

America and Empire: Thoughts on a Debate

by Alex Cooley

In a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, [Alex Motyl](#) posed the question, “Do past empires hold lessons for U.S. foreign policy today?” In a review of two new books (an edited volume by Craig Calhoun and a study by Charles Maier), he concluded that “efforts [to show that they do] yield little payoff.”

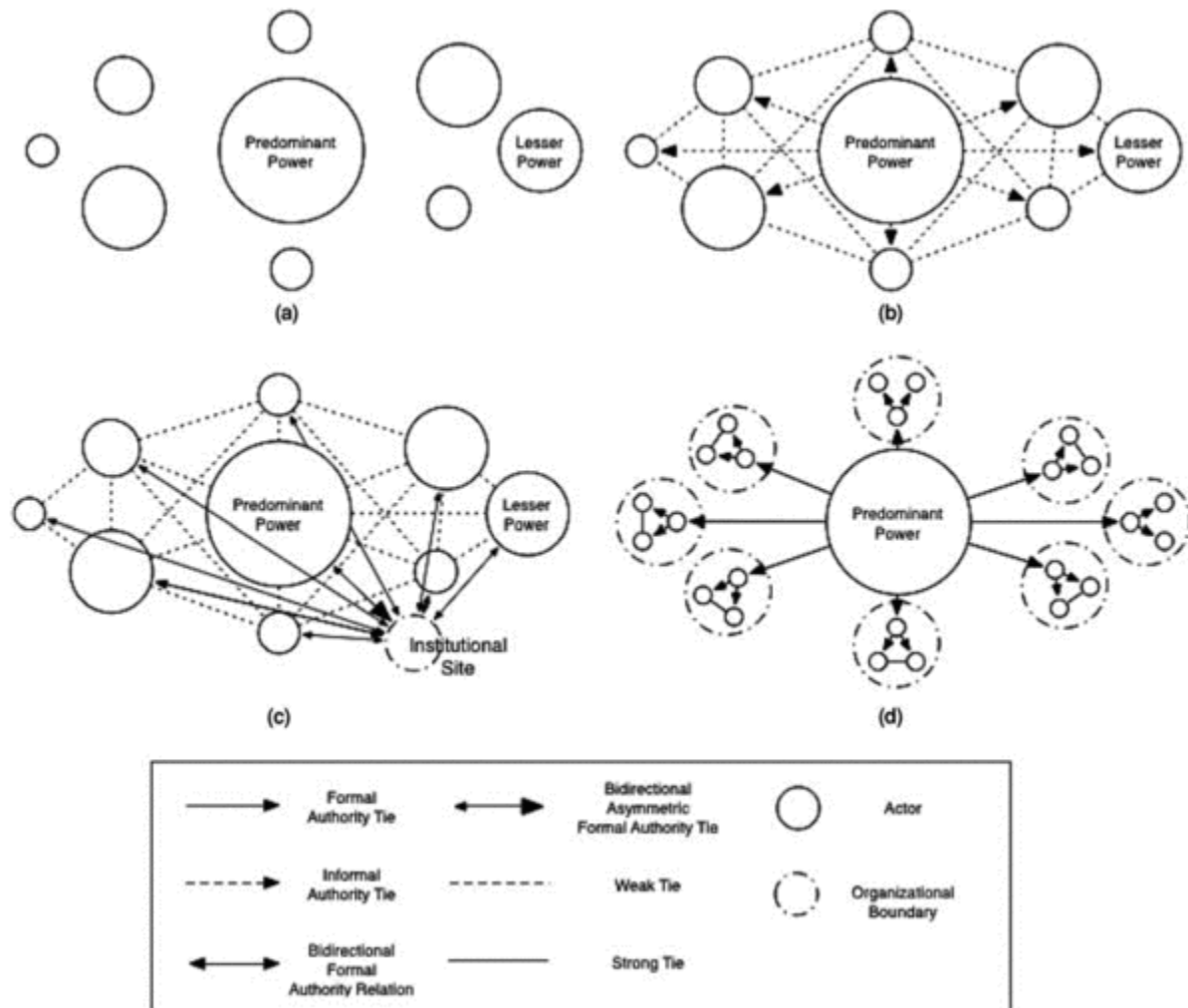
To be sure, the use of the term “empire” has become commonplace in descriptions of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. Yet, save for a small group of exceptions, American political scientists until now have mostly neglected the *theoretical* investigation of empires and the dynamics of imperial relations. Filling a massive gap in the literature, political scientists Dan Nexon and Thomas Wright’s new article “[What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate](#)” published in the May 2007 *American Political Science Review* is one of the most thought-provoking and policy relevant scholarly articles to appear in recent years in the field. The article builds on much of Nexon’s previous work on the network properties of early-modern empires, but applies these insights to some of the central problems confronting today’s U.S. foreign policy community.

