

# H-Net Reviews

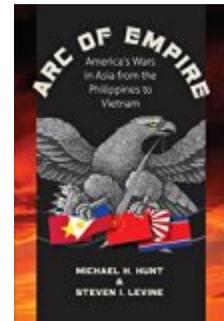
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael H. Hunt, Steve Levine. *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 340 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3528-9.

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America's interest in East Asia began toward the end of the eighteenth century, but picked up speed in the second half of the nineteenth century. The principal factor for this growth was the spread westward, to the Pacific Ocean shore, and the sailing of merchant and fishing vessels throughout this ocean. The intensified interest led to the United States threatening Japan so that the Asian country would allow American ships to anchor and be equipped in Japanese ports. It also led to America's annexing of a series of islands, in particular the Hawaiian Islands (1895). This interest and involvement in East Asia and the western Pacific took place at the same time as Japan's abandonment of its policy of isolation, having come to the realization that if it wished to become an industrial power, it had to obtain colonies in the east Asiatic sphere, both sea and land. The United States, however, also aspired to obtain colonies overseas, but its motivations were more political than commercial; in other words, it wanted to join the "club" of world powers alongside Great Britain and France. The practical American tendencies derived directly from the theses presented by various personalities, such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Alfred Thayer Mahan. The joining of theory and practice may be found in the annexation of Hawaii and, quite clearly, in the Spanish-American War (1898). In the wake of this war, the United States strengthened its hold on Latin America and also occupied the Philippine archipelago. In the long run, the Spanish-American War led to a deepening involvement in East Asia. Another practical manifestation that increased US involvement in East Asia was the declaration of the Open Door policy by Secretary of State John Jay in 1899. The purpose of this policy was to allow the United States to have cer-

tain economic rights in China. Gradually, the deepening American concern saw the United States conduct three very difficult wars in this region.

Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine's book examines the seven decades of American involvement in East Asia, from the occupation of the Philippines to the withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam. The book's four chapters are each devoted to one war: suppression of the revolt in the Philippines (1899-1902); the war with Japan as part of World War II (1941-45); the Korean War (1950-53); and finally the war in Vietnam, from the Americanization of that war in the first half of 1965 to the peace agreement in January 1973. Similarly each chapter integrates the events that occurred in the interwar periods, such as the Boxer Rebellion, the deterioration of US relations with Japan, the civil war in China, and the war against the Huks in the Philippines. The authors, who grew to adulthood in the 1960s as they relate in their introduction and who followed with concern the escalation of the war in South Vietnam, argue that the four wars, which the United States conducted in Asia, should be viewed as "not separate and unconnected," but as constituting a "single historical drama in four acts" (pp. 8, 1). They repeat this argument at the end of the book, saying that the chain of imperial logic connects the Philippines with Vietnam and that any attempt to relate to the four wars as individual events will result in a failure to understand the worldview of American policymakers in regard to "American Pacific destiny" (p. 237).

The two researchers bring to this study long-time expertise in the fields of the history of American foreign

policy and the history of East Asia. US actions in Asia, they claim, were of clear imperialistic essence, for they were identical to those taken by typical imperialist powers, notably, Britain and France. Thus, American policy was motivated simultaneously by ideological and nationalist motives: the carrying out of far-reaching changes in political, social, and cultural areas in the region was intended—destined—for colonization. So, too, these processes acted at the same time to suppress all nationalist opposition.[1] It is an argument that marks the book's weakness even as it characterizes its strength. It should not be forgotten—and, as said, the authors do not hide the fact—that they were direct witnesses to the huge permutation that American society underwent in the period of the Vietnam War. This shake up, which began on American campuses, was closely related to the development of the revisionist school of history. Very simply stated, this school may be defined as identifying the United States as a power that conducted an aggressive foreign policy in general, and as being responsible for the outbreak of the Cold War in particular.[2] Hunt and Levine, who belong to this school, base their arguments on the assumption that American foreign policy emanates from an aggressive ideology.[3]

