

IMPERIALISM AND THE CRISIS OF WORLD ORDER

Amsterdam– Global Justice School

4 December 2010

Gilbert Achcar

I. IMPERIALISM

Imperialism: a **doctrine** born in the latter part of the 19th century, especially induced by the **Great depression of 1873-1895**, with champions such as Joseph Chamberlain in Britain and Jules Ferry in France

Key features:

- **economic motivation: to secure raw material, markets and outlets for industry & capital**
- **the ‘civilising mission’ discourse → hypocrisy**
- **not necessarily ‘colonialism’ (‘semi-colonies’, protectorates, etc. – ‘informal empire’)**

A clear and frank discourse:

American economist **Charles Conant** in 1898

Overaccumulation ('congestion of goods and capital')

➔ **necessity of imperialist expansion**

'It is the **excess of savings**, with the resulting **accumulation of unconsumed goods**, in the great industrial countries, which is one of the world maladies of the economic situation of today. It lies at the root of a large share of **industrial discontent**...

For the means of finding new productive employments for capital, therefore, it is necessary that the great industrial countries should **turn to countries that have not felt the pulse of modern progress**. Such countries have yet to be equipped with the mechanisms of production and of luxury...

The United States cannot afford to adhere to a policy of isolationism while other nations are reaching out for the command of these new markets....

Whether the United States shall actually acquire territorial possessions, shall set up captain generalships and garrisons, whether they shall adopt the middle ground of protecting sovereignties nominally independent, or whether they shall content themselves with naval stations and diplomatic representations as the basis for asserting their rights to the free commerce of the East, is a matter of detail. ...

The writer is not an advocate of “**imperialism**” from sentiment, but does not fear the name if it means only that **the United States shall assert their right to free markets in all the old countries which are being opened to the surplus resources of the capitalistic countries and thereby given the benefits of modern civilization.**’

Charles Conant, ‘The Economic Basis of Imperialism’, 1898

CRITICAL THEORIES OF IMPERIALISM

The liberal J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism*, 1902

- **Same explanation** as Conant’s
- Denounces the **role of monopoly capital** (‘concentration of industry in “trusts”, “combines”, etc.’) in producing the glut in commodities and capital
- Denounces the **cost of imperialism**, especially **militarism**, and those who **profit** from it
- Denounces imperialism as providing an **inefficient solution to the economic problem** (costs/benefits compared to trade with peer industrial countries)

- Advocates **liberal policies**:
limitation of concentration +
stimulation of internal demand (prefiguring Keynes)

Basically, according to Hobson: Imperialism is an 'option' that is not consubstantial to capitalism; actually, it stands in contradiction with free competition and democracy

The Marxist V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 1916

A synthesis of Hobson and Hilferding (*Finance Capital*)
for political purposes (WW1)

Lenin's definition:

'Imperialism is capitalism at that **stage of development** at which the dominance of **monopolies and finance capital** is established; in which the **export of capital** has acquired pronounced importance; in which **the division of the world among the international trusts has begun**, in which **the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.**'

→ Imperialism as a *necessary*
'stage' of advanced capitalism
contrary to Hobson's view

A 'parasitic' and 'decaying' stage – signalling
the agony of capitalism and the age of
socialist revolution (written in 1916)

A debate among Marxists:

Kautsky vs. Lenin – and Trotsky's later prognosis

- **Kautsky's theory of 'ultra-imperialism' (1914):** a cartel of major imperialist powers prompted by economic reasons – the rising cost of war – and leading to permanent peace between them.
- **Lenin: Uneven development** of capitalism → Imperialism leads to **inter-imperialist wars**; no way out of 'imperialism' but its revolutionary overthrow.

- **Trotsky (1924-26):**
'American capitalism is seeking the position of world domination; it wants to establish an American imperialist autocracy over our planet. ... This means that Europe will be permitted to rise again, but within limits set in advance, with certain restricted sections of the world market allotted to it.'
'What is this? This is "pacifism." But it is pacifism of a sort that imposes its will by dint of monstrous economic superiority and prepares "peacefully" military superiority in the next historical period.'

