

Empire and Multilateralism: Maintaining Client States During Imperial Decline

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Abstract

In recent years, the position of the United States in the world has sparked numerous debates; among them the sustainability of what is now widely known as the U.S. empire. Positions on this issue vary widely. However, they share a basic assumption: that there is an overarching goal serving to motivate the U.S. resort to military force. Our argument in this paper is that there is no overarching goal, which motivates U.S. resort to force. Instead, U.S. policy is means-oriented, revolving around the acquisition and maintenance of client states. There are a number of means by which client maintenance occurs; some are interventionary and, among the latter, some involve military force, whether in support of clients or against states deemed actual or potential dangers to clients. It follows, then, that the U.S. employs military force for many goals, even if only in a certain limited number of ways. Those ways are rarely unilateral, even today; and thus, although political or resource constraints place limitations on the use of force, the U.S. can call on international organizations and other states for aid. Moreover, the idea of client states is in the process of diffusing, so that U.S. clients can themselves maintain clients, thereby further lowering U.S. costs and enabling clientilism to continue even long past the apogee of U.S. imperial power.

In recent years, the position of the United States in the world has sparked numerous debates; among them the sustainability of what is now widely known as the U.S. empire. Earlier arguments about “imperial overstretch” have been superseded by disagreements over the supposedly unilateral proclivities of the George W. Bush administration, the feasibility of continuing the kind of military activism seen as typical of the U.S. since the end of the cold war, and the dangers such policies may present to the post-1945 liberal order.¹

Positions on each of these issues vary widely. However, they share a basic assumption: that there is an overarching goal serving to motivate the U.S. resort to military force. For some authors, this goal is “permanent military domination of the world”; for others, “on behalf of the American project of creating an open and integrated world.”² Whatever the goal, it can then be used as a criterion against which to assess the success of U.S. policy, its cost-effectiveness, and so forth.

Our argument in this paper is that there is no overarching goal, which motivates U.S. resort to force. Instead, U.S. policy is means-oriented, revolving around the acquisition and maintenance of client states (economic liberalism, for example, is for the most part instantiated in client form). There are a number of means by which client maintenance occurs; some are interventionary and, among the latter, some involve military force, whether in support of clients or against states deemed actual or potential dangers to clients. It follows, then, that the U.S. employs military force for many goals, even if only in a certain limited number of ways.

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A note on format. This paper is designed to provoke discussion; it therefore is short and lacks both detailed examples and a footnote apparatus. It also takes up many of the ideas developed at length in a forthcoming book on client states and intervention.³

Clientilism: An Overview

Although the United States pursues numerous policy goals, those goals are not arrayed in some sort of hierarchy or integrated significantly. They vary over time and

¹ These debates are summarized in our 2004 ISA paper, “Recently Imperial: Assessing Supposed Discontinuities in U.S. Foreign Policy.”

² Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 284; Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 232.

³ David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski, *U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective: Clients, Enemies and Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming, 2005).

space, so that if in a given situation the U.S. is aiming, say, at spreading democracy, in other situations, the goal may instead be to suppress a popular insurgency, or to promote trade agreements. Of course it is possible, as an intellectual exercise, to connect goals to each other and show how they all reflect some broader aim; and it is even possible to find statements by policy makers propounding that aim. But in practice, when one looks at the pattern of recommendations, discussions, and decision implementation instructions for particular situations, this consistency is nowhere to be found.

Consider, for example, U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. For over a century, the U.S. has played a controlling role in that country; but toward what end? At first, it had to do with the construction of an isthmian canal, then with attempting to stabilize the internal politics of the country (via long-term Marine occupation), then with reliance on the Somoza dynasty both in general and, after World War II, as a regional anti-Communist base, then with overthrowing a leftist regime, and recently, with what the State Department in its “background notes” on the country calls “strengthening democratic institutions, stimulating sustainable economic growth, and supporting the health and basic education sectors.” These goals are obviously highly varied and do not admit of a consistent ranking; indeed, there is no evidence that the most recent set of goals was at all relevant, even in a secondary or tertiary fashion, during most of the twentieth century.

