

The next empire

BY ROBERT COOPER

The world began the 20th century riddled with empires and ended it with none. But can we do without them? The weak still need the strong and the strong still have an interest in an orderly world. For this, the nation state is not enough. In Europe, empire is returning in a new co-operative form

IMPERIALISM, EMPIRE, IMPERIAL: at worst these words have become a form of abuse; at best they sound merely old fashioned, historical curiosities. Empire, it seems, is history. The empires have gone, leaving behind some ruins, some laws, some coins and the occasional road.

Empire is indeed history. Almost all that we know of history, from Sumeria through Babylon, Egypt, the Assyrian empire, through Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, through the Chinese dynasties, the Carolingian empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the Mongol empire, the Mogul empire, the Habsburg empire, the Spanish, Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, and German empires to the Soviet empire, plus many that we have forgotten, all of this suggests that the history of the world is the history of empire.

Or should we say "was"? One of the most remarkable changes in a remarkable century is the almost total disappearance of empires. The world began the 20th century covered in great empires and ended without a single one. With their defeat in the first world war, the Austro-Hungarian, German, Russian and Ottoman empires broke up. Kemal Atatürk embraced the end of the Ottoman empire as a chance to create a modern, national (and European) Turkish state. So, earlier, had the foundation of nation states in Italy, Norway and, up to a point, Germany, been seen as the path of modernisation. Atatürk imposed the reading of the Koran in Turkish, echoing the events of centuries earlier when Luther's Bible had begun the awakening of a German national consciousness.

Not only did the first world war destroy two European empires but, with Woodrow Wilson's 14 points, it established the principle of national self-determination and created a band of nation states in central Europe out of the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Most of them

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turned out to be weak and poorly governed. Following the war, the Irish Free State was established, ending centuries of British rule and in the 1930s the US applied the principle of self-determination to itself and gave independence to the Philippines.

The next great burst of decolonisation came with the second world war where the defeats of Britain, France and the Netherlands by Japan removed the aura of western superiority—already badly shaken in India by Gandhi—which had sustained their eastern empires. The French, who had acquired their empire by arms, fought for it; the British, who had acquired theirs partly by accident, got out. The result was, in the end, the same. African decolonisation followed as self-determination caught on abroad and the costs of empire grew at home. In 1974, the Portuguese revolution—which grew out of the costs of colonial wars—led to the end of that empire. And finally, in 1989, the end of the cold war brought the collapse of the Soviet Union's external empire, followed shortly thereafter by the end of Russia's internal empire.

Decolonisation was a last act of imperialism. At the heart of imperialism is the imposition of alien laws and systems of administration. Decolonisation left former colonies with nation state structures that were, in many cases, quite foreign to their traditions. Some peoples and parts of the world have long histories of alien rule: for them at least decolonisation may have been more profoundly imperialist than empire—a last legacy from the last imperial masters.

Have we seen the last of empire? It is hard to tell. Sometimes one can only identify something as an empire after it has broken up. Now that it has separated we can identify British rule in Ireland as imperialist; but had Gladstone's campaign for home rule succeeded, Ireland might be a part of a rather different Britain instead of a former colony. How China, India and Indonesia are seen in future will depend on how they are governed and what happens to them.

The world of empires which dates back as far as

we can remember and which was thriving in 1900 has, 100 years later, become a world of nation states. Compared with empire, the nation state is a new concept; the small state began to emerge with the Renaissance and the nation became a major political factor only in the 19th century. For most of the period since, the nation state has been confined to a limited part of the globe. Not by accident, this has also been the most dynamic part. The non-existence of empire, however, is historically without precedent. The question is whether this can last.

