

## Chapter 11

# States of Empire: Liberal Ordering and Imperial Relations

PAUL MUSGRAVE & DANIEL H. NEXON

FORMAL EMPIRE IS DEAD. SOME ARGUE THAT EMPIRES died because a normative shift—the post-war spread of liberal values—made them illegitimate. UN Resolution 1514, adopted in 1960, gave full expression to the view in its proclamation of the ‘necessity of bringing to a speedy and unconditional end colonialism in all its forms and manifestations’. The post-Second World War dismantling of most of the formal empires of Western Europe was already well advanced when the UN General Assembly adopted that resolution. Today, all that remain of formal empires are the shells of their former selves. The British Empire, for instance, has been transformed into the British Overseas Territories, with only about a quarter million inhabitants—far fewer than Hong Kong alone had at the time of its repatriation to China in 1997.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the disappearance of formal empire should not be confused with the end of imperial relations. On one level, this point is easy to grasp. The emergence of the United States as the world’s sole superpower after the end of the Cold War has led to charges that Washington’s outsized influence on world affairs is tantamount to an ‘American Empire’—one that is said to be informal but no less real than its British, Ottoman, or Roman antecedents. That debate only grew in intensity after the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Although many who used the term ‘empire’ sought to criticize what they saw as American hubris or disregard for liberal values, others—notably many American neo-conservatives—embraced the label as a way of describing their ambitions to reshape other countries’ domestic regimes in order to enlarge the sphere of liberal, democratic regimes. The rhetoric of empire, then, is alive and well among both advocates and opponents of the idea (Motyl, 2006). But, as we will argue, the participants in this debate have relied on misleading definitions of ‘empire’.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the list of Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories, available at <<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/publications-and-documents/treaties/uk-overseas-territories/list-crown-dependencies-overseas>>.

Instead of engaging the American empire debate, we argue a different point, but one that more directly engages the tensions between liberal aspirations and the character of empire. We contend that imperial relations do exist and that the United States does indeed maintain imperial relations with other political communities—as do other countries. However, far from asserting that empire is a betrayal of liberalism, we argue that the temptation to empire is inherent in liberal aspirations. Indeed, some values urge liberal states to establish imperial relationships with other polities. Other liberal values uphold the inviolability of sovereign polities that are themselves imperial in character. Finally, international institutions, often regarded as innately liberal, can themselves act in ways not dissimilar to empires.

### Liberal practices, relations, empires

Many see liberal norms and practices as antithetical to empire. They associate liberalism with the right of self-determination: of ethnic and national groups to live in their own sovereign states rather than under the yoke of empires. Liberalism emphasizes individual equality, human rights, and open markets rather than the institutionalization inequality, domination, and mercantilism associated with imperial rule. Others, however, see a close connection between liberalism and empire. They point to liberal justifications for empire offered by such leading thinkers as John Stuart Mill. In this line of argument, liberalism's emphasis on universal principles of free trade, justice, rights, and rules provide a pretext for imperialism in the name of spreading liberal values. Critics counter that liberal order emphasizes international organizations, sovereign equality, international law, and other institutions that supplant imperial rule and make it difficult for states to engage in imperialism (Boot, 2002; Cooper, 2005; Ikenberry, 2006b; Philpott, 2001/2002; Pitts, 2006).

As Duncan Bell argues, this debate reflects the ideological and historical diversity of liberalism:

The liberal tradition was, and continues to be, divided on a plethora of political issues, including the status of empire. And once this is established, the problems of generalizing about the tradition from the standpoint of identifiable 'impulses' should become apparent. Such generalizations efface, indeed frequently erase, the complexity of history in much the same way as a crude variety of liberal universalism. (Bell, 2006: 285)

This complicated relationship persists in contemporary international society. Some liberal norms and practices clearly cut against empire, but others create, sustain, or protect imperial relations. For example, liberal states have long used militarized regime change as a tool of democratic enlargement, even

though such tactics can be politically contentious. But even if a liberal power seeks to use militarized regime change to create a democratic and sovereign state, the act of invading, overthrowing, and occupying another political community creates an imperial relationship. Take the relatively straightforward example of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. The United States assumed a structural relationship—albeit temporarily—with Iraq that was quite similar to that of republican Rome with Gaul, tsarist Russia with Finland, imperial Japan with Korea, and countless other imperial cores with their peripheries (Nexon and Wright, 2007).

However, we should not describe every hierarchical relationship among discrete political communities as imperial. The United States's relations with other NATO countries are structured hierarchically, but Washington does not exercise rule over the United Kingdom or France. Nor should we limit our definition of empire to interstate relations. Empires predate the emergence of modern states and contemporary conceptions of sovereignty; humans will likely live in imperial contexts long after they cease to take for granted that the 'natural' political community is a self-determining nation state (Gilpin, 1981; Burbank and Cooper, 2010). In order to adjudicate whether or not a particular relationship is 'imperial', we need to develop a more refined conception of empire.

### What empires are (and are not)<sup>2</sup>

Defining empires proves to be a difficult task. Common usage labels a wide variety of political communities as 'empires', and it is impossible to reduce this jumble of meanings to a single, straightforward definition. But we can still develop an analytically useful ideal-typical conception of empire.<sup>3</sup> We argue that empires are a form of transnational hierarchy involving a particular kind of core-periphery system, one combining *indirect rule* with *heterogeneous contracting*. This is distinctive from the sorts of historical and ideational typologies developed by, for instance, Hobson and Hall in (this volume).