II – IMPERIALISM DURING THE COLD WAR

The Feudal Paradigm – Suzerain and Vassals: a new configuration of the world imperialist system

U.S. hegemony = suzerainty + economic seigniorage

Determining factors:

Factor 1: The anti-systemic threat of communism

Factor 2: The post-war balance of forces among capitalist powers

Factor 3: The lessons of the Great Depression and the two World Wars

III – THE “UNIPOLAR MOMENT”

Post-Cold War US debate: “liberals” vs. “realists”

The **unipolar option** was ‘overdetermined’:

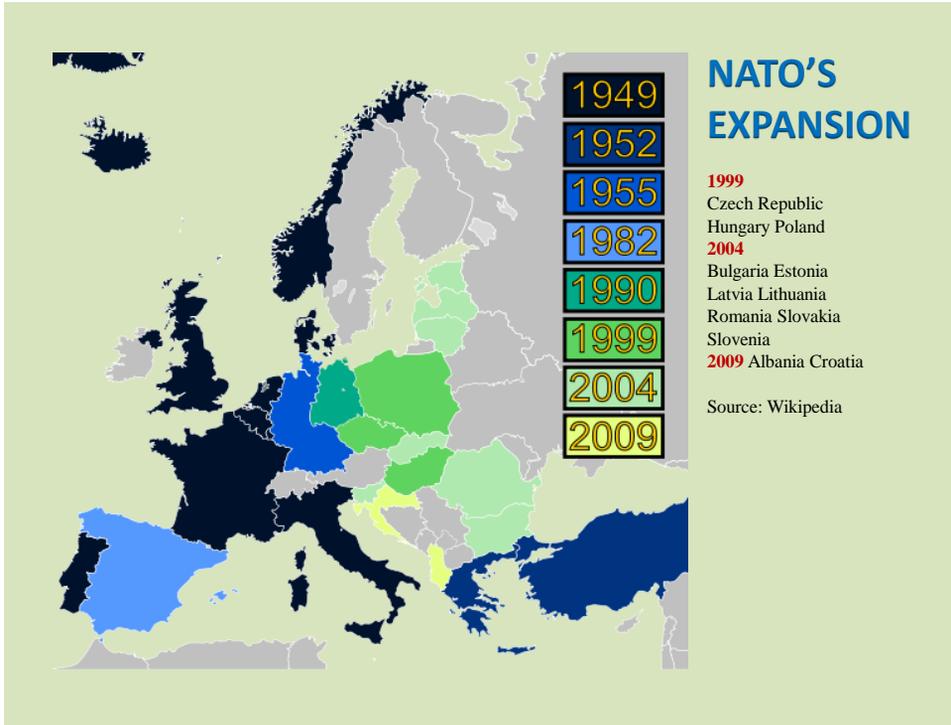
- Neoliberalism → force vs. consent
- Military supremacy and suzerainty privileges
- Securing the lion’s share of global resources

The **unipolar agenda**:

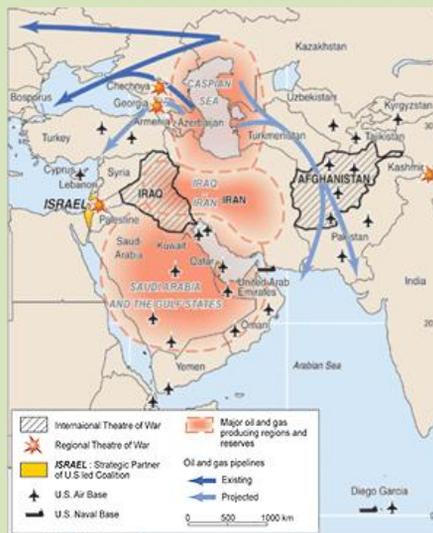
- Renewing the vassals’ allegiance: NATO’s mutation + US-Japanese Security Treaty
- Expanding the US Empire to the rest of the world
- Encircling potential challengers: Russia and China

