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Empires
The Logic of World Domination – from Ancient Rome to the United States

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PREFACE

Since the middle of the twentieth century, German scholars have no longer been particularly interested in the theory and history of empires. The collapse of the Soviet Union briefly revived an interest in the subject, sustained by the comforting observation that the history of empires, which goes back to the time of ancient high civilizations, was now definitively over. But, as the new global role of the United States became apparent, all this changed quite abruptly. Suddenly people were talking about American imperialism, and since then criticism of US actions in world politics has taken a strongly anti-imperial turn. It is true that the USA has often been accused of imperialism - during the Vietnam War, for instance, or in relation to military interventions in Latin America or the Persian Gulf – but these charges were directed at specific decisions and actions of the US government. The anti-imperial trend, on the other hand, is directed against US supremacy and claims to dominance as such. It goes decisively beyond earlier criticisms.

Does the world community depend for its security on a supreme imperial power? Or does that imperial power represent a serious threat to world order, and would it be better if it did not exist? The debate leading up to the latest Gulf war fundamentally revolved around these questions. The world community assembled in the UN has actually relied again and again on the capabilities of the dominant imperial power. That

this reliance has not been selfless, and that the USA could use it to demand special rights, is something people have refused to accept. The resulting irritations also have to do with the fact that it is a long time since the functions and demands of an empire have been systematically thought through.

Empires are more than large states; they move in a world of their own. States are bound together in an order created together with other states, over which they do not have sole control. Empires in contrast see themselves as creators and guarantors of an order that ultimately depends on them and that they must defend against the outbreak of chaos, which they regard as a constant threat. A glance at the history not only of the USA but also of other empires shows that formulations like 'the axis of evil' or 'outposts of tyranny' are nothing new or extraordinary. They run like a red thread through the history of empire.

Fear of chaos, and the self-appointed role of defender of order against disorder, good against evil, through which the empire sees and legitimizes itself, are corollaries of the imperial mission, which also represents a fundamental justification for world empire: whether it be to spread civilization, establish a world-wide socialist order, defend human rights or promote democracy. While states stop at the borders of other states and permit them to regulate their own internal affairs, empires intervene in the affairs of others in order to fulfil their mission. Empires can therefore set in train much more powerful processes of change, whereas a system of states is marked by structural conservatism.

When we look at things in this perspective, it casts doubt on what has seemed self-evident under the influence of theories of imperialism: that we ought to prefer and strive for a global order of states with equal rights and without an imperial actor. The

political order of the European region, after the fall of the Roman Empire, developed in such a way that it no longer produced a lasting and effective imperial power, while creating a host of pretenders to that role who soon came to grief. Elsewhere it was different - leaving aside the fact that Europeans certainly built large empires on other continents. Above all in Asia a political order was established in which empires surrounded themselves with a circle of client states. As a result, order in that region was strongly centralized, whereas in Europe there emerged a diverse polycentrism.

Our image of empires is shaped by the idea that the periphery is sucked dry and exploited, that it grows poorer while the centre becomes ever richer. Such empires have indeed existed, but they have been of short duration; after some time, resistance to the centre has grown out of control, and the costs of domination have exceeded the gains derived from the periphery. By contrast, empires have lasted longer when they have invested in their dependencies and taken pains to ensure that the periphery had as much interest as the centre in their continuation.

This book is about the types of imperial domination, the forms of imperial expansion and consolidation and the contexts in which empire-building has occurred. But our concerns are not limited to a distinction between sea and land empires, commercial and military empires, imperial orders that develop by controlling territory and those that essentially depend on controlling flows of human beings, commodities and capital. Our further aim is to consider the rationality of players, as well as the logic of world domination. The book will also offer prognoses on the duration and stability of the American empire, and reflections on how to create a Europe that can both establish itself as a political power independent of the USA and stabilize its unsettled or

disintegrating neighbours and influence them in a positive way. That kind of Europe can hardly avoid developing its own imperial characteristics and capabilities - and, on closer inspection, this process has already begun. The precondition, of course, is that imperial activity is not considered a priori to be bad and reprehensible but rather seen as a mode of problem-solving alongside the state and other forms of political organization.