Imperial cores exercise authority over peripheral subjects via local intermediaries. Local intermediaries—who have gone by such diverse titles as 'viceroy', 'governor', 'proconsul', and 'satrap'—occupy a brokerage position between central authorities and imperial subjects. They govern peripheries incorporated into empires through unequal bargains that specify rights (or the lack thereof) and obligations (Tilly, 1997; Nexon and Wright, 2007). Unlike in a number of other political systems, such as federations, these

<sup>2</sup>Parts of this section are derived from Nexon and Wright 2007.

<sup>3</sup>For an elaboration of the methodology of ideal types, see Jackson, 2011.

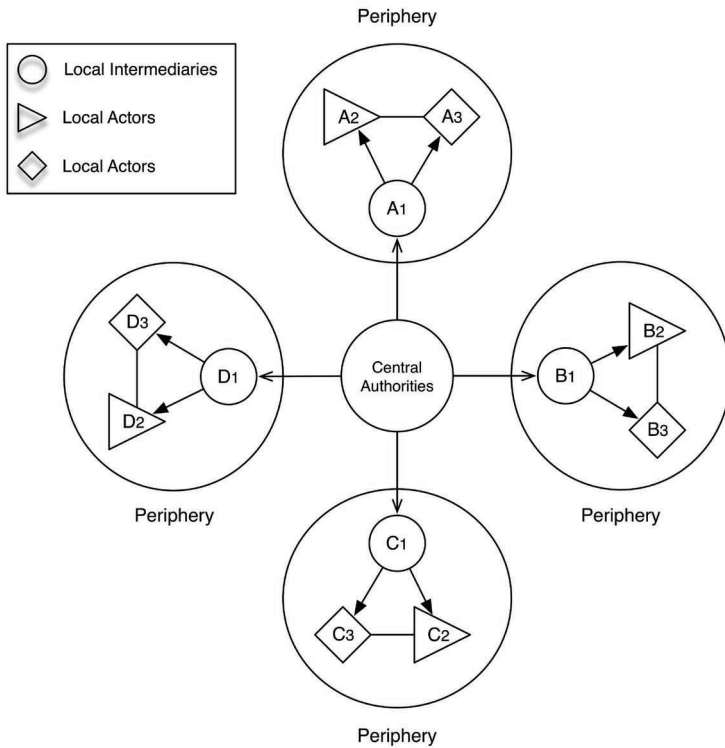
contracts differ from periphery to periphery—often in ways related to those institutions that predated imperial incorporation, specific pathways of imperial domination, and the strategic importance of a periphery.<sup>4</sup>

Imperial bargains may specify the adoption of specific forms of government or legal orders in a periphery, may simply require that peripheries pay regular tribute, or involve an exchange of basing rights in the periphery for access to markets in the core. The benefits that the core derives from the periphery may be diffuse or they may be oriented towards a specific elite (colonial or indigenous) ethnic group or subregion. Such contracts are always asymmetric, backed by the threat of imperial sanction and negotiation based on the superior resources of imperial cores, but they are contracts nonetheless. Indeed, if we reduce empires to nothing more than coercive arrangements then we overlook the degree to which the benefits of these contracts, and their ultimate legitimacy, underpins imperial orders (Lendon, 1997; Daniels and Kennedy, 2002). Moreover, we will miss an entire dimension of the contestation of imperial rule, namely the degree to which peripheries and cores dispute the extent of the periphery's residual rights to autonomy and the degree to which the core has fulfilled the expectations of the imperial bargain. Collapsing all such movements into simplistic readings as 'anti-imperial' conflates the very different forms of mobilization that aim to revise and those that seek to *reject* the core's influence over the periphery (Tilly, 1997; Nexon and Wright, 2007).

This combination means that authority relations run from the core to the periphery, but peripheries themselves are relatively disconnected—or segmented—from one another. As Motyl argues, the 'core-periphery relations' of empires 'resemble an incomplete wheel, with a hub and spoke but no rim' (Motyl, 1999; Galtung, 1971). Figure 11.1 shows the (stylized) structure of an empire with four peripheries. It highlights a number of crucial structural positions—central authorities, local intermediaries, different local subjects—that may be occupied by a variety of different actors and organizations. It illustrates how, whether by accident or design, imperial orders operate as systems of institutionalized divide-and-rule.

The conjunction of indirect rule and heterogeneous contracting reinforces differences among imperial peripheries, and thus reduces the possibility of cross-periphery collaboration against imperial rule. It also places pressure on central authorities to reconcile competing interests and identities. At the same

<sup>4</sup>Most of US territory is governed through principles of federation: the same basic bargain, the US Constitution, applies to all fifty states. But the United States also has imperial and empire-like relations with a number of semi-sovereign political communities—including many Native American nations, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands—some of which are legacies from periods of explicit US empire building or colonial imperial expansion.



**Figure 11.1** An ideal-typical representation of an empire with four peripheries.

time, indirect rule allows imperial authorities to reduce the political capital required to administer peripheries and to distance themselves from unpopular policies, but also creates principal-agent problems that, in extreme cases, can lead local intermediaries to challenge imperial rule itself.

This ideal-typical specification of empire offers many advantages over the typical inductive definition. Among its implications is the proposition that empire is neither wholly an ‘international’ nor a ‘domestic’ structure. The perpetuation of empire requires the core to order the peripheries’ internal politics (what we normally consider ‘domestic’) while also structuring relations among the peripheries (normally called ‘international’) (Doyle, 1986). Indeed, today as in the past, imperial structures can be found both within sovereign polities that claim to be nation states and among polities that claim juridical equality.