(We daresay that the same can be said of U.S. policy toward most, if not all, states, at least those whom American officials do not see as enemies. In this respect, the shifting justifications offered by the current administration with respect to its policy in Iraq are hardly unique. The only difference, in effect, is that Bush and his advisers are clumsier and less diplomatically adept than their predecessors. Certainly their ideological fervor is no less intense than that of Wilson and Bryan toward, say, Mexico; or of Acheson and Nitze toward the Soviet Union; or of Dulles toward China, of Kennedy toward Cuba, of Reagan toward the Sandinistas. Read today, any of their speeches appear just as bloodcurdling and obsessive as do contemporary pronouncements by Cheney, Rumsfeld, and other so-called Vulcans. On the other hand, this ideology is of little predictive value with regard to most issues in most states: knowing, for example, that Dulles and Eisenhower were hostile to communism would not shed much light on their policy during the Suez crisis.)

Not only is there little evidence that U.S. policy is made in pursuit of certain long-term or recurring goals; there is good reason to suspect that it would be completely unfeasible for policy to be made along these lines. In practice, high-level policymaking presents itself as an enormous number of place- and issue-specific problems that have to be solved. Quite apart from the cognitive and bureaucratic difficulties involved in proceeding in some kind of systematic, top-down, overarching-goal-driven fashion, there is a significant practical problem: “translating” from general, long-term principles to the specifics of the problem at hand. In the end, any such translation will end up looking ad hoc.

It is much more reasonable to assume that policy-making proceeds in a cybernetic fashion: concentrating on immediate issues, which have already been framed by the lower-level organizational units responsible for routine management; and searching in a precedent-based manner for ways to solve the problem as such. Problems thus

present themselves as in need of organizational/programmatic solutions: distributing money, training troops, offering a diplomatic trade, and so forth. Existing programs, even if discarded, will serve as a kind of parts bin in which to rummage for solutions. Overarching goals, however heartfeltdly believed in, are as it were stapled onto the solutions that are put together.

Many, though of course not all, of the problems landing on policy makers' desks (or laps) are country-specific in nature. However nice it might be to think about promoting democracy or defeating terrorism or making the world financial markets run more smoothly, in practice there will be a coup d'état (or, more likely, a dangerously popular candidate) to deal with or a report that certain notorious individuals have surfaced in a particular place or an announcement that loan repayments may be suspended. The majority of these problems have to do with countries whose regime (the configuration of political and economic power) the US is supporting and which acquiesces in that support; and so what policy-making means in practice is how to support such client states. By our calculations, there are currently some 81 U.S. client states among the 190 independent states (see the table at the end of this paper). Some of them, like those in Central America and the Caribbean, have been clients since the early 1900s; others, like many of the Western European countries, became U.S. clients shortly after World War II; still others, like Afghanistan and Iraq, only became clients following U.S. occupation in the last few years.

The US policy apparatus is to a great degree organized around the maintenance of client states' regimes. This involves, first, surveilling such states; second, informing Washington of the problems and successes faced or enjoyed by those states; third, formulating policies to solve the problems and build on the successes; and fourth, implementing the policies locally. In general, policies toward clients fall into two categories: routine maintenance, in which normal problems are dealt with (e.g., development issues, marginalization of local adversaries); and interventionary maintenance, in which U.S. officials face what they consider a potential threat to the survival of the regime and have to carry out extraordinary measures, ranging from emergency loans to coups d'état or extended bombing campaigns.

From time to time, U.S. officials identify certain nonclients as enemies, i.e., as fundamentally antipathetic to U.S. policies. These enemies span a wide ideological gamut, from Mexico in the Wilson era to Iran today. Enemies are not only an affront to U.S. policy makers (this is due in part to the fact that some enemies had been U.S. clients; their "loss" is traumatic), but they are considered as posing a potential danger to U.S. clients. Hence the U.S. will try, especially at first, to overthrow the client. This means that there are two types of intervention: that on behalf of clients and that against enemies.

The Role of Military Force

A look at the list of U.S. clients shows that at any given moment, most of them are not subject to intervention. Wealthy clients, such as those in Western Europe, do not need any sort of development aid; they also are capable of paying for their own military equipment; and those military bases they host are less for purposes of protecting them

than of projecting U.S. power elsewhere. Nonetheless, the U.S. still assumes a kind of responsibility for these states, as can be seen to this day by defense arrangements like NATO or cooperative arrangements with Japan. Nor is it the case that U.S. concerns about domestic stability in wealthy countries ceased when the Marshall Plan was wound up. Concern with “Eurocommunism” in the 1970s and 1980s led the U.S. to renewed heightened surveillance of the political scene in Italy and France. (The U.S. role, it must be emphasized, is accepted, if not always happily: most of these countries are proud to cast themselves as “loyal” allies.) On the whole, however, wealthy clients do not cost the U.S. anything.

