GHOSTS OF EMPIRE

Reducing the Specter of Imperialism in Modern Stability Operations

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April 25, 2011

Introduction

During the colonial era, the empires of Europe (and the United States to a lesser extent) covered the vast majority of the world's territory. These great powers reshaped their colonies to reflect their own political and cultural images, which has deeply impacted the psyche of today's developing world. Partly due to this legacy, the populations of former colonies as well as international commentators often charge that modern stability operations are simply manifestations of "neo-imperialism".[2] While it may be impossible to completely quash the specter of imperialism, the United States must take steps to avoid inducing imperial déjà vu with its stability operations.[3]

It is first important to understand the roots of the oft-made comparison between imperial adventures and modern stability operations. What are the commonalities? In what ways do they differ? Some military scholars such as Steven Metz downplay the value of studying imperialism to improve modern stability operations;[4] but, this fails to recognize that today's perceptions are largely shaped by the experiences of the past. Consequently, imperialism has created a number of challenges for the United States such as leaving an inherent distrust of Western motives in former colonies.

This article argues that the U.S. government (USG) can mitigate the specter of imperialism by reshaping key aspects of its planning and implementation process. In particular, the USG should partner with developing countries, provide a credible guarantee of withdrawal, and work more prudently to build indigenous governing capacity. Also, policymakers must strengthen civilian capacity to carry out the non-security components of operations as well as incorporate indigenous socio-political structures into institution building efforts.

Imperial Adventures vs. Stability Operations

Stability operations have a number of important commonalities with the imperial adventures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Particularly salient parallels include the fact that (1) great powers have been the primary implementers of both types of operations; (2) the implementers of the operations have used similar strategies; and, (3) states have claimed humanitarianism as a key motive for intervention in both cases.

First, former imperial powers are largely the same countries undertaking stability operations. By the late nineteenth century, it was Western Europe states – France, Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Germany – that largely dominated the imperial project. These seven countries ostentatiously demonstrated their dominance by dividing Africa among themselves at the 1884 Berlin Conference. Western Europe's holdings, however, did not constitute a monopoly on empire during this era. The Ottoman Empire controlled territories stretching from Baghdad to Belgrade, and the United States took over Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines after its 1898 victory in the Spanish-American War.

In today's stability operations as well, the United States and its European allies are often in the lead. At the outset of OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM in 2003, the U.S.-led coalition had approximately 130,000 American troops, followed by Great Britain with 46,000, and only 17,000 personnel from other countries.[5] Similarly, countries outside of the United States and Western Europe have only contributed a token number of troops to OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan. Great Britain and France have also independently undertaken smaller-scale stability operations in Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, respectively.

Second, parallels exist between the military strategies used during imperial adventures and stability operations.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) set up to help stabilize the rural areas of Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, have roots in France's *cercle* concept first implemented in 1890s Indochina. *Cercles*, administrative jurisdictions with a unified command structure, focused on economic development activities if the security situation in the area permitted. PRTs, for their part, have an explicit development mandate and include personnel from government organization who comprise a single "Command Group".[6]

The leaders of the Iraq and Afghanistan stability operations have sought to co-opt local forces, which was a widely-used strategy during imperial adventures. In British India, for instance, the administrator Robert Sandeman used "native auxiliaries" instead of British forces to provide security in the Raj's remote northern provinces.[7] General David Petraeus adopted this same strategy in 2007 when he worked with the Sunni "Sons of Iraq" to secure areas that coalition forces had theretofore failed to stabilize. Petraeus is now adapting this program in hopes of pacifying the Taliban-led insurgency in rural Afghanistan.[8]

In the final commonality, humanitarianism is often presented as a motive for intervention in both imperial adventures and stability operations. As scholar Kimberly Zisk Marten writes,

> Control over foreign territory was justified by the great powers as a way for the civilized nations of the world to bring economic development and political enlightenment to those who would otherwise be without them...[B]oth the leaders and the publics of the great powers seemed genuinely to believe that colonial occupation was a kind of charitable act.[9]