Moreover, this definition allows us to discard loose associations between empire and power. Although many empires have been powerful, not all powerful states are empires, nor are all empires powerful. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, the United States (which, to be

sure, eventually acquired colonial possessions) became powerful, while the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Qing (China) empires became bywords for decline. Pre-war Belgium ruled in a colonial empire, but hardly qualified as a powerful state.

Finally, we should remember that empires, in contrast to their bad reputation, do provide public goods. That point can be taken too far by some, such as Niall Ferguson (2004), who contend that empire (or the British and American empires, at least) can be the handmaiden of democracy, economic growth, and liberalism while ignoring the many downsides of imperial rule. Nevertheless, imperial regulation may be preferable to competition among sovereign states; there is a reason why we speak of the *Pax Romana*.

### The origins and ends of imperial systems

Scholars have produced numerous theories of imperial formation. Some focus on the private interests of economic, military, and other elites in the core. Some look at broader economic processes, such as the need to maintain a slave economy or the requirements of late capitalism. Other approaches point to ‘peripheral pulls’: events or developments that create opportunities for, or even compel, polities to form imperial relations. Empires often expand, and even form, to deal with political disorder, interference with economic interests, or security threats emanating from its periphery. These and other theories persist because empires develop and expand for a multiplicity of reasons; the specific causes of imperial expansion vary widely across time and space (Gilpin, 1981; Doyle, 1986; Barfield, 1989; Motyl, 2001; Howe, 2002; MacDonald, 2009; Burbank and Cooper, 2010).

The best we can say, then, involves two dimensions of the causes of imperial formation. First, political communities embrace imperial modes of control because they are reasonably effective ways to manage diverse and distant territories. Indirect rule reduces the political, economic, and military costs of control. In combination with differential contracting, it allows distinct territories to retain aspects of their institutions and identities. Over the long haul, empires often radically transform these identities and institutions; some processes of imperialism aim to ultimately assimilate, or replace, indigenous populations. But even in those cases, imperial governance provides a convenient station on the way to direct incorporation.

Second, empires develop as a result of both internal and external factors. There will always be individuals and interest groups that stand to gain from outright conquest or the political subordination of outsiders. Ideologies that justify—or even call for—such expansion may appear at any time or place in history. As polities, or even interest groups within polities, develop interests in

the abroad, circumstances will lead political entrepreneurs to conclude that the imposition of imperial modes of control are the best way to protect those interests. Some political communities will always have the means to subordinate others. And because military capabilities and effective governance are unevenly distributed, there will always be gravitational pulls to develop empires—for example, to deal with public order problems, to secure access to resources, or to block the expansion of a competitor. Differential rates of growth in economic, technological, and military terms can also reduce the relative costs of imperial expansion for the core; the same processes can also work in reverse, by raising the costs of governance, spurring contraction.

This structural account of empire offers an explanation for why empires can appear suddenly, persist for generations or centuries, and then fall apart just as quickly. In the Achaemenid (Persian) and Mongol empires, as well as too many other cases to list, the pattern was as we have described: the replacement or recruitment of local elites to govern peripheral units on behalf of an imperial core that made few claims on the loyalty or behaviour of the vast majority of citizens. Similarly, the collapse of empires such as the Soviet Union, and the severe strains that the Habsburgs faced in the seventeenth century, demonstrate how simultaneous and coordinated risings in the periphery can overwhelm the core in the pattern that this account describes. Importantly, the process of imperial decay caused by a core's decline will be different than the sudden collapse of an empire occasioned by the emergence of trans-peripheral resistance. In particular, we should expect to see the development of networks linking peripheries to each other directly, the emergence of movements linking actors within peripheries to challenge the core and local intermediaries, and the severing of the authority ties binding the periphery to the core. Even empires that look relatively stable, therefore, may break apart as inter-peripheral ties are strengthened, even if their core remains roughly as strong vis-à-vis any individual periphery.

As we will argue later, much of liberal-internationalist ideology concerns how to derive the benefits of empire—particularly with respect to solving international public order problems—without its moral and human costs. It should be no surprise, then, that traces of empire exist at the international level.

### From empires to imperial relations

The ideal type considered here describes an imperial order or system—it provides a stylized account of the structure of an entire political community, such as the Roman and British empires. In turn, it associates imperial orders with an interrelated set of practices, including indirect rule, heterogeneous

contracting, divide and rule, and the maintenance of plausible deniability by imperial rulers in the core.<sup>5</sup> However, ideal types are analytical categories, not descriptions of real social, political, and economic relations. Concrete cases combine elements of different ideal types. Real empires include non-imperial arrangements, such as authoritative relations among actors in different peripheries, provinces ruled directly from the metropole, and so forth.

Similarly, we may find imperial relationships embedded in other political forms, alongside other modes of governance, or emerging as an unlikely byproduct of international practices. It follows that liberalism may produce imperial relations—those combining indirect rule with differential asymmetric contracting—through a variety of mechanisms. Imperial systems, for their part, may be inflected by liberal ideologies and liberal practices. Treating empire as an ideal-typical organizational structure facilitates thinking about the connection between liberalism and empire in two important ways.

- It allows for the possibility that imperial relations may exist alongside non-imperial ones. The United States' relations with, for example, Iraq and Afghanistan were, for a time, imperial. During the same period, its foreign relations with countries such as the United Kingdom, the Russian Federation, and Brazil lacked key elements of empire—most notably indirect rule.
- It implies that imperial relations may exist between any kinds of actors. The structure of interactions, not the nature of those who engage in them, determines whether we describe a relationship as imperial, federative, or whatever.