IMPERIAL GLOBALISATION: POST-CW STAGES

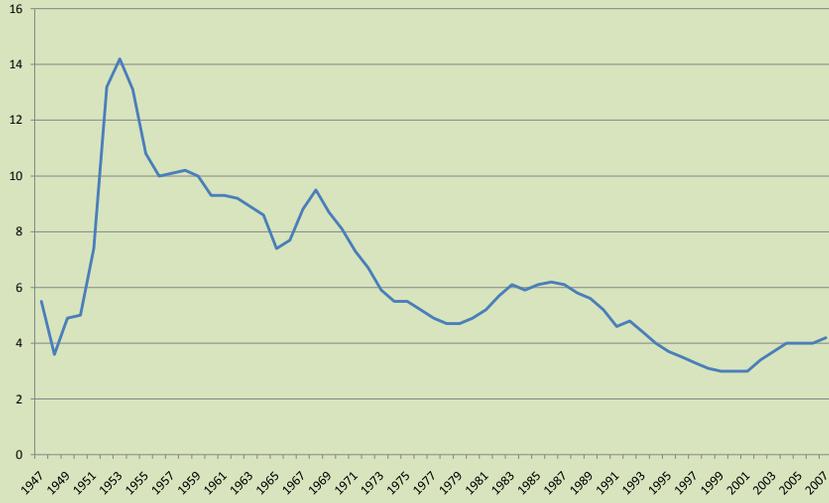
- Gulf Crisis and War (1990-91): the defining moment – NATO, Oil Gulf
 - Clinton: “from containment to enlargement” – expansion of NATO
 - G. W. Bush: a “war on terror” for a ‘New American Century’: Oil Gulf and Central Asia
- ➔ The completion of imperial globalisation