Demonstrating this assertion, the French labeled their imperial conquests as the *mission civilistrice* ("civilizing mission"). And, King Leopold II of Belgium succeeded in gaining recognition for his Congo Free State by vehemently expressing a desire to Christianize the area's inhabitants.[10]

Many modern stability operations also claim the mantle of humanitarianism. The 1995 NATO intervention in Bosnia stands out as the archetypical example. Paddy Ashdown, who served as the European Union's High Representative in the country stated that "Bosnia will be seen as a new model for international intervention – one designed not to pursue narrow national interests but to prevent conflict, to promote human rights and to rebuild war-torn societies."[11] Humanitarian grounds were also cited as partial motivations for the U.S.-led reinstatement of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti (1994), Great Britain's OPERATION PALLISER in Sierra Leone (2000), and the NATO intervention in Kosovo (2000), among other operations.

Dissenters might contest Ashdown's assertion about a "new model for intervention" as some view stability operations as little more than modern imperial adventures. However, fundamental differences exist in that (1) imperial powers sought long-term economic and competitive security advantages while stability operations aim to make countries self-sufficient; (2) unlike imperial adventures, enhancing governing capacity is a central objective of stability operations; and, (3) imperial militaries used harsher tactics on their subject populations.

Imperial powers established their empires for self-interested economic and competitive security gains. Economically, commercial enterprises such as the Dutch East India Company[12] or entrepreneurial individuals such as Cecil Rhodes spearheaded much of the imperial project.[13] By the early twentieth century, most colonies turned to net negatives on metropole balance sheets, but great powers maintained their empires due to perceived security imperatives. The realist tenet of relative power dominated European and American mindsets of the era. This paradigm readily explains the Sykes-Picot agreement, for instance, which divided the defeated Ottoman Empire (except for Asia Minor itself) between Great Britain and France.

Conversely, the implementers of modern stability operations seek partnerships and usually endure substantial economic costs. The United States brought together a "coalition of the willing" to lend greater international legitimacy to OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM.[14] American officials likewise have consistently pressured their NATO allies to make greater contributions to the Afghanistan mission. Economically, according to Marten, stability operations are "an expensive business that saps state treasuries without providing many investment opportunities for international business."[15] The Department of Defense (DoD) estimated that the U.S. deployment to Bosnia cost approximately $2 billion[16] in 1996 alone, far outweighing the benefits from the $58.8 million in American exports to the country.[17]

Why, then, did the United States intervene in Bosnia? Humanitarian concerns played an important role as it does with most stability operations. Clinton administration officials held personal convictions about stopping the conflict on moral grounds, especially after the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre.[18] Various groups, namely Jewish-American lobbying organizations, also pressured the USG to intervene for humanitarian

reasons.[19] Furthermore, the national interests that played into the U.S. decision calculus—e.g., preventing continued refugee flows—benefited all the parties involved in the conflict except for the aggressors. Similar humanitarian motives also partly drove the U.S. interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, and elsewhere.

In addition, the implementers of stability operations pursue rapid exit strategies by enhancing the civilian capacity of local populations. After the 2000 NATO intervention in Kosovo, for instance, the United Nations (UN) developed a coherent civil administration, which eventually led to Kosovar self-government of an independent state. While the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia can intervene in the country's democratic process, it does so to protect the unity of the indigenous government. And, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq handed over power only fifteen months after toppling the Hussein regime.

Unlike stability operations, imperial powers held on to their colonies for close to a century in many cases and did little to build up local governing institutions. The European countries, which formalized their Africa conquests at the 1884 Berlin Conference, did not begin dissolving their holdings until after World War II. Colonialism finally ended on the continent in 1974 when Portugal granted independence to its African territories. Although metropoles made some effort to build local institutions when decolonization became seen as inevitable, the projects lacked adequate resources and thereby contributed to Africa's post-colonial woes.[20]