Although some might find these propositions strange, they accord well with common sense. During the nineteenth century, Britain exercised imperial rule over significant swathes of the globe, but it also treated political communities as equals, clients, allies, and rivals. After the Spanish-American War, Washington ruled the Philippines and Puerto Rico as imperial possessions, but its relations with Virginia, Ohio, New York, and other states was federative in character.

Moreover, similar relational structures operate in a variety of contexts and between different kinds of actors. For example, states, friends, and colleagues all may organize their relations according to bilateral and multilateral principles. Multinational firms may adopt imperial structures, in which division chiefs in different countries or regions manage their own mini-corporations and report independently to corporate headquarters. When individuals position themselves as the centre of a segmented network of

<sup>5</sup>For a more exhaustive discussion, see Nexon and Wright, 2007; Nexon, 2008, 2009.



followers—whether in politics, business, or high school—the phrase ‘empire building’ is more than a metaphor: it accurately describes the organization of their personal power structure.

How does this clarify the connection between liberalism and empire? As we noted at the outset, contemporary liberal practices produce and/or sustain a variety of relationships that have imperial characteristics. In this section, we focus on three: *informal interstate empire*, *sovereign empire*, and *postmodern empire*.

### Informal empire

Liberal practices—at least as defined in this volume—would seem to rule out ‘traditional’ forms of empire as inconsistent with state sovereignty and norms of self-determination. These (apparently) anti-imperial norms, and their associated practices, enjoy a contingent, rather than necessary, relationship with liberalism; defenders of empire have articulated liberal visions that justify imperialism and colonialism.

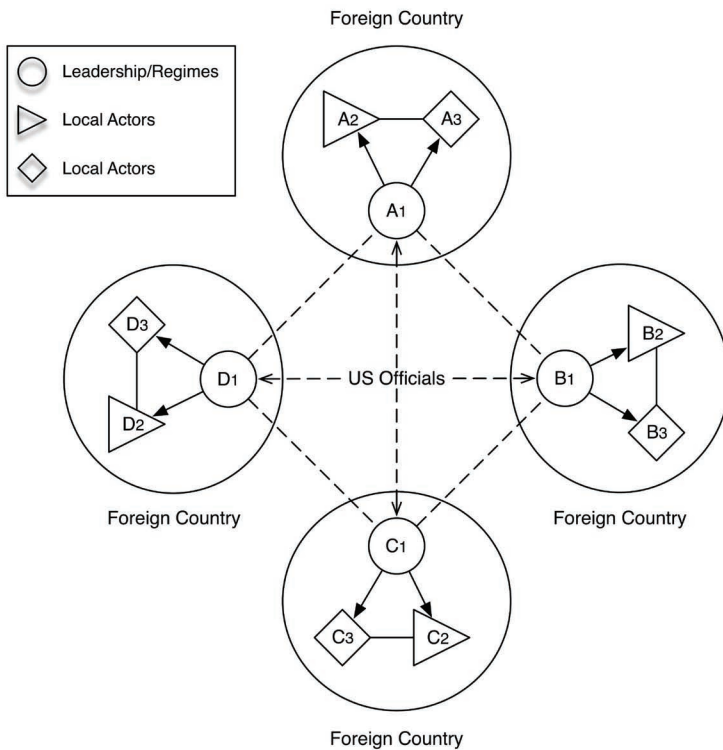
Still, contemporary liberal order not only renders formal empire problematic but also deems illegitimate the kind of conquest necessary for formal empire building. The 1960 United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples constituted a firm rejection of the compatibility of empire and liberal order (although see Hobson and Hall, this volume, for a critique of the ‘subliminal Eurocentric base’ of the post-war order). Outright annexations of one state by another, already rare after the Second World War, seem to have gone the way of Australian megafauna. Despite attempts to rehabilitate ‘empire’, most commentators continue to use the term in order to criticize the behaviour of a state or its government; indeed, contemporary uses of ‘empire’ are overwhelmingly pejorative. It should therefore come as little surprise that all contemporary imperial relations are informal; no regime claims, at least in public, to rule an empire.

#### **Liberalism and informal interstate empires**

We use the term for relations among putatively sovereign states that reflect, in at least some significant ways, the organization and structure of empires. These interstate empires involve officials of one state effectively imposing indirect rule over putatively sovereign states (see Figure 11.2). Indicators of indirect rule include whether or not:

- the decision to enter the relationship was sufficiently constrained as to not truly constitute a choice on the part of the weaker party;
- the decision to exit the agreement, regardless of voluntary entrance, implicitly or explicitly lies with the external party or parties;
- external control over some sphere of a country's sovereignty is sufficiently routine and taken for granted that, despite the voluntary character of the arrangement, its associated practices might as well involve rule.

It follows that informal empires prove difficult to detect: as long as super- and subordinate polities comply with the terms of their asymmetric contract, their relationship will look much like that among amicable partners. In such stealth empires, local intermediaries are (or claim to be) rulers in their own right. Some may even be elected through free and fair elections. Informal empires only 'reveal themselves' when a subordinate state deviates beyond the parameters set by central authorities and, in doing so, prompts a coercive response.



**Figure 11.2** Hypothetical US informal empire.

But if the informal imperium functions effectively, if it generates some degree of legitimacy among subordinate populations, and if central authorities decide to allow it to unravel when faced with the equivalent of 'secession', then we may never be certain about whether or not it existed in the first place.