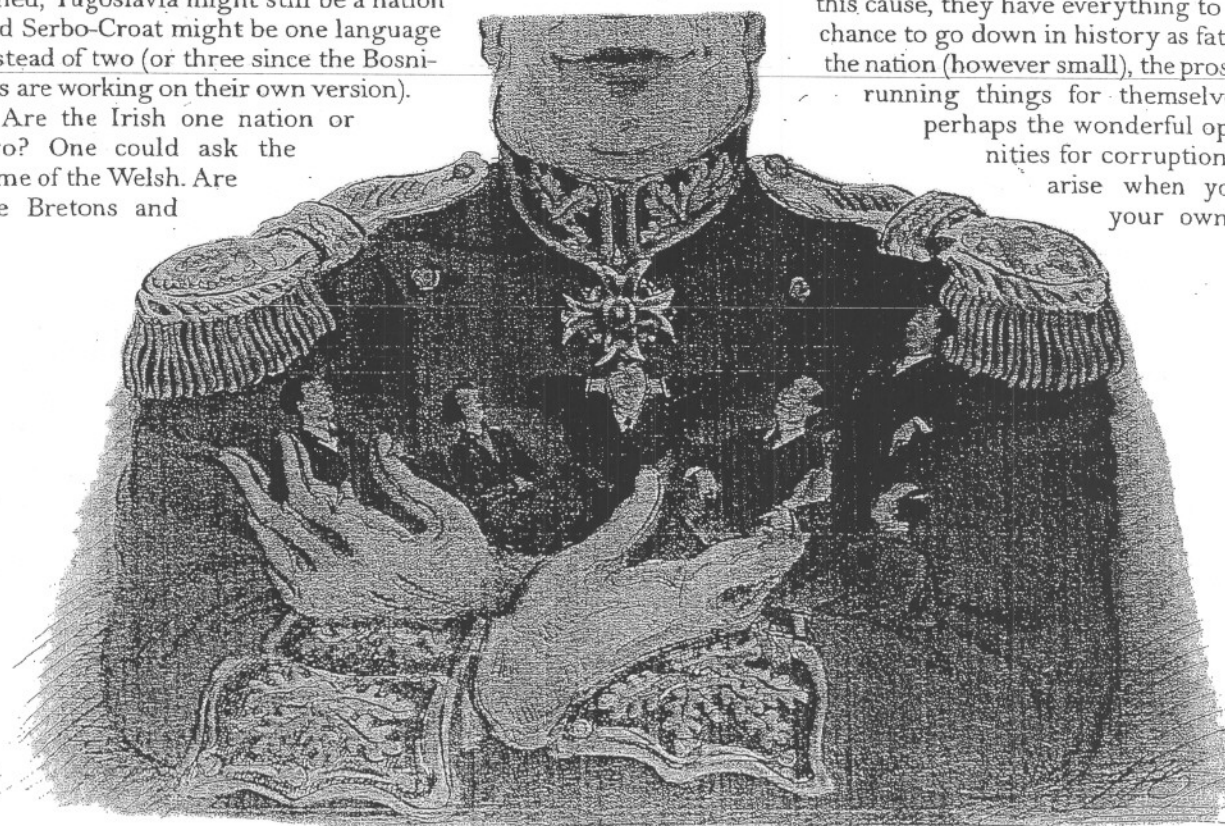
There are both theoretical and practical reasons for thinking that it won't. The nation state has proved a powerful engine for growth and modernisation, but that does not make it a good basis on which to organise the entire world. The theoretical reason is that there is no clear definition of the nation. If nations were fixed, like geographical features, we could draw a map of the world which neatly divided people up into nation states, just as the dynastic monarchs of Europe once hoped to contain their territorial states within natural frontiers. Unfortunately, nations are not like that: "Now we have created Italy," said Cavour after he had driven the Austrians out, "next we must create Italians" (at the time only 2 per cent of the population spoke modern-day Italian). The Yoruba language—and in a sense the Yoruba people—was the creation of the missionaries who standardised local dialects in a translation of the Bible (just as Luther had done in Germany). Nigeria itself is, of course, a creation of the European powers at the Congress of Berlin. Had it been better governed, Yugoslavia might still be a nation and Serbo-Croat might be one language instead of two (or three since the Bosnians are working on their own version).

Are the Irish one nation or two? One could ask the same of the Welsh. Are the Bretons and

the Basques, the Catalans, the Cockneys, nations? Are the Arab people a nation? How many nations are there in South Africa? Even the Japanese, who have a powerful national myth and identity, might have broken up if the Meiji restoration had turned out differently. The examples are endless but the conclusion is clear: the nation is often the creation of the state (and especially of the ministry of education).

If the nation is created by the state—even some of the time—then we cannot say that states should be defined by nations. The consequences of this circularity are beginning to become apparent as more and more groups decide that they would like to break away and form new states. Who is to tell them that they cannot? On top of this is the practical problem that ethnic and linguistic groups do not always exist in neat geographical packages. Nation states almost always contain minorities. A state which is based on nationality and national identity has a natural tendency to exclude minorities. Taken to its hideous conclusion, it will try to eliminate them. Why should the minorities not be granted self-determination, since by its self-proclaimed definition the nation state makes clear that they do not really belong to it?