Last, the tactics used in imperial adventures were significantly harsher than those applied during stability operations. In the twenty-two years that King Leopold II ruled the Belgian Congo, some analysts estimate that up to 10 million people died – half of the territory's original population.[21] While American actions in the Philippines did not approach the scale of abuses in the Congo, the U.S. military still engaged in massacres – the most brutal of which occurred on the island of Mindanao in 1905. In this attack, Major General Leonard Wood ordered his troops to fire automatic weapons on a village hiding insurgents, ultimately leaving hundreds of civilians dead.[22]

While individuals engage in undue violence during stability operations, these instances usually occur despite an immense amount of training to the contrary and discipline mechanisms. The U.S. military's counterinsurgency doctrine explicates a series of measures to minimize civilian casualties. The Army Field Manual also condones only interrogations techniques that fully comply with the Geneva Convention. In an example of disciplinary measures, the perpetrators of the now-infamous Abu Gharib incidents were subsequently court martialled and sent to military prison.

The Legacy of Imperialism: Challenges for Modern Stability Operations

Due to the indelible impact of the colonial experience on the developing world's collective psyche, it is important to identify the unique challenges that the specter of imperialism poses to stability operations. Implementers must deal with an inherent distrust of Western motives and build local institutions without being perceived as controlling the country's body politic. These problems are compounded by the fact that implementers often still attempt to apply their governing models universally and continue to rely on their militaries to conduct the non-security aspects of operations.

The populations of former colonies are usually skeptical of stability operations' motives given that imperial adventures sought long-term economic benefits. This mistrust is particularly prevalent in the Arab world where many believe that the United States is engaging in a broader neo-imperialist effort to control its resources.[23] Many Iraqis compared the recent American occupation with British interventions during the colonial era meant to ensure the steady flow of oil. Similar accusations of neo-imperialism arose when Afghan President Hamid Karzai indicated that donor countries should receive preferential treatment for tapping the country's potentially-vast mineral resources.[24]

Additionally, the implementers of stability operations are faced with the challenge of institutionalizing stable political systems without creating the appearance of controlling the country's body politic. This challenge is acutely demonstrated in the Bosnian operation. As stipulated in the Dayton Accords, the Office of the High Representative is often labeled as a "neocolonial" institution given its broad powers ranging from mandating the use of common license plates to preventing war criminals from winning political office.[25] It is precisely this type of imposing actions, however, that have greatly improved the prospects of Dayton's success.[26]

While the legacy of imperialism is perhaps most prevalent in former colonies, it still has impacted the foreign policies of today's great powers. The idea of the *mission civilistrice* for the French or "White Man's Burden" in the British narrative continues to hold a degree of resonance among policymakers.

As a result, the implementers of modern stability operations often seek to replicate their own governing model in the areas under their control. Many analysts, however, argue that the democratic governing model enshrined in Afghanistan's constitution does not comport with the country's indigenous political structure. Similarly, Iraq's new constitution fails to recognize the importance of tribal and religious lines deeply rooted in the country's society. These cases demonstrate the challenge implementers have in identifying and incorporating indigenous socio-political structures into newly-established governing institutions.

Addressing the Challenges

To address these challenges, the USG must countervail the perception that its stability operations are analogous with imperial adventures. It can breakdown mistrust of American motives by (1) undertaking operations in partnership with developing countries, (2) providing credible guarantees of its intention to withdraw when conditions permit, and (3) pushing local populations to administer their own governing institutions as soon as possible. Furthermore, the USG can improve its likelihood of success in stability operations by (4) emphasizing indigenous socio-political structures in institution building and (5) strengthening its own civilian capacity to carry out the non-security components of operations.

First, conducting stability operations in partnership with developing countries will build trust among the local populations. This multilateralism is one of the strengths of UN peacekeeping forces, which top contributors consist of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.[27] The USG, however, generally conducts operations either unilaterally with token international contingents or in partnership with European powers. Thus, the DoD should consider tapping the approximately 81,000 troops trained and equipped through the Department of State's Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) for future operations.[28]