These stealth empires contravene the spirit, if not the letter, of liberal practices surrounding sovereign equality. Indeed, one of the clearest recent examples of an informal imperial arrangement was also illiberal in its ideological outlook. For over forty years, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) exercised informal imperial control over the member states of the Warsaw Pact. When faced with attempts at exit, or acute deviations from acceptable domestic policies, Moscow often resorted to coercive force. It did so in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The threat of Soviet invasion provided a justification for General Jaruzelski's imposition of martial law in Poland in March 1981. In fact, the overall dynamics of the USSR's so-called 'outer empire' track closely with those associated with many formal empires—and help account for the eventual demise of the Soviet Union (Bunce, 1985).<sup>6</sup>

Informal empires, however, also develop around liberal states. In the early twenty-first century, the United States established informal imperial relations with Iraq and Afghanistan via invasion and occupation. The fact that Washington sought to transform their domestic political systems into sovereign democracies—that it hoped for a short-lived dominion over Iraq and Afghanistan—did nothing to change the imperial character of its short-term relations with them.

It should come as no surprise, then, that military failure in Iraq led military planners, civilian officials, and informed observers to look to imperial history for guidance about how to pacify the country. Modern counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine amounts to, in its essential contours, an application of experience gained from past empires' attempts to control their peripheries. Other imperial lessons have been even more productive: the major source of the United States's (relative) success in Iraq after 2006 came not from COIN but from an active campaign to drive a wedge between Sunni nationalists and militant Islamists. In classic imperial form, US forces co-opted local potentates, along with their military-political networks, and enlisted them against their erstwhile allies.

Contemporary liberal practices encourage informal interstate empire in a variety of ways. They make the costs of formal empires nearly prohibitive. States that embark on explicitly imperial projects risk suffering significant losses to their international reputation, even more difficult and protracted

<sup>6</sup>For accounts of the demise of the USSR, see Nation 1992, Gaidar 2007.

resistance in their new peripheries, and sometimes even their domestic legitimacy. In consequence, the current order effectively channels imperial ventures into the informal realm.

At the same time, some liberal international norms create motivations, justifications, and pretexts for foreign interventions designed to transform domestic institutions, remove illiberal leaders, or protect civilians from their governments. And although sovereign equality undermines the ability of one state to, for example, monopolize the external relations of a subordinate polity, it does enhance specific structural advantages of imperial control. Most notably, the ability of states to regulate cross-border exchanges, particularly in conjunction with national identities coterminous with state boundaries, strengthens inter-peripheral firewalls. In order to forge a common front against informal imperial control, transnational movements must now compete with nationalist loyalties that divide populations from one another.

Of course, nationalist ideology—the notion that each nation deserves self-determination—makes populations less likely to support subordination to a foreign power. But it also provides a resource for informal imperialists to divide and rule putatively sovereign states. (See also the discussion in Hobson and Hall, this volume, on this point.) The most common examples involve exploiting national rivalries to prevent two or more states from colluding against an informal interstate empire, but this process sometimes extends into sovereign states themselves (McGregor, 2010). Russian involvement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (two breakaway regions of Georgia) demonstrates how a powerful state can exploit nationalist divisions not only to weaken another state but also to de facto annex minority-controlled parts of its territory. Moscow recognized the sovereign independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Abkhazia, at least, found itself increasingly absorbed into the informal imperial polity that is the Russian Federation.

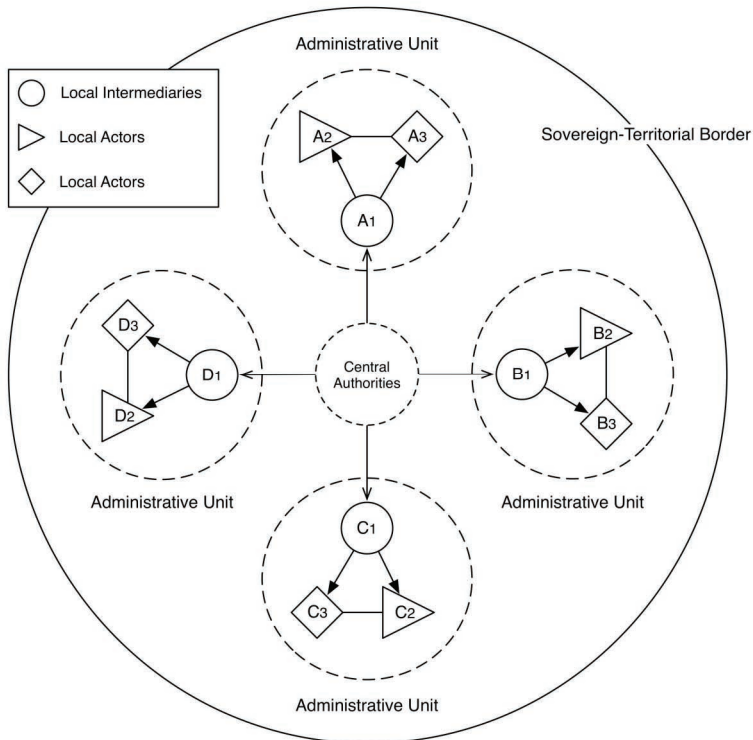
When compared to earlier periods of human history, contemporary liberal order works against the establishment and maintenance of empires, whether formal or informal. But it does not preclude the formation of relations in which one state transforms, in practice if not in name, another into an imperial periphery. The United States' foreign relations have become, overall, less imperial than they were during the early Cold War. This is largely due to the disappearance of superpower competition. With no communist threat to bind peripheral elites to the United States, peripheries are less driven to agree to such contracts, even as Washington is similarly less incentivized to bear the costs of governing imperial structures.