Central to Nexon and Wright’s analysis is the contention that the term “empire” has been stripped of much of its analytical content and, instead, is now used (and over-used) to describe the aggressive or domineering foreign policy actions of the United States. Accordingly, the terms “empire” and “imperial” have become fused with normative connotations about unchecked expansionism. Consequently, policymakers disdain the term’s implications, while they ignore coming to terms with the actual political logics and trade-offs produced by an imperial political order. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s now infamous quote that “we don’t do empire” comes to mind, although some now would add the word “well” to the end of that particular musing.

In a theoretical tour-de-force, the Nexon and Wright suspend the current normative use of the term in order to explore the actual structural or network characteristics of imperial systems. In doing so, they upend many of the assumptions of the international relations discipline.

The authors propose that two structural properties distinguish imperial systems from other types of hierarchical political orders such as unipolar systems or hegemonic orders. First, empires are systems where a central power exercises control over peripheral polities indirectly through intermediaries or “informal” rule. Second, these imperial arrangements or contracts differ across a central power’s different peripheries. So the terms of governance of imperial rule over “Periphery A” are not the same as those over peripheries B or C. In this way, the authors distinguish imperial rule from a federal arrangement under which all contracts with subordinate units are equal. In turn, the various peripheries of an imperial system remain segmented or walled off from one another as their relations are mediated and managed by the core power. In visual terms,

imperial systems resemble a rimless hub and spokes of a wheel, rimless because the individual peripheries at the end of each spoke remain segmented.



This simple network analytic has three major consequences for how international relations theorists should think about systemic dynamics. First, traditional balance-of-power concerns, the supposedly timeless practice of states playing power politics against each other, are supplanted by divide-and-rule dynamics. That is, empires seek to control, manage and extract resources from their peripheries, but must also prevent the formation of collective ties among peripheries that might become the basis for future anti-imperial collective action.

Second, the axis of relevant political relations shifts from interstate relations to intersocietal within peripheries, as imperial centers empower intermediaries to govern local populations according to specific markers of social status and hierarchy. From the center's perspective, there is a trade-off between controlling the actions of an

intermediary (or the “principal-agent” problem), while allowing them to retain local legitimacy as a ruler.

Third, empires face perennial problems of legitimating their control, especially when they try to maintain authority across a wide audience of multiple peripheries that have very different demands and expectations from the center. Thus, a justification of rule to one periphery may completely contradict the rationale given to another. Accordingly, imperial centers must be mindful of their mixed messages or, more precisely, the structural capacity for peripheries to realize they are receiving mixed messages. As the authors observe, “Multivocal signaling is most effective when the two audiences either cannot or do not communicate with one another. (p. 264).” All of these theoretical claims are illustrated with loads of fascinating anecdotes drawn from such seemingly disparate empires as the British East India Company, the Mongols, the Hapsburgs and the Soviet Union.

The “real world” implications of all of this rigorous theorizing are too numerous to summarize, but let me flag four important issues that the Nexon and Wright model raises.

First, this account of international relations provides a more robust account of Cold War politics than traditional balance-of-power accounts that focus just on the inter-state bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Nexon and Wright model explains both great power competition and why the United States and Soviet Union took such pains to intervene in the internal affairs of peripheral countries and reinforce the client status of allies (the Shah in Iran, Marcos in the Philippines, Park in South Korea) by providing them with private goods. Cold War politics exhibited both balance-of-power and divide and rule dynamics, even though the legitimating strategy of the latter was one of systemic anti-Communism.

Second, in terms of the Nexon/Wright model, America’s actual resort to imperial governance since the end of the Cold War has been declining, not increasing. Of course, the post 9/11 military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have drawn more attention to the practice of “American Empire” and the authors acknowledge that “empire”-like qualities of continuing U.S. intervention in these countries. But the more counterintuitive point is that America’s use of overtly imperial systems is actually not as widespread as it was during the 1960s and 1970s.