Second, clearly articulating the intention to withdraw can alleviate concerns over American motivations of economic and competitive security self-interests. As scholar David Edelstein discovered, "occupation is likely to generate less opposition when the occupying power makes a credible guarantee that it will withdraw and return control to an indigenous government in a timely manner."[29] The USG should thus set withdrawal benchmarks contingent on the behavior of the population in the area of operation. This provides a positive incentive for the local government to cooperate with U.S. forces while depriving belligerents of a date for planning post-withdrawal hostilities. This approach, for instance, succeeded during the Allied occupation of Italy where U.S.-led forces granted gradual autonomy to southern provinces, successfully incentivizing cooperative behavior in the country's northern region.[30]

Third, the USG should push local populations to take control of their governing institutions, which would serve as an important signal of American intentions to withdraw. Capacity building did not take place until very late in the colonial era, and some stability operations failed to conduct this task effectively. One of deficiencies with the UN's reconstruction effort in East Timor was the fact that international personnel essentially administered the nascent country until the withdrawal.[31] The USG can avoid this problem and further distinguish its stability operations from imperial adventures by focusing resources on capacity building to facilitate the fastest possible transfer.

Fourth, the USG should seek to incorporate indigenous socio-political structures to strengthen newly-formed institutions. The United States in fact has already adopted this strategy with considerable success during the post-World War II occupations of Germany and Japan. The U.S. occupational authorities allowed Germans to establish local tribunals known as *Spruchkammern* which, according to RAND Corporation scholars, "eliminated remaining support for the return of [the Nazi] regime."[32] In Japan, General Douglas MacArthur made the prudent decision to keep in place Emperor Hirohito who subsequently toured the country urging citizens to support the occupation's objectives.[33]

Finally, USG civilian agencies should take the lead in capacity building. Being the primary tool of conquest during imperial adventures, the military's involvement in civilian governing reinforces the image of imperialism. The U.S. military, however, is often relegated to this work due to the acute lack of resources in civilian agencies. The Foreign Operations budget (Department of State, USAID, and other international programs) increased 40.9 percent to $51.7 billion in FY2010 but still pales in comparison to DoD's $663.7 billion budget.[34] The USG took an important step in improving its civilian capacity with the establishment of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization in 2004. An equally important step will be the implementation of—with fiscal support from Congress—the conflict management reorganization outlined in Department of State's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review.[35]

Conclusion

The fundamental differences between the past's imperial adventures and today's stability operations are clear. Perhaps the most

important difference lies in the fact that imperialism was largely pursued for the economic and competitive security gains of great powers while stability operations have a central grounding in humanitarianism. Given the trauma of the colonial experience for many developing countries, however, these populations are also very conscious of the commonalities between both types of operations. This creates challenges for implementers that must be addressed.

Implementers can overcome these challenges by adjusting their strategies and tactics. The USG in particular should partner with developing countries, provide a credible guarantee of withdrawal, push for local self-government, strengthen its own civilian capacity, and emphasize indigenous socio-political structures in institution building. While these are not the only steps that could improve the effectiveness of the USG's stability operations, they will significantly increase its likelihood of success.

Conversely, if the USG ignores colonial legacies, the ghosts of empire will continue to haunt its operations. The U.S. military attempted to turn away from unconventional warfare after Vietnam, but the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that it cannot afford to do so again. Afghanistan arguably presents the United States with one of the most challenging and complex engagements in its history. A strong possibility also remains that the United States will have to undertake similar stability operations, albeit at a smaller scale, in the future. For these reasons, addressing the specter of imperialism is an imperative.