Today's world frowns on repressive measures against groups seeking self-determination. There will often be a good market for their views. Most people, quite naturally, dislike governments; it may not therefore be difficult to convince them that they would be better off with a different government in a different state—something closer to them and to their ethnic identity. As for the politicians promoting this cause, they have everything to gain: a chance to go down in history as fathers of the nation (however small), the prospect of running things for themselves and perhaps the wonderful opportunities for corruption which arise when you run your own state.



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Internationally, you can pose on the world stage; and at the UN you are—in theory at least—the equal of the US. What is there to stop the creation of an ever greater number of ever smaller states?

Paradoxically, growing economic integration makes political disintegration easier. In the days of national economies and protective tariffs, it was important to be big; but in a borderless world, what difference does it make? Being small does have costs: administration is more expensive and security is less certain. But the first is not always easily visible and the second may not be a convincing argument either to people who live in a peaceful part of the world or to those who, as minorities, feel insecure even in their own state. In the last 50 years, the number of states has increased dramatically: 51 signed the UN Charter in 1945; today it has 189 members. It will be surprising if we do not see more in the next 50 years.

The practical problem with a world of nation states is that many of the post-colonial states have weak national identities, weak political institutions and weak economies. Some of these states—especially in Africa—are near collapse. Others in central Asia, south-east Asia or the south Pacific do not look healthy. In many cases one would have to say that self-government and self-determination have failed. What should we do? In the past, the solution would have been colonisation. But today there are no colonial powers willing to take on the job. In some respects the need for outside authority is even greater today than it was in, say, the 19th century. Then the peoples of Africa and Asia were organised in a reasonably stable manner in traditional societies based on family and tribe. Those bonds were irreparably damaged by western traders and missionaries; whatever was left has now been destroyed by education, ideology and television. There is no going back. But going forward is not easy either: collapsing states are awash with guns, law and order breaks down and government begins to resemble organised crime. Some writers refer to “the new middle ages.” With the breakdown of order, the possibility of attracting foreign investment falls to zero.

Those who can get themselves into the global economy do well—prosperity helps stability and stability attracts investment. Those who are left out fall into a vicious circle: economic failure undermines government; weak government means disorder and that means falling investment. In the 1950s, South Korea had a lower GNP per head than Zambia: the one has achieved membership of the global economy, the other has not. Is it a surprise then that the top 20 per cent of the world now earns 86 per cent of world income and the bottom 20 per cent gets only 1 per

cent? In 1820, when the 19th century colonial expansion began, the top 20 per cent were earning only three times the income of the bottom 20 per cent. We should probably expect that this gap will widen.

The weak states of the post-imperial world are disastrous for those who live in them and are bad for the rest of us. There is no need to dwell here on the mutilations in Sierra Leone, the oppression of women and many others in Afghanistan, the genocidal violence in the Balkans or the daily insecurity and injustice in many other countries. Such conditions make life a terrifying experience for those who live under them. For those who are outside, there are risks too: risks for investors and risks for neighbours. The risks for neighbours are especially important. The domino theory was false for communism, but it may be true for chaos. Sierra Leone destabilises Liberia (and vice-versa), Afghanistan helps destabilise central Asia.

ALL THE conditions seem to be there for a new imperialism. There are countries which need an outside force to create stability (recently in Sierra Leone a rally called for the return of British rule). There are metropolitan countries which want stability so that they can trade. And though there are fewer missionaries today there is a new class of imperial auxiliaries in the form of NGOs

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trying to help people who need it and preaching human rights—the secular religion of today's world.

If the rich took over the world when they were only three times richer than the poor, why do they not do so again when they are 86 times richer? The answer is that the very ideas that have made them rich—the ideas of free exchange, free speech and the rule of law—are anti-imperialist. (To reverse the remark by Macbeth's porter on drink, bourgeois values promote the performance but take away the desire.) The bourgeois values of Deng Xiaoping: “It is glorious to be rich,” define success in terms of purchasing power, not subjecting people.

Nor do today's poor wish to be colonised, except perhaps briefly under extreme circumstances. In the 19th century, a number of countries offered themselves up to imperial powers. Since then the spread of western ideas—liberty, equality and fraternity—has disrupted traditional societies so they have difficulty in governing themselves, and has also made them unwilling to accept foreign domination. Both the supply and the demand for imperialism has dried up.