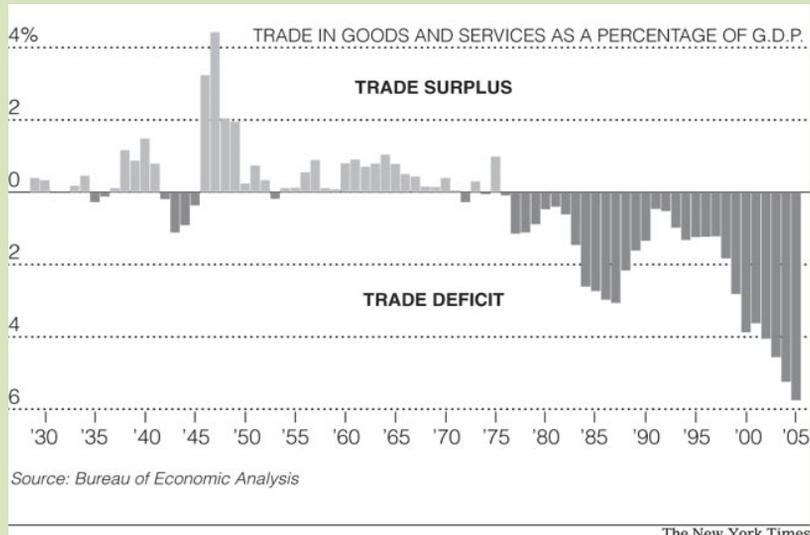
THE "WAR ON TERROR" AND U.S. STRATEGIC DEPLOYMENT



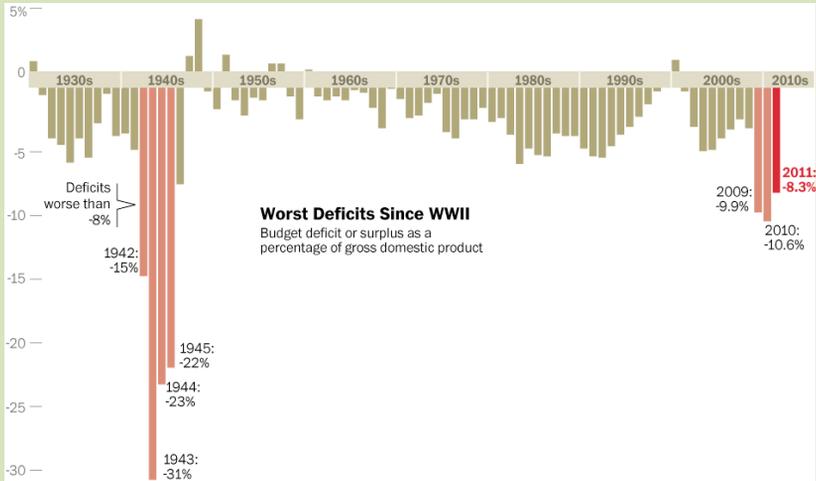
DEFENSE BUDGETARY OUTLAYS AS % OF GDP



A WIDENING TRADE DEFICIT

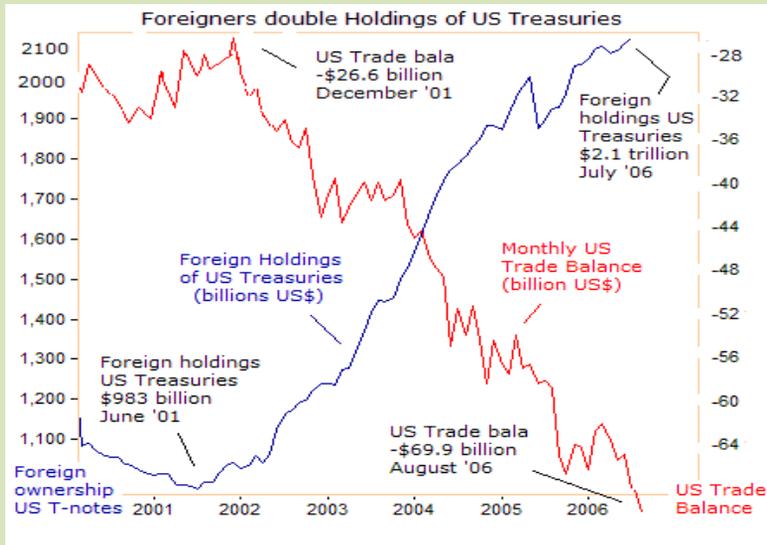


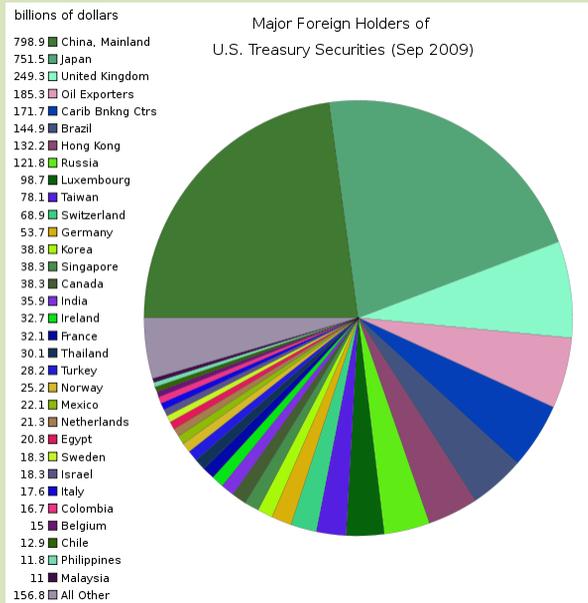
WORST BUDGET DEFICIT SINCE WWII



Maastricht criteria: The ratio of the annual government deficit to gross domestic product (GDP) must not exceed 3%

A SUBSIDISED STATE & ECONOMY





WHY DO OTHER COUNTRIES “SUSTAIN” THE U.S. STATE & ECONOMY?

	Economic Interdependence (Seigniorage + Trade)	Military Dependence (Suzerainty)
Military Dependence (Suzerainty)	Japan Western Europe Taiwan	Oil exporting countries
Economic Interdependence (Seigniorage + Trade)	China Brazil Russia	

THE RATIONALE FOR VASSALAGE RENEWAL

Country	Spending in 2009 (\$ b.)	Share of 2008 GDP (%)
USA	661	4.3
Russia	53	3.5
UK	58	2.5
France	64	2.3
China	100	2.0
Australia	19	1.8
Italy	36	1.7
Germany	46	1.3
Canada	19	1.3
Spain	18	1.2
Japan	51	0.9
Euro Union	(2008, € b.) 200	1.6

V – ANTI-IMPERIALISM TODAY

- ‘Campism’ is no longer an alternative: Russia, China, North Korea...
- Weakness of organised anti-imperialism in Western countries and character of the forces confronting US imperialism: Iraq, Afghanistan, ‘terrorism’ (compare with Vietnam, Nicaragua...)
- The Latin American exception: Cuba’s positive image and the new progressive wave; democracy as a condition.
- Genuine anti-imperialist pacifism as the alternative: rule of international law, dissolution of military alliances, denuclearisation, disarmament.