[1]Countries that were never colonized include Japan, China, Tibet, Thailand, Persia, Afghanistan, and most of the Arabian Peninsula. It should be noted, however, that Afghanistan fought two wars with imperial Britain, and the British exercised significant influence over the territory. David B. Abernethy, The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires 1415-1980 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 255.
[2]John B. Judis, "Bush's Neo-Imperialist War," The American Prospect, October 22, 2007, accessed October 10, 2010, http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=bushs_neoimperialist_war.
[3]As defined in the U.S. military's Joint Publication 3-0, stability operations encompass "various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief."
[4]Christian Tripodi, "Enlightened Pacification: Imperial Precedents for Current Stabilisation Operations," Defence Studies 10 (2010): 40-74, accessed October 10, 2010, 10.1080/14702430903378009.
[5]U.S. and coalition numbers from "US Forces Order of Battle," GlobalSecurity.org, accessed October 17, 2010, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_orbat.htm. Great Britain deployment number from "Reports: UK to begin withdrawing troops," CNN, February 21, 2007, accessed October 17, 2010, http://www.cnn.com/2007/ WORLD/meast/02/20/uk.iraq.troops/index.html.
[6]Michelle Parker, "The Role of the Department of Defense in Provincial Reconstruction Teams," RAND Corporation, Testimony presented before House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, September 5, 2007.
[7]Tripodi, 56.
[8]Kim Sengupta, "Petraeus's first act is to establish local militias to fight the Taliban," The Independent, July 16, 2010, accessed October 10, 2010, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/petraeuss-first-act-is-to-establish-militias-to-fight-the-taliban-2027711.html.
[9]Kimberly Zisk Marten, Enforcing the Peace: Learning from the Imperial Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 65.
[10]Adam Hochschild, King Leopold's ghost: a story of greed, terror, and heroism in Colonial Africa (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).
[11]Marten, 83.
[12]William J. Bernstein, A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World (New York: Grove Press, 2008).
[13]Abernethy, 187.
[14]Steve Schifferes, "US names 'coalition of the willing'," BBC News, March 18, 2003, accessed October 11, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2862343.stm.
[15]Marten, 61.
[16]Associated Press, "Cost details of the deployment to Bosnia," USA Today, February 14, 2010, accessed October 11, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/index/bosnia/nbos017.htm.
[17]"Foreign Trade Statistics," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed October 11, 2010. http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4793.html#2010.
[18]Vice President Al Gore, for instance, expressed deep concern to President Bill Clinton about the atrocities taking place in Bosnia. See David Halberstam, War in a Time of Peace (New York: Scribner, 2001), 330-331.
[19]Marten, 78.
[20]Donald R. Wright, The World and a Very Small Place in Africa, Second Edition (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).
[21]Hochschild.
[22]Marten, 62.

[23]Leslie Evens, "War on Terrorism Looks Too Much Like a War on Islam, Arab Scholar Warns," UCLA International Institute, January 27, 2003, accessed October 15, 2010, http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp? parentid=3010.
[24]"Unser engster Partner ist Deutschland," Frankfurter Allgemeine, June 18, 2010, accessed October 16, 2010. http://www.faz.net/s/Rub0CCA23BC3D3C4C78914F85BED3B53F3C/Doc~EC6AA84A29E36487D860188A2EB25E09F~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html.
[25]Roberto Bellone, "Bosnia: The Limits of Neocolonial Rule," Foreign Policy in Focus, August 5, 2004, accessed October 16, 2010. http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/916/bosnia.html?breadcrumb=/experts/199/ graham_allison%3Fback_url%3D%252Fpublication%252F1730%252Ftime_to_heal_usturkey_wounds%253Fbreadcrumb%253D%25252Fpublication%25252Fby_type%25252Farticles_and_opeds%26back_text%3DBack%2520to%2520publication.
[26]James Dobbins et al., America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2003), 103.
[27]Monthly Summary of Contributors of Military and Civilian Police Personnel 2006 – 2009," United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed October 16, 2010. http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/06-08.shtml.
[28]"U.S. Department of State Surpasses Target of 75,000 Trained Peacekeepers by 2010," Department of State, accessed October 16, 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/126396.htm.
[29]David M. Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," International Security Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004): 51.
[30]Ibid., 68.
[31]Marten, 55.
[32]Dobbins et al., 14.
[33]Ibid., 39.
[34]Fiscal Year 2010 Federal Budget, "A New Era of Responsibility: Renewing America's Promise," Office of Management and Budget, http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy10/pdf/fy10-newera.pdf.
[35]"2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review," The Washington Post, November 2010, accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/state-dept-development-aid-review.html.

Special Acknowledgement:

The author would like to thank Dr. Nora Bensahel for her contributions to this article. She provided valuable feedback on an early draft, and many of the article's themes were gleaned from her lectures at Georgetown University.