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Conference Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College, and
Triangle Institute for Security Studies*



The Rise and Fall of Empires

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Key Points:

- Participants carefully avoided precisely defining “empire” early in the conference as it was evident that considerable debate was needed on the topic.
- Empires come into existence from a variety of causes and exhibit somewhat different characteristics.
- Empires pass from the scene for equally various reasons and do not necessarily collapse or decay since, participants argued, some never existed until after their time had passed.
- America appears to have stumbled into a condition popularly called empire after the Spanish-American War, but has recently stumbled into a condition of empire of a different kind, again without any particular thought of becoming one.
- The conferees presented historical approaches/evaluations that avoided an aspect more prominent in the realm of political science—the issue of leadership among members of a community.

On March 4-5, 2005, the Strategic Studies Institute and the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS), (Duke University, University of North Carolina and North Carolina State University) co-hosted a conference addressing the question of whether or not the United States has become an empire and, if so, what does that mean for U.S. national security policy? The path to the answer was to examine several other “empires” rise, limiting factors, and declines. The audience, consisting principally of scholars from TISS, included students and one U.S. Air Force Fellow studying at the University of Chicago. The number in attendance varied from 25 to about 50. The conference examined dominant paradigms; addressed how empires begin; the limits to imperialism; the end of empire; and a reassessment of American Empire. The conference concluded with national security implications.

DISCUSSION

Participants carefully avoided of any attempt to define “empire” precisely. Speakers did, however, recount certain aspects of empire as either present or missing, such as a zeal usually of religious origin, an excess of capital and manpower to fuel conquest, a vision of something new and better—even if

that was markets, or control of the sea that might lead to adventuring. A primary thread of the presentations, however, was that, in most cases, critical aspects of what were commonly believed to constitute empire were missing. As noted below, either the motivation or the resources, generally felt necessary to establish empire, did not exist in the originating states or state equivalents.

Participants suggested that the Muslim Empire, in ways very similar to the Mongol empire, evolved from a search for booty – a large raid. Neither had any particular “missionary” motive in the beginning, and both seized on an advantage of social decay of a wealthy neighbor. Both had excess manpower and an animating adventurous spirit.

At the other extreme, the Aztecs, Chinese, and Soviets/Russians were motivated to take deliberate actions that resulted in empires from a series of essentially defensive or self-protective moves. The Aztecs appear to have been the most deliberate because of their inability to expand more than a very limited distance per year. The Chinese eventually convinced themselves that they were the center of the universe and expected everyone else to come to them for enlightenment – once their borders were secure. Russian paranoia was well-founded and arguably remains today as the primary motivation for maintaining a safe buffer zone – which can be called an empire. Protection of the center mattered most and such resources as did exist were focused to secure it.

In between lay the Spanish, whose empire motivations were not their own, whose manpower and money were not their own, and who actually gained very little from what only came to be known as an empire after they lost in the Spanish-American War. Dr. Kamen argued that Spain had no impulse toward, nor resources for empire; that her military heroes of the period were not Spaniards and the idea of a Spanish Empire does not even exist in literature until post-1898.

The panel on “Limits to Empire” drew together Chinese, Byzantine, and French scholars, all three of whom generally concluded that overreach is always a problem but in different ways. For the Chinese, territory and numbers don’t necessarily produce the required density as China’s perennial

problem has been how to feed/maintain its people because of inadequate lines of communication. The Byzantines seem to have been the most adept at adjusting to large variations of controlled territory. They were able to trim their ambitions to their relative power. It was notable that the theme of control of the sea mattered to many empires, and the Byzantines lost control of the Mediterranean relatively early in their “Imperial” period, but nonetheless maintained solid control of many of their land territories. The French were never serious about an empire outside of Europe and that was attributed to the deep desire of the French to enjoy what they already had to the fullest. Why else would the Germans employ the phrase “Leben wie Gott im Frankreich!” (To live like God in France!) as an expression of the ultimate life experience. This comparative comfort with domestic matters and a lack of any missionary impulse seriously curtailed any genuine imperial thrust until overtaken by the “everybody’s doing it” impulse on the late 19th century.