But whatever the fate of liberal order, we should expect the rise and decline of imperial relations among putatively sovereign states. Both supply-side and demand-side forces will likely continue to make informal empire an attractive option for global and regional powers.

## Liberalism and sovereign empires

Contemporary liberal order not only gives rise to stealth interstate empires but also obscures the existence of more traditional imperial arrangements. The domestic organization of a number of sovereign states includes imperial characteristics, sometimes directly alongside other logics of political control (see Figure 11.3). Some of these matter at the political margins. For example, long after the United States abandons the last remnants of its (already rather limited) informal empire, it will continue to exercise indirect rule—via heterogeneous contracts—with a variety of subordinate polities, including Guam, the District of Columbia, and numerous Native American reservations. But other imperial relations are central to the organization and logic of polities usually regarded unproblematically as being sovereign states.

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are two of the most geopolitically consequential 'sovereign empires' of the early twenty-first century. Neither should be thought of as exclusively empire-like



**Figure 11.3** Ideal-typical sovereign empire with four administrative units.

in terms of its domestic political institutions, but both exercise imperial rule over a number of constituent political units.

The PRC has engaged in classic colonial imperialism in at least two major regions: Tibet and Xinjiang. The latter, a long-term battleground of empires, has experienced waves of Han Chinese colonization over centuries. Recent intensive development, driven in no small measure by the region's natural-gas reserves, has stoked tensions with the predominantly Muslim, Turkic-speaking Uyghur population. Similar dynamics play out in Tibet, which China invaded and annexed in 1950. There, the completion of the Qinzang Railway has led to an influx of Han Chinese and increased tensions between Tibetans and Beijing. (Lustgarten, 2008) Both Tibet and Xinjiang are autonomous regions with their own governing bodies, but these intermediaries (among whom have been such notable politicians as Hu Jintao, the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary) answer to the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing.

Indeed, much of the CCP's ruling strategies can be described as imperial. Even though the formal structure of the PRC's government is unitary, the day-to-day governance of the country, both politically and economically, strongly resembles segmented rule by intermediaries. Much of the party's influence derives from the penetration of its personnel into the state and corporate bureaucracies (McGregor, 2010). Its control of the media helps the regime quash the spread of news that might help protesters coordinate their message and their activities (Pan, 2009). Far from being a consolidated, rational Weberian bureaucracy, the Chinese system of government in practice resembles more a series of negotiated accommodations between Beijing and various provinces (Shirk, 2008).

The Russian Federation—like its more territorially extensive predecessor, the USSR—has always been a heterogeneous patchwork of administrative regions—including oblasts, republics, and federal cities—with differing degrees of autonomy. As Charles King (2003) argues:

Russia is still something close to an empire—an electoral one, perhaps, but a political system whose essential attributes are simply not those of a modern state. Central power, where it exists, is exercised through subalterns who function as effective tax- and ballot-farmers: they surrender up a portion of local revenue and deliver the votes for the center's designated candidates in national elections in exchange for the center's letting them run their own fiefdoms. Viceroys sent from the capital keep tabs on local potentates but generally leave them to their own devices. State monopolies or privileged private companies secure strategic resources and keep open the conduits that provide money to the metropole. The conscript military, weak and in crisis, is given the task of policing the restless frontier—fighting a hot war in Chechnya and patrolling the ceasefire lines of cold ones in the borderland emirates of Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan. Such arrangements do make for federalism of a sort, but in an

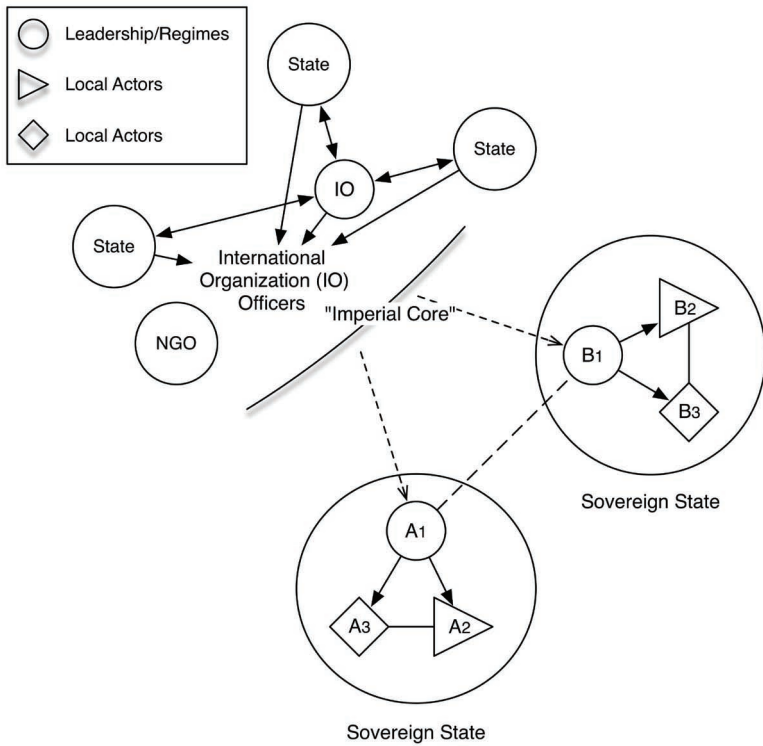
older sense of the word. The concept comes, after all, from Rome's practice of accommodating threatening peoples by settling them inside the empire and paying them to be federative, or self-governing border guards. It is federalism as an imperial survival strategy, not as a way of bringing government closer to the governed.