And yet a system in which the strong protect the weak, in which the efficient and well governed export stability and liberty, in which the world is open for investment and growth—all of these seem eminently desirable. If empire has not often been like that, it has

frequently been better than the chaos and barbarism that it replaced. There have even been times and places—the Roman and Athenian empires are distant enough for us to see things in perspective—where it has helped the spread of civilisation.

But in a world of human rights and bourgeois values, a new imperialism will in any case have to be very different from the old. Perhaps we can begin to discern its outlines. It has two forms: the imperialism of globalisation and the imperialism of neighbours. Both, in keeping with the times, are voluntary.

Empire is about control. It involves control above all over domestic affairs (academic writers contrast this with hegemony which consists of control of foreign affairs only). That is why interference in domestic affairs is so resented—it represents a taint on independence that reeks of imperialism. And yet it is precisely domestic affairs that need guidance if countries in trouble are to find their way back into the global economy, attract investment and return to prosperity. The conditions which the IMF sets for its loans are almost all about domestic economic and political management. In return for accepting these conditions, states which are in danger of falling behind and dropping out of the global economy receive help, not just from the IMF but from the governments of the rich and from Wall Street. These days, aid programmes are less often about dams and roads. It is generally recognised instead that having a good government and administration is essential to development. Many programmes are, therefore, about the way in which the country is organised and governed—so called good governance provisions.

How different is this from what Lord Cromer and others did in Egypt? From 1875, a representative of British bondholders controlled the revenue of the Egyptian government, while representatives of the French government controlled expenditure. Foreign debt funding was overseen by an international committee, who effectively decided how much foreign exchange the government should be allowed. Does this not sound remarkably like a rather strict IMF programme? Perhaps, but there is one vital difference: when a new Egyptian government threatened to ignore the programme, Britain did not renegotiate the programme or even cancel the external financial support, as the IMF might do today. Instead it sent General Wolseley and 31,000 troops to restore government, order and, of course, financial discipline.

Today's voluntary imperialism may place advisers in key ministries as Cromer did in Egypt. But there is no violence, only money. No one has to accept these programmes. Those who do may well benefit. Today's imperial intervention is also limited in time and in extent. Since it is voluntary, perhaps it is wrong to call it imperialism at all. It represents not so much a loss of sover-

eighty, but a temporary loan of sovereignty. Nevertheless, the relationships are similar to those of empire: it is a relationship between strong and weak; and it is about the organisation of domestic affairs.

The classic writers on imperialism—Lenin, Schumpeter, Hobson—associated it with economic interests. Either trade followed the flag or the flag followed trade, or both. So it is no surprise that in a global economy there are global institutions—anonymous and objective as such institutions tend to be—which make the world safe for investment. And since we live in a post-imperial age, the control which they exercise is light, temporary and voluntary.

The second form of the new imperialism is that of neighbours. Mismanagement and instability in places where your companies wish to invest money is inconvenient. Instability in your neighbourhood can have much more serious consequences. The remarkable thing in today's world is that the US, in spite of a position of dominance—military, political, commercial, cultural—unequalled since Rome, is not the world's leading imperial power. Having few neighbours, the US is interested primarily in the lighter form of the new imperialism—assistance through multilateral organisations. Mexico is doing well and Nafta may help it do better. There are worries in the Caribbean and Colombia, but for now the US, in spite of its enormous wealth and power, can afford not to take the risks or pay the costs of some form of imperial enterprise—though it is possible that an American free trade area could develop in this direction.

With Europe it is different. On the EU's eastern borders are a large number of recently decolonised states. Many are making progress, but anyone who wants to see the risk of weak states has only to look at the Balkans. Here, for the last ten years, we have seen a mixture of misgovernment, ethnic violence and crime (the three often being indistinguishable) which not only offends the conscience of the rich but also brings costs for the stable parts of Europe. The Balkans are on the transit route for drugs and a centre for smuggling. Smuggling people, in particular, is a major new industry: the Chinese who were found dead in the docks at Dover, arrived there via Belgrade. Violence reached its extremity in Bosnia and Kosovo, both of which are now effectively UN protectorates. In each case, there is a UN High Representative who has more or less plenipotentiary powers. It is no surprise that both the High Representatives are Europeans. Europe provides most of the aid that keeps Bosnia and Kosovo running and most of the soldiers (though the US presence is an indispensable stabilising factor). In a further unprecedented move, the EU has offered unilateral free market access to the countries of the former Yugoslavia for all products including most agricultural produce.

