policy

- The case of China was more complex. Here US corporations seeking to exploit what they considered the mass market of the 21st century produced a formidable lobby that pressured the Clinton administration to tone down US criticism of China’s record on human rights and democracy.

in countries in crisis, whether this was Henry Kissinger’s invocation of European-style *raison d’etat*, Samuel Huntington and Jeanne Kirkpatrick’s glorification of authoritarian rule, or Ronald Reagan and George Bush’s crass redefinition of murderers, military dictators, and autocrats as “democratic allies.”¹¹

The wave of democratization that swept the Third World and East Asia from the mid-1980s took place in spite of, rather than because of, US policy.

During the years of Republican ascendancy, many Democrats warned that jettisoning the promotion of democracy as an essential component of US foreign policy and focusing mainly on strategic and economic interests would be self-defeating in the long run, since the US's role as the world's hegemonic power was precisely legitimized before both its citizens and the rest of the world by its democratic ideology and political practice.

These warnings were validated by the emergence of anti-dictatorship movements to which the left was a central player — a trend that was exemplified in the Philippines, where the National Democratic Front began to gain significant allies in the elite opposition to Marcos. With the assassination of Filipino opposition leader Benigno Aquino in 1983, pragmatists in the US State Department moved away from the uncritical support of Marcos toward favoring a “democratic opening,” a process that culminated in Washington's carting off Marcos to Honolulu during the civil-military uprising on 12 February 1986 and giving its full backing to Corazon Aquino.¹²

Pragmatists in the Reagan administration also pressed the Chun dictatorship to step down during the 1987 uprising in Korea and threw Washington's weight behind free elections. In Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, the pragmatists likewise sought to maintain US influence by pressing for elections, as they did in Chile, where Pinochet yielded to a democratically elected government in 1990.

Promoting Democracy, Again

What was pragmatic adjustment during the Reagan and Bush administrations became a central ideological platform of the new Clinton administration that assumed office in 1993. Missionary democracy was once more ensconced as a primary consideration of US foreign policy, and promoting democracy became the main rationale for sending US troops to Haiti and imposing sanctions on Burma.

There were, however, two problematic countries, and the Washington's effort to deal with them illustrated the tension among the strategic, economic, and ideological drives of US imperialism and the “relatively autonomous” role — to borrow a term from structuralist Marxism — of

■ The failure to implant formal democratic regimes that would stabilize Asian societies caught up in nationalist revolution left many US officials disenchanted with the ideology of missionary democracy. Thus anti-communism soon overshadowed democratic credentials as the key criterion for choosing allies...

the executive in shaping the particular thrust of policy at certain conjunctures.

In the case of Indonesia, the perception that longtime US ally Suharto was the irreplaceable linchpin of US security interests prevented the Clinton administration from pressing the dictator for democratic reforms, until the massive urban riots in Jakarta in the third week of May 1998 forced Washington to nudge (the already powerless) Suharto to formally step down.

The case of China was more complex. Here US corporations seeking to exploit what they considered the mass market of the 21st century produced a formidable lobby that pressured the Clinton administration to tone down US criticism of China's record on human rights and democracy. On the other hand, the US defense establishment, convinced that China would be the US' most formidable rival from a strategic point of view, had set into motion a policy of containment, part of whose strategy was allying with the human rights and pro-democracy lobby to criticize China on human rights grounds to keep it off balance. With the different driving forces of US imperialism getting out of synch, the role of the Clinton administration in determining the principal thrust of US policy became increasingly weighty, and it chose to exercise this along the lines of stabilizing US-China relations that US business interests preferred.¹³

Conclusion

In conclusion, economic expansion, strategic extension, and missionary democracy have been the three main driving forces of the American imperialist enterprise that made its dramatic debut in 1898. These three drives have coexisted uneasily as relatively autonomous imperatives, and the history of US foreign policy toward various regions of the Third World reflects attempts of various administrations to work out concrete policies that were compromises or an unstable equilibrium among these drives. What this meant was that each administration enjoyed a great degree of autonomy in working out policies for each

conjuncture, underlining the strong element of truth in the description of the US executive as “the imperial presidency.”

In East Asia, up until the unwinding of the Cold War in the 1980s, the strategic extension of the power of the US state was a far greater determinant than corporate expansion, and these two drives were conditioned in turn by the ideological legitimation of the imperial process which was the extension of democracy and the achievement of (formal) political independence.

The Philippines, where the US set up military bases to project power onto the Asian mainland as US corporations took over key sectors of the economy, became, in a very real sense, the laboratory for forging the imperial formula, especially on the ideological front. In the Philippines, the US was able to export its institutions of Lockean democracy which drew the masses into the electoral process, thus legitimizing the political system, providing a mechanism for competition among the elite, and producing a fragile social peace in a society characterized by vast class cleavages.

In a very real sense, the problematique of US policy since World War II has been how to reproduce the Philippine formula in the rest of Asia and the Third World. ❁

Endnotes

- 1 This essay draws a great deal from the analytical paradigm sketched out by Franz Schurmann in *The Logic of World Power* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).
- 2 A. Whitney Griswold, *The Far Eastern Policy of the United States* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 34.
- 3 “Hawaii Annexation,” in Eric Foner and John Garraty, eds., *The Reader’s Companion to American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 493.
- 4 Quoted in William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Dell, 1978), pp. 48-49.
- 5 Roy K. Flint, “The United States on the Pacific Frontier, 1899-1939,” in *The American Military in the Far East: Proceedings of the Ninth Military History Symposium* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: US Air Force Academy, October 1980), pp. 155-156.
- 6 “Conversation Between General of the Army MacArthur and George Kerman, 5 March 1948—Top Secret,” in Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1949-50* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 229.
- 7 For more discussion of this shift, see Walden Bello, “APEC’s Place in US Trade Policy,” in Walden Bello and Joy Chavez-Malaluan, eds., *APEC: Four Adjectives in Search of a Noun* (Manila: Manila People’s Forum on APEC, 1996), pp. 12-34.

- 8 Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 131.
- 9 Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 116.
- 10 See Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
- 11 Henry Kissinger's Central European conceptualization of US relations with the Third World was capsulized in his classic statement on Salvador Allende's presidency in Chile: "I don't see why we should let a country go Marxist because its people are irresponsible." Quoted in Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 250. Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) was a book that played a very influential role in downgrading US officials in the Third World from a focus on supporting structures of democratic representation to a stance of building "structures of authority." Jeane Kirkpatrick's essay "Dictatorship and Double Standards," which appeared in *Commentary*, July 1979, explicitly argued for support of authoritarian regimes in the Third World to prevent political disorder. Then Vice President George Bush's Orwellian toast to Marcos during a visit in Manila in 1981 probably represented the nadir, ideology-wise, of US imperial policy: "We love you, sir...We love your adherence to democratic rights and processes."
- 12 For a fuller analysis of this shift, see Walden Bello and John Gershman, "Democratization and Stabilization in the Philippines," *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 1990).
- 13 For a more detailed discussion, see Walden Bello, "China and the Resurrection of Containment," *Human Rights Forum*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (January-June 1997), pp. 133-146.