Russia and the PRC suggest something of a paradox about contemporary liberal order. On the one hand, norms of sovereign equality both obscure the existence of modern-day empires and enable them. They shield sovereign empires from foreign interference, and thereby facilitate practices inconsistent with liberal principles of democratic governance and national self-determination. On the other hand, norms that render sovereignty conditional upon adherence to basic standards of liberal governance—such as 'responsibility to protect' (RIP) doctrine—facilitate the formation of informal imperial relations across state boundaries. In other words, *both* sovereignty-eroding *and* sovereignty-enforcing practices reinforce imperial relations—albeit of different kinds. This helps explain why empire remains relevant to contemporary liberal order.

### Liberalism and postmodern empire

Left-wing critics routinely accuse key institutions of liberal order of, variously, supporting imperialism, engaging in imperialism, enforcing a system of neo-imperialism, and being tools of imperialists. Many of these claims rest upon Marxist understandings of the workings of capitalism as an imperial enterprise: one that forces open markets, imposes policies favourable to capital accumulation, and denies ordinary people economic self-determination.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural-adjustment programmes provide a favourite target for these charges. The IMF has a long history of conditioning its loans to cash-strapped countries on their adoption of pro-market austerity policies. These policies, at least in the short term, deprive the most vulnerable members of society of state-provided economic support and otherwise 'impose' neoliberal economics on developing countries. In agreeing to conditional aid—often without any real alternatives—recipient countries concede sovereign authority over domestic economic relations; their governments are reduced to local intermediaries between decision makers at the IMF and their own citizens (Figure 11.4). Notably, such arrangements can be beneficial to these intermediaries, as when Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso used IMF conditionality to force through cuts in government spending that he had sought for years, or when newly elected Uruguayan President Luis Alberto Lacalle used an IMF arrangement to force through similarly austere measures over strong domestic opposition (Vreeland, 2007).



**Figure 11.4** Stylized representation of a postmodern empire with two peripheries  
 (Note that: (1) the composition of the 'core' overlaps, but is likely not identical for each periphery;  
 (2) multiple actors in the 'core' have vectors of authority into each periphery).

The merits of this argument vary from case to case, but it should be clear that conditional international assistance sometimes creates authority structures rather similar to those associated with empires. Indeed, the record of British and US informal imperialism contains echoes of this kind of economic influence. Britain 'integrate[d] parts of the world that lacked adequate capital markets of their own' by supplying that capital. 'The essence of the contract was that recipients should honour their debts and generally maintain a regime that was stable and sufficiently congenial in its attitude towards expatriate interests to reassure foreign investors and their associates' (Major, 1994). After the Second World War, American diplomats and officials routinely set economic policy—or parameters for policy—in a number of Latin American countries.

IMF loans, as well as other conditional assistance, were said to position recipient governments as brokers between foreign actors and local citizens. But such a relationship need not be imperial, even if it involves limited concessions of sovereignty. The United States signs many agreements that



concede aspects of its sovereignty; but only a few cranks would consider the UN, the International Commission on Whaling, or other international institutions to exercise empire-like control over Washington. In this context, recourse to the same indicators we discussed for informal empire proves useful for identifying postmodern empire.

Another complication associated with postmodern empire, at least in its liberal variant, is that many of the institutions involved also exhibit features of uniform, rather than heterogeneous, contracting. At least in principle, liberal order is premised upon the same general bargain for states: most rules and norms apply to all states, sovereignty equality elevates every state to the same position of juridical equality, and membership in bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the United Nations (UN) reflects these aspects of liberal order.

In practice, of course, *realpolitik* concerns and the unequal distribution of power means that states seldom receive equal treatment in the 'court' of international law, norms, and opinions. Hypocrisy is an endemic feature of world politics. Such inequality also finds formal expression in international organizations themselves, such as the enjoyment of veto rights by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Regardless, liberal order embeds postmodern imperial relationships in an institutional environment with (extremely weak) federative principles. We discuss the significance of this in the conclusion.

### The postmodern character of postmodern empire

Liberal ordering produces a variety of these kinds of relationships, such as those found in UN peacekeeping operations, neo-trusteeship arrangement such as those following NATO intervention in Kosovo, and stability operations. As imperial relationships, these examples have a number of interesting and unusual properties that justify calling them 'postmodern empire' (see Figure 11. 4).

First, imperial relations generated by many of these arrangements are usually short-lived, giving postmodern empires an ephemeral quality. Periods of IMF-imposed structural adjustment tend to last no longer than a few years; some even less. Bosnia and Kosovo are outliers when it comes to peacekeeping operations that transfer significant sovereignty to international actors.<sup>7</sup> Typical peacekeeping operations, for example, last a little less than three years (Babcock, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>As opposed to, for example, UN border-monitoring operations, such as the United Nation Emergency Force I (1956–7) and II (1973–9) in the Sinai Peninsula. See <<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unef1mandate.html>> and <<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unef2mandate.html>> (both accessed 5 June 2011).