It is not just soldiers that come from



the international community, it is police, judges, prison officers, central bankers and others. A whole team of European officials is creating a Bosnian customs administration. Elections are organised and monitored by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Local police are financed by the UN. As auxiliaries to this effort—in many areas indispensable to it—are over a hundred NGOs.

The Balkans is an extreme case, but it illustrates the costs of instability turning into real conflict. In the rest of the area to its east, the EU is engaged in a programme which will eventually lead to massive enlargement. From Stettin on the Baltic to Tirana on (or near) the Adriatic, every country between Vienna and Moscow wants to join the EU and Nato. To do this they are rewriting their laws and constitutions and reorganising their military. Some have hardly begun and may not yet understand what is required to join; but others have made good progress. The EU negotiations cover agriculture, industry, transport, environment, competition policy, monetary policy, foreign affairs and much else. In the past, empires

have imposed their laws and systems of government. In this case, no one is imposing anything but a voluntary movement of self-imposition is taking place. The countries concerned are not unstable but without the objective of EU membership and the support they have received from the EU, some of them might have been at risk. It is probably good, on balance, that a set of western rules and norms is available off the peg. While you are a candidate for EU membership you have to accept what is given—as subject countries once did. But the prize is that once you are inside you will have a voice in the commonwealth. If the process is a kind of voluntary imperialism, the end state might be described as co-operative empire. "Commonwealth" might not be a bad name.

MANY PARTS of Europe have lived longer and perhaps more happily in an imperial framework than as nation states. The Balkans with its patchwork of ethnicities has known little else. Belgium, Germany and Italy all flourished under one form or another of imperial suzerainty—in the case of Germany this came close to being a co-operative empire. Admittedly the imperial periods were associated with decayed and rigid aristocratic regimes; and the nation states that swept them away brought modernisation, dynamism and democracy. But the clarity and vigour of the nation state also brought bloodshed—both in wars among themselves and in the way they handled their minorities. Armenians, Albanians and Kurds lived more safely in the Ottoman empire than in its more modern successors. In those times,

the empire could sometimes function as a third party, above the ethnic groups and keeping the peace between them. Today that role too belongs to the international community, which is invited in, in the form of monitors or peacekeeping forces.

In his classic work on empires, Michael Doyle argues that the successful empires were those which created an imperial bureaucracy that governed for the empire as a whole and not just for the metropole (Rome did this; the British empire did not).

"A persistent empire presupposes imperial bureaucratic coordination and transnational integration in the political, economic and cultural spheres. This integration can merge the metropole and the periphery, as Caracalla legally integrated the two in the Roman empire in 212. At this point the empire no longer exists and the many peoples have become one. In the case of Rome the many were assimilated into a common despotism, but the continuing attraction of the otherwise reprehensible international domination of empire lies in the possibility that all might be assimilated to a common liberty. Empires continue to attract

as a road to peace, but imperialism holds a double tragedy. First, modern empires, resting upon a metropolitan, ethnic nationalism, may not be able to travel the whole way to integration. Second, any extensive empire, to survive long enough for integration

to occur must cross the Augustan threshold to imperial bureaucratic rule—and bureaucratizing the metropole destroys participatory government. Liberty and empire emerge, both analytically and historically, as opposites, for the periphery from the beginning and for the metropole in the end."

The attraction of the EU is that, if we can get it right, it might just offer a way out of this dilemma. Conceived as a state, the EU is not merely unattractive—it is unworkable. But as a co-operative empire, a commonwealth, in which each has a share in the government in which no single country dominates and in which the governing principles are not ethnic but legal; conceived in these terms it might just work. The lightest of touches will be required from the centre; the "imperial bureaucracy" must be under control, accountable and the servant, not the master of the commonwealth. Such an institution must be as dedicated to liberty and democracy as its constituent parts. Like Rome, this Europe would provide its citizens with some laws, some coins and the occasional road. None of this will be easy but perhaps it is possible to imagine a future Europe, with 30 or so members, as a modernised, democratic, co-operative empire offering both a road to peace and the possibility of assimilation in a common liberty. It is, at the least, a noble dream. ■

Conceived as a state the
European Union will not work.
But as a co-operative, voluntary
empire it has a chance