This is not to be confused with a rehabilitation of the old colonial empires. A war of independence against such a colonial empire is the founding myth of the USA; Europeans see themselves as having once exercised and then relinquished such domination over non-European regions. Yet it is doubtful that the model of equality and reciprocity among states will in the coming decades be able to withstand a number of already discernible challenges. The failure of states, and especially their collapse, is more likely to prompt the intervention or creation of empires.

Many will object that this opposition of state and empire does not exhaust all possibilities, and will instead outline their own conception of a good and desirable political order. But this will take them ever further away from existing reality. A glance at history shows that, when all is said and done, political models have come down to a choice between state and empire - if we understand both these concepts broadly and inclusively, without creating a generic term to cover every special case of statehood or imperiality. In exploring what is entailed in the concept of empire, in considering how empires came into being and how they collapsed, we will enter a field of knowledge that has lain waste for too long a time.

Berlin, February 2005

1. WHAT IS AN EMPIRE?

Debates on the latest war in Iraq, the possible causes and hidden goals of renewed US military intervention in the oil-rich Gulf region, the general role of the United States in the Gulf and Central Asia, together with deep rifts in transatlantic relations, have focused attention in Europe on the emergence of a new world order since the end of the East-West conflict. With Washington's notorious refusal to join international agreements, from the Kyoto Protocol to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, we have been seeing a redefinition of the American position in world politics. Relations between the USA and the UN, never unproblematic in recent decades, are now fundamentally in question, after President George W. Bush, in a keynote speech at the General Assembly on 12 September 2002, threatened that the United States would solve some of the most pressing security problems on its own, if the international organization proved itself incapable of dealing with them.

In the spring of 2003, the third Gulf war demonstrated that this was no empty threat. One possible interpretation was that Washington was seeking to use the Security Council as a submissive source of legitimacy. Another was that it was beginning to free itself from demands that it act as the military arm of the international organization: it would no longer pplace its highly developed and costly military apparatus at the service of the international community but would deploy it in pursuit of its own interests and objectives. The conflicts in the run-up to the Iraq war were – also - a controversy about

who would use whom as an instrument: whether the United States would use the United Nations or the United Nations the United States.[i]

The European security architecture, on which Germany had until then depended, seemed also to be crumbling. Largely unnoticed, NATO had in the 1990s transformed itself from an alliance based on consultation into an instrument of US control over Europe. And where it seemed too unmanageable, it was quickly replaced with a 'coalition of the willing'. In comparison with the Cold War era, the dependence of Europeans on the United States had grown rather than diminished: whoever failed to comply with US demands should expect political and economic pressure or an onslaught of derision. By contrast, anyone who wished to engage on the American side could do so any time - to be sure, on American terms and without influence on fundamental political decisions, as even Britain, the USA's principal ally, more than once discovered. In principle, then, the problems encountered by the United States in Iraq changed nothing. The era of reciprocal consultative obligations in the North Atlantic alliance was over, and NATO's eastward expansion was proving, on reflection, to be a step that significantly reduced the influence of those who had been America's allies in the East-West confrontation.[ii]

In this situation, there were mounting appeals for the United States not to strive for imperial power but to content itself with its longstanding role of beneficent hegemon. To lend force to these warnings, references were made to the uncontrollable risks of empire, to the dangers of overextension and to the inevitable collapse of all previous empires. 'Whereas in the recent past,' wrote Michael Mann, a Briton teaching in America, 'American power was hegemonic – routinely accepted and often considered

legitimate abroad – now it is imposed at the barrel of a gun. This undermines hegemony and the claim to be a benevolent Empire.'[iii] Anyone who sought to replace hegemony with an imperial position, it was argued, not only risked failing in that project but ran the danger of losing hegemony too. Hegemony and empire were thus played against each other in endless variations, almost always accompanied with advice that it was better to remain a hegemon than to strive for empire.

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[i] On the prehistory of the third Gulf war see Aust (ed.), Irak, esp. pp. 39ff.; Tilgner, *Der inszenierte Krieg*, pp. 17ff.; Kubbig, *Brandherd Irak*, esp. pp. 9-20; Wolfgang Sofsky, *Operation Freiheit*, pp. 66-74, and Münkler, *Der Neue Golfkrieg*, pp. 19-28.

[ii] On the history of Nato's eastward enlargement and the aims of those involved, see Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*.

[iii] Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, p. 252. See also Czempiel, 'Pax Americana oder Imperium Americanum?' The term clearly refers back to an article by Robert Kagan, 'The Benevolent Empire'.