Among the most earnest presentations was Georgiy Mirsky’s on the Soviet Empire. His message was simple – “You don’t want to go there!” Empires emanating from defensive motivations tend, he suggested, toward totalitarianism.

An American Empire exists, several panelists suggested, simply because America is the most powerful and only global power. But its global nature comes as much, if not more, from business and culture than from military power. English is the language of global business, stemming in some measure from its global use in air transportation, the most important physical means of globalization of travel. It is the imperial onrush of American culture, albeit the Hollywood version of it, that is the focus of Osama bin Laden’s rage. His reaction reflects the enormous frustration many feel toward the force of that seemingly irresistible impulse. And yet there is no Machiavellian grand design behind it. Some others saw a grand design behind the promotion of democracy, but that, too, failed of imperial explanations.

Dr. Crane argued that the United States was incapable of creating an empire on purely practical grounds of the sort that led to the “Imperial Overreach” thesis attributed to the British. For

example, one does not recruit an “Army for Empire” in the United States today, much less attempt to draft for one.

All empires decay or collapse in one fashion or another. As several of the speakers suggested, there is merit to the idea of imperial overreach, but there are many dimensions to that factor. These may include physical infrastructure becoming inadequate to sustain the frontiers, loss of interest or will to sustain it, or hostile actions by neighbors. The Aztecs were destroyed by an alliance between the Spaniards and neighboring tribes threatened by them. The Mongols lost interest as they became increasingly settled into more civilized ways. The Ottomans fought constantly to adapt to external and internal pressures and finally collapsed from an exhaustion of resources. The Chinese present a more complex picture as they purposefully curtailed their global explorations, built their walls and then found themselves unable to sustain these barriers over the land distances at which they were constructed.

Throughout all these very competent presentations and excellent discussions that followed, this observer was struck by an absence of any discussion of the element of leadership. In each case, a body of people surveyed their circumstances and elected to take charge of their future rather than be reactive to the circumstances surrounding them. Even the Spanish developed enough of a vision to invite others to use their ports and flag to further what were seen to be mutually profitable undertakings. If the Aztecs gathered allies in their regular, if limited, conquests, they did so in a positive effort to strengthen their security. The Arab tribes that set off to pillage the rich North African coastal region launched their effort from an intelligent design for positive action and were rewarded far beyond their original expectations. In each case, a decision was made to lead, and thus, as far as possible, control events leading to a desired future. The shape of that desired future varied from empire to empire, but behind each lay a design for safety as a bare minimum. In some cases it was only a design for secure markets. The accidental empires develop from leadership in other undertakings, but even they, at some point, are continued by conscious

decisions. President Teddy Roosevelt participated in the creation of the first American Empire and then, becoming President, found himself saddled with all that came with it. In the case of the Philippines, in particular, he decided there was no one to give it back to, and it remained part of the American empire until after World War II.

One must take great pains to see any substantial similarities between those past situations and the imperial motivations that generated those empires and the present. If it is proper to label the United States as an empire, it must be classed as another “accidental” empire, one no one planned to create. However, aside from the alleged Hollywood Cultural Offensive—which is probably best categorized as mere marketing—the “American Empire” does have some aspects of a defensive motivation stemming from the Post-World War II tensions between it and Soviet Communism. It would be more fair to describe the present state less as empire than as simply taking the initiative to assume the position of global leadership in the absence of any other capable entity. If this is empire, then the definition of empire needs to be completely revised. The present state of “American Empire,” if one insists that such a thing actually exists, is one of a very strong state seeking stability on the playground of a chaotic world. That it continues to seek economic benefit from this stability is nothing new or unusual in the history of nations; that it seeks that stability through the suggested medium of representative democratic governments is somewhat Wilsonian, but is being pursued more in rhetoric than force. Because the United States is rich and strong it will, perforce, arouse jealousy—that is the lot of the rich and strong. Diplomacy and judicious use of the varied instruments of national power, with a constant eye toward efficiency, will long be required.

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