The situation is obviously different for developing countries, but the costs are still relatively minor (well below 1% of U.S. federal government spending). Apart from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (which we will discuss below), the total foreign assistance budget in fiscal year 2004 was no more than \$21.1 billion (the amount requested in FY 2006 is some \$2 billion more); this includes short-term (non-emergency) relief and long-term development aid, budgetary support to favored clients, concessional arms transfers and military training, anti-narcotics funding, and PL 480 food aid and Ex-Im Bank credits. These funds, for the most part, cover what we have called routine maintenance, although they do include significant budget entries for cases of interventionary maintenance, such as Colombia and the Philippines. As is well known, these sums represent a proportion of GDP (around .15%) well below the 0.7% fixed as an international development assistance target some years back.

These costs, of course, are not the only ones associated with routine maintenance. Some percentage of the Defense Department budget should be added to the totals, principally to cover the salaries of defense attachés and security assistance personnel (the latter are in charge of military training). Other agencies of the U.S. government (e.g., the DEA) also incur costs in running overseas programs, though most of these are relatively minor. Some unknown amount of money does go to the CIA for running routine covert operations (for intelligence gathering and political involvement), but estimates are that this does not exceed more than \$4 billion a year. All told, then, most U.S. clients either do not cost anything to maintain or involve relatively small amounts of money.

This limited financial exposure is facilitated by the considerable provision of aid from third parties. Most U.S. client states receive foreign assistance from various other countries; they also receive significant grants and loans from multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and regional development banks. The United States contributes to multilateral institutions (the contribution is included in the foreign assistance figure discussed above), but the total resource transfer from those institutions in any given year is considerably greater than the amount provided by the U.S. In short, most U.S. client states are maintained in that status, and have been for years, for a relative pittance.

Much the same can be said for most types of interventionary maintenance. Even the most expensive covert operations do not typically run more than a few hundred million dollars (coups are usually much cheaper), and there are never more than a handful of these, at the most, occurring at any given moment. Financial bailout operations, such as occurred in Mexico and East Asia, are potentially much more

expensive, but in fact the loan guarantees often do not need to be drawn on and in any case are put forward jointly with multilateral institutions such as the IMF. As for military assistance, even encadrement, training, and weapons transfers do not cost that much: U.S. operations in Colombia, for example, which is a classic counterinsurgency war, are currently running at around \$780 million a year, all U.S. agencies combined.⁴

As with routine maintenance, many forms of interventionary maintenance can be offloaded onto, or at least offset by, other states. For example, the UN's peacekeeping operation in a longtime U.S. client, Haiti, MINUSTAH, has around 7400 troops and police; the U.S. provides only 28 of those. In another U.S. client, Liberia, comparable figures show 15,775 total forces, with the U.S. contribution being 71. In short, from the point of view of American dollars and American blood, the U.S. is able to maintain most of its clients at a minimal cost.

Of course, such figures do not take into account the enormous costs of the U.S. military, which could in principle be used for direct combat operations if counterinsurgency or peacekeeping operations falter. Certainly one of the possible missions of Southern Command and other unified commands around the world is to engage in combat. However, the cost of the military (again, in purely financial terms) tends to be remarkably constant in terms of its burden on the U.S. economy, showing a gradual, long-term decline from the cold war high-water mark in 1953 (14.2% of gross domestic product) to figures oscillating between a fifth and a fourth of that over the last decade. Spikes in spending are associated with wars (e.g., in Vietnam) and tend not to last for more than a few years; and contrary to received wisdom, the current Iraq war is leading the administration to cut down on other military expenditures.

Two conclusions flow from this. First, if much of the U.S. military can be said to be tied up closely with the U.S. client state empire, then, as a burden on the economy, it does not seem by itself to have much more of a negative impact now than during the boom times of the 1990s or, for that matter, of the mid-1980s or the 1960s. Financial disaster may indeed occur because of the state's fiscal crisis, but this is due much more to tax cuts than to the level of military spending. Second, wars such as in Vietnam or Iraq are affordable, in strictly budgetary terms (manpower problems are different, as of course are political, reputational, and moral costs), provided that they do not occur too frequently. This brings us to the question of how typical Vietnam and Iraq are.