One major reason for this decline is that globalization – contra the claims of many globalization critics – undermines the conditions necessary for effective imperial management by the center. Today, imperial powers can no longer monopolize globalizing processes such as transnational information flows, media broadcasts, NGO activity and economic exchange. Such transnational flows undercut the informational firewalls that imperial managers have traditionally erected between their peripheries to maintain segmentation and prevent collective action. For example, Al Jazeera and other Middle Eastern cable news networks can instantly and effectively undermine U.S. legitimation strategies regarding its Middle East policy by broadcasting daily images of how America and its political clients routinely disregard human rights concerns and democratic ideals.

The contradictions of multivocal legitimation strategies are more quickly, and effectively, exposed in our global era.

The U.S. experience with Uzbekistan is a good case in point. To support its military campaign in Afghanistan, the United States established a military base in southern Uzbekistan in fall 2001 and signed a security cooperation agreement with the Uzbek government. Under its terms, the United States aided and armed Uzbek security services in exchange for basing rights. However, it turned out that the Uzbek government had little interest in adhering to its human rights obligations and used its international support as a partner in the war on terror to eradicate all forms of domestic opposition, not just Islamists with ties to al-Qaeda.

The most egregious of these actions was the so-called [Andijan massacre](#) in May 2005 when troops that were dispatched by the Uzbek Ministry of the Interior killed hundreds of demonstrators in the eastern city of Andijan. Following these events, the cross-periphery dissonance between the justifications for promoting democratic state-building in Iraq and Afghanistan, and supporting the heavy-handed actions of the Uzbek regime became an international embarrassment to U.S. policymakers. Even [William Kristol](#), editor of the hawkish neo-conservative *Weekly Standard*, pointed out that the administration's Uzbek policy simply was no longer compatible with the public logic of America's involvement in the Middle East or its support of the colored revolutions in the other former Soviet states. In the end, the United States military was shortly after [evicted from its military base](#), as the Uzbek government grew increasingly concerned that U.S. officials were actually intent on fomenting democratic change. Multivocal signaling, in the Uzbek case, delegitimized U.S. relations with the Middle East, but it also lessened American credibility with the Uzbek government.

Again, the analytical point here is not that the United States is hypocritical in the conduct of its external relations; rather, it is that traditional "multivocal" appeals and legitimating strategies can no longer function effectively in a global setting where contradictory justifications cannot be restricted to specific peripheries and political clients.

Third, Nexon and Wright correctly focus our attention on the formal structures of hierarchy operating in the contemporary international system. But we should be aware that states and international actors often employ a mixture of different types of hierarchical organizational forms, some of which require intermediaries and others which are more direct. Thus, Iraqi reconstruction has been delegated to intermediary private corporations and contractors, most of them American, however the U.S. military continues to directly play the major security function within the country. Moreover, some states may also find themselves at the periphery of multiple "imperial centers" and their dictates. The former Communist countries of East Europe may be a case in point, as they implement both the conditions and expectations laid out by the EU while they integrate themselves into the security network of the United States (including its overseas basing network and/or global missile defense shield).

The fourth – and most unsavory – implication of the Nexon/Wright model concerns what an “effective” U.S. strategy *would* look like in Iraq. The authors convincingly point to some of the control problems that using unreliable intermediaries in Iraq has generated for the United States. But their own analytic scheme points to the broader problem inherent in current U.S. efforts to preserve Iraqi unity while maintaining a political balance among Iraq’s factions in a quasi-democratic setting.

In fact, the extreme implication of the Nexon/Wright model for U.S. policymakers would be to more vigorously pursue “divide-and-rule” policies in Iraq instead of its contradictory nation-building policies of “unite and rule.” This would mean, practically, to empower or even openly arm Shiite and Kurdish factions against the Sunni minority and to license such action in exchange for American patronage. Now, to be clear, the authors do not advocate such a policy (and nor do I), but some [others](#) have, drawing upon this structural imperial logic.

All of this points to the fact that U.S. officials have not learned basic lessons from past imperial experiences. Indeed, the very explosion in the recent use of the term “empire” by critics of U.S. foreign policy merely highlights the failure of the U.S. to adequately manage its imperial cross-pressures and multivocal contradictions. Moreover, from this perspective, the rapid erosion of American legitimacy throughout the world – as evidenced in surveys like the [Pew Survey on Global Attitudes](#) – should be a much more central concern for the current managers of the American Empire than it was for its discredited recent champions.

[Alex Cooley](#) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, author of [Logics of Hierarchy](#) (Cornell University Press, 2005), and also served as 3 Quarks Daily's World Cup 2006 correspondent.