Second, in all of the kinds of empires considered earlier—whether formal or informal, ancient or modern—the core is a single territorial entity. Often, the political centre of the core is so centralized that a single city can stand as synecdoche for the core as a whole: Washington, London, Rome. The imperial relations created by liberal international institutions and regimes, in contrast, have cores composed of multiple entities. The IMF itself answers to multiple states, who enjoy voting rights proportional to their contributions to the organization's quota. One consequence of this arrangement is that 'the governance of the IMF favors countries that do not participate in IMF programs', with a result that countries such as Belgium and Canada have much larger vote shares than do Brazil or Nigeria. (Vreeland, 2007) This reinforces the sense held by many, especially in the developing world, that the IMF is a tool of Western neo-imperialism.

Peacekeeping and stability operations often are composed of multiple countries, international institutions, and even non-governmental organizations. For example, after the 1995 Dayton Accords, Bosnia and Herzegovina became, in effect, a trustee of a body known as the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), the majority of whose representatives are drawn from NATO member states and which operates under the authority of the UN. The PIC appoints the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, who in turn has significant authority over Bosnia's central and regional governments.<sup>8</sup> Although it has been roughly sixteen years since the Dayton Accords, most observers believe that Bosnia would collapse in the absence of foreign troops and oversight.<sup>9</sup>

The existence of a variety of different actors in the subject-position occupied by imperial cores creates well-known multiple-principals problems. Because agents on the ground—whether NGO workers, peacekeepers, or local officials—are responsible to a range of different governments and international organizations, they often receive conflicting directives. If they so choose, they can play their principals off against one another. Thus, postmodern imperial relations tend to involve much weaker leverage over peripheries than their ancestors, precisely because their cores are unwieldy agglomerations of

<sup>8</sup>Office of the High Representative and EU Special Representative, 'General Information', available at <<http://www.ohr.int/ohr-info/gen-info/>> (accessed 4 June 2011).

<sup>9</sup>As of 4 January 2001, 1,600 European troops remained in Bosnia. The US and NATO engage in significant defence-institution-building activities in the country, designed not only to enhance the effectiveness of its military but also its interoperability with NATO forces. See US Department of State, 'Background Note: Bosnia and Herzegovina', available at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2868.htm>> (accessed 6 June 2011).

different states and organizations. The IMF may soon face a similar problem. The long-term decline in the concentration of vote shares (the top ten countries now hold only about 40 per cent of the vote) might lead either to the IMF becoming less responsive to any single set of member countries or, more likely, to paralysis as the IMF becomes a forum for conflict between established and rising economic powers.

The usually ephemeral, frequently fragile, and contingent character of postmodern empire means that the international system contains, at any given moment, the appearance and disappearance of emergent short-term imperial relationships. These relationships exist in different sectors—economic, political, and military. Only sometimes, such as in Bosnia and East Timor, are all three sectors bundled together. More often than not, these relationships both emerge from and support liberal ordering: they seek to create and enforce negotiated settlements of inter- and intrastate conflict, forward market economies, and secure individual rights.

In this sense, postmodern manifestations of imperial relations play a fundamental role in liberal order. But we must be careful lest we overplay this dimension of liberal empire. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri argue that:

The new paradigm (of empire) is both system and hierarchy, centralized construction of norms and far-reaching production of legitimacy, spread out over world space. It is configured *ab initio* as flexible and dynamic system structure that is articulated horizontally ... Some call this situation 'governance without government' to indicate the structural logic, at times imperceptible but always and increasingly effective, that sweeps all actors within the order of the whole ... At the same time ... the effectiveness of the consensus under a supreme authority of the ordering appears ever more clearly. All conflicts, all crises, and all dissensions effectively push forward the process of integration and by the same measure call for more central authority. (Hardt and Negri, 2001 13–14)

Perhaps. Postmodern empires are, in fact, ephemeral and heterogeneous. They do play an important role in liberal ordering. To the extent that their cores are often a hodgepodge of state officials and international institutions, they take on a deterritorialized quality, yet their peripheries are almost always territorial units. However, their underlying structure, as we have argued, is otherwise consonant with traditional imperial organization. They engage in many (but not all) of the functions of earlier empires: maintenance of public order, transformation of local institutions in ways favoured by external authorities, and so forth. It is a mistake to believe that we need a 'paradigm shift' to understand how they work, and a greater one to attribute them to an inexorable 'capital-e' Empire. Instead, as is the case with modern informal empires and sovereign empires, they reflect, at most, an adaptive mutation of imperial relations to contemporary conditions.

## Conclusions

As a cursory knowledge of the British Empire suggests, the relationship between ‘liberalism’ and ‘empire’ is neither straightforward nor unambiguous. Contemporary liberal practices support at least three manifestations of imperial logics: informal interstate empires, sovereign empires, and post-modern empires. They simultaneously undermine each of these forms by, among other things, calling into question their fundamental legitimacy.

Empires, even if in mutated form, persist for a basic reason: an uneven distribution of power and governance will always characterize world politics. This uneven distribution ensures the persistence of forces that push and pull imperial formation. In one way or another, post-war international liberalism has struggled with a resulting dilemma: how to ensure the fulfillment of imperial functions—such as the provision of public order and the maintenance of a rule-based order—while rejecting the legitimacy of empire. Its solution, by and large, has been to ‘democratize’ imperial functions. It vests them in multilateral international organizations and otherwise attempts to ensure that they, as much as possible, reflect the consent of the abstraction that is the ‘international community’. Whether these efforts have succeeded, and even whether or not we should consider them sincere, remains very much up for debate. But the fact remains that, in a variety of ways, empires and imperial relations play a significant role in liberal ordering.