Here it is important to distinguish between U.S. combat operations on behalf of a client and aimed at attacking an enemy. In the case of the former, Vietnam is very much an exception. Most U.S. clients are states that have been around for a while and in which the regime has enough support that it can, with U.S. help, fight an insurgency with a reasonable chance of success. When, as in the cases of Nicaragua and Zaire (and, to some degree, Cuba under Batista), the regime in question is a kleptocracy which conservative forces are unwilling to back (e.g., via death squads), then the U.S. has tended to take its distance rather than commit U.S. military forces. The same goes for regimes confronted by nonviolent popular demonstrations (e.g., Iran, the Philippines, Indonesia): even their most ardent defenders think about coups

⁴ <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/aidtable.htm>

d'état rather than sending U.S. troops. This rather acute sense of what is and is not a "winnable" intervention tends to be sharpened by certain cybernetic features of policy making: typically, use of U.S. forces is proposed as a way of relieving local forces in certain tasks, so that they can concentrate better on others. Since in the above cases, the local forces were manifestly failing across the board, and disintegrating the process, there was no organizational purchase to plan an operation that at least was plausible. Thus, where U.S. officials feel themselves obliged to use military force on behalf of a client, they correctly anticipate a relatively minor operation against a weak foe. Vietnam was a glaring exception precisely because, as Ellsberg pointed out years ago, the surveilling apparatus made it clear that the war would last for years and that the U.S. would need large numbers of forces to counter a strong and competent foe. Since, unlike in the "basket cases" mentioned above, local forces were also considered strong, the U.S. went to war. This combination of factors is practically unique in over 100 years of U.S. clientilism.

In the case of hostile interventions, the situation is somewhat different. Many states considered by the U.S. as enemies have regimes that came to power through revolutionary means; hence they are assessed as a competent foe. The strong U.S. preference is thus to use proxy forces against them, as in the Bay of Pigs and with the contras in Nicaragua or, more recently, in Afghanistan (both in the 1980s against the Soviet Union and, in 2001, against the Taliban). Alternatively, if the enemy is strong and proxies are not present, a policy of harassment and punishment may be resorted to, as against Serbia in Kosovo. If and only if the enemy's forces are assessed as weak, as was the case with Grenada, then it becomes safe for the U.S. to invade.

Note that in the above examples of U.S. combat involvement, the U.S. received backing from other states. In the case of Grenada, the intervention took place at the request of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States and at one time it was contemplated that Venezuela would also send forces. In the case of the Taliban, the U.S. was backed by force offers from numerous countries, as well as by UN resolutions. (This also is true of numerous "friendly" interventions. Even in the case of Kosovo, in which no UN resolution was sought, the U.S. and its NATO allies were able to get a resolution after Milosevic capitulated.) In general, if the U.S. uses combat forces overtly against an enemy regime, it has a strong preference that those forces be supported both bilaterally by other states and multilaterally by regional organizations and, if possible, the UN.

Seen in this manner, the Iraq war of 2003 was absolutely standard. The U.S. duly assembled a "coalition of the willing," even though it was not as large as its 1991 counterpart. The U.S. obtained one resolution from the UN and might well have obtained a second (along with French military participation) had not Bush jumped the gun. Certain objecting states, such as Germany, did nothing to hinder U.S. force transfers to Iraq. After the initial combat was over, the UN passed resolutions tacitly accepting the situation and arranged to play a role in political negotiations and elections. Iraq's creditors forgave tens of billions of dollars of debt; and now NATO members will train Iraqi security forces. The major difference – the insurgency excepted (see below) – with the 1991 war was that, in the absence of a Security Council authorizing resolution, the U.S. had to pay out of its own pocket for most of the combat operations.

But of course the insurgency is hardly minor. It seems clear that U.S. leaders grossly miscalculated the extent and persistence of guerrilla operations after the country had been conquered. Although a combination of ideological blindness and bureaucratic machinations by different “Vulcans” may be a proximate cause of this mistake (recall, however, that the war was also supported by many Democrats in Congress), it is probably also due to the fact that when the war was being planned, it had been over 30 years since the last time the U.S. faced an insurgency. The question, then, is whether one should expect this kind of forgetfulness often in the future.

Our sense is that this will not be the case. For decades, the pattern of U.S. military action has been carefully to avoid direct combat against powerful enemies, directing U.S. forces against small and weak foes. By all accounts, Truman and his advisers were shocked when China massively entered the Korean War, and this memory served as a brake on certain fantasies 15 years later of invading North Vietnam. Only when the possibility of World War III was being considered during the Cuban missile crisis were there plans put forward for U.S. forces to invade the island. Only marginal advisers to Reagan contemplated U.S. combat in Nicaragua. It stands to reason that the experience in Iraq will have a powerful effect in deterring similar adventures if there is even a remote chance of getting bogged down. In this regard, it is significant that whatever plans are currently being debated for military operations against Iran envisage a short air campaign, not a ground invasion.

Hence, at least in budgetary terms, the U.S. is unlikely to find its empire of client states significantly diminished in the years to come. Revolutions may occasionally result in a state or two being “lost,” but for the most part, the U.S. has the means – along with help from other states and multilateral institutions – to maintain its clients. Nor should we expect that the U.S. would launch many costly (therefore involving overt military force) hostile interventions, at least until the Iraq situation has been liquidated (it is unclear whether, had Kerry won, he would have gotten out of Iraq any faster) and, to some degree, forgotten. This conclusion does not mean that the U.S. will become more peaceful now than in the past; just that it will be no more violent or militaristic in the future than it has been for decades. Neither the end of the cold war nor the advent of George W. Bush changed U.S. policy in fundamental ways; and U.S. policy now is about as sustainable as it has always been.

Clientilism After the United States

One of the more interesting aspects of the US reliance on other states’ forces in recent years is the way that clientilism seems to be spreading. On the one hand, states such as Australia have recently carried out interventions (with international support) in places like East Timor and the Solomon Islands. On the other hand, states like Brazil and Nigeria are playing leading roles in the UN forces in Haiti and different parts of West Africa. This goes well beyond the older kind of client interventions carried out by France and Britain, because one sees the same kind of programmatic proliferation and use of multilateral forces as has been typical, for decades, of the U.S.

Clientilism is a policy with two features favoring its spread. First, it presumes and indeed is based on the clients’ sovereignty. In this sense, it harnesses the forces of nationalism and self-rule, because as long as the patrons’ role is not heavy-handed,

the clients can be said to have the best of both worlds: domestic and international legitimacy, and external support. Second, clientilism is built around concrete programs of assistance from patrons and various other donors, be they states or multilateral institutions. If the notions of “mission civilisatrice” and “white man’s burden” have long been discredited, technical and development aid have a much more wholesome ring. This, we think, accounts in no small part for why regional powers have been so willing to intervene: it is not simply a matter of prestige but of helping those in need. Indeed, since client support is means-driven, there can be wide agreement no matter what the particular political complexion of the patrons and the clients. Much the same can be said for intervention against enemies, because more and more, such actions are justified not on grounds that the regime in question is on the wrong side of some ideological divide, but are mistreating their own populations or are simply dangerously incompetent.

Thus, even if the U.S. finds itself unable to support clients and attack enemies as often in the future as it has done up until now, the policy that it developed may well outlive it for decades to come. Like the Cheshire Cat, even if the US can no longer do the job, the smile remains.

U.S. Clients as of February 2005 *

Africa (4% of countries)

Ethiopia

Liberia

Western Hemisphere (97% of countries)

Antigua and Barbuda

Argentina

Bahamas

Barbados

Belize

Bolivia

Brazil

Canada

Chile

Colombia

Costa Rica

Dominica

Dominican Republic

Ecuador

El Salvador

Grenada

Guatemala

Guyana

Haiti

Honduras

Jamaica

Mexico

Nicaragua

Panama

Paraguay

Peru

St. Kitts and Nevis

St. Lucia

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Suriname

Trinidad and Tobago

Uruguay

Venezuela

Europe (43% of countries)

Austria

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Belgium

Denmark

France

Germany

Greece

Iceland

Italy

Luxembourg

Macedonia

Netherlands

Norway

Poland

Portugal

Spain

Sweden

Turkey

United Kingdom

Middle East and North Africa (55% of countries)

Bahrain

Egypt

Iraq

Israel

Jordan

Kuwait

Oman

Qatar

Saudi Arabia

Tunisia

United Arab Emirates

Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia (13% of countries)

Afghanistan

Pakistan

East Asia and Oceania (47% of countries)

Australia

Brunei Darussalam

Indonesia

Japan

Malaysia

Marshall Islands

Micronesia

New Zealand

Philippines

Samoa

Singapore

South Korea

Taiwan

Thailand

Total: 81 countries (43% of countries worldwide)

* Source: State Dept., *Treaties in Force* and *Fiscal Year 2006 Budget Justification*