The case of the Philippines represents a clear imperialistic essence, particularly in the years of the suppression of the rebellion, which had broken out in February 1899 after the United States refused to recognize the aspirations for independence on the part of the Philippine leader Emilio Aguinaldo. The occupation of the Philippines came at the apex of this imperialism, toward the close of the nineteenth century; however, the three other cases with which the book deals are problematic when discussion turns to US motives in East Asia. First, it must be remembered that the war with Japan and the wars in Korea and Vietnam were conducted against powers, whether directly or indirectly, and were not part of any imperialistic conquest or occupation. The deterioration of relations with Japan had begun toward the end of the nineteenth century and very clearly worsened after the Russo-Japanese War (1905). US involvement in Korea, too, may be related to American hopes to apply a brake to the Soviet Empire, which the United States perceived as wanting to violate the stability of East Asia by harming America's hegemony in the region. Thus, for example, the American conquest and occupation of Japan should be viewed, not as stemming from an imperialistic tendency, but as a process that ended World War II in the Pacific Ocean. Just as the United States governed and shaped West Germany after the war, so it very similarly

did with Japan. The imperialistic nature of the US presence in East Asia, from 1945 to 1973, offers then a subject of historical debate. This argument is strengthened in light of the fact that in many senses the United States did not act according to imperialistic principles, one proof of this being its granting independence to the Philippines in 1946. It is true that Britain and Holland began granting independence or clearing out their forces from different regions in Asia, but these withdrawals were made in the wake of their political and economic weakness in direct consequence of World War II. The United States, in contrast, did not become weak after the war.

America's behavior may possibly be explained according to John Mearsheimer's thesis, presented in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001): one of the powers in a certain region that is in the area of interest of a number of powers tries to obtain hegemony because such a step would help it to attain security. However, the inter-power rivalry leads in actuality to system instability. The reason is that this power (in our case, the United States) feels threatened by the other powers, which themselves hope to gain hegemony. All these powers, therefore, will fight among themselves in order to establish hegemony. World War II in the Pacific theater broke out as a result of hegemonic struggles between the United States and Japan. The years of the American occupation of Japan were meant, on the one hand, to preclude future aggression on Japan's part and, on the other, to prevent the penetration of the Soviet Union. This thesis may explain America's involvement in both Korea and Vietnam, the interventions intended to prevent Soviet or Chinese hegemony in those regions. The traditional principles of Chinese foreign policy, it should be remembered, hold that China must gain back territories that were under its control or influence in the past, as well as expand its regional influence and intensify its world power.[4]

In postwar Japan, as well as in South Korea and South Vietnam, the United States put into operation a mechanism that may be called nation building. The question arises, then, whether this mechanism contains an imperialistic essence or whether it is an attempt to stabilize a state/region politically, economically, and socially; or is it perhaps an attempt to instill American ideological principles and, therefore, a neo-imperialistic tendency? To establish, to the extent possible, an objective viewpoint, it is necessary to examine in depth the theoretical characteristics of three concepts: "imperialism," "hegemony," and "nation building." Such a study, which should be both historical and regional, can create a fuller picture of American foreign policy in general and of the period in

which Hunt and Levine's book deals in particular. Here, in effect, we reach the strong point of this work.

As stated, one may debate the imperialistic patterns in the cases of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, but it is difficult to avoid the fact that these wars stemmed from one another in succession. Thus, the political and military history of the United States in East Asia is laid out for the reader in a discussion that is well backed in a rich and relevant secondary literature that the authors spice with key documents of the period. It appears, though, that the entire discussion that is conducted in the book's four main chapters has the purpose of leading the reader to the conclusions chapter, where the two researchers ask whether American imperialism in East Asia is being repeated today, too, with America's involvement in Southwest Asia. In other words, the book can serve as a model for examining American involvement in other parts of the world, in particular the continuation of its presence and military involvement in East Asia (the issues of Taiwan and Korea), Latin America, and especially continuing patterns of activity in the Persian Gulf as part of the Southwest Asia space.

The start of American involvement in Southwest Asia may be identified already in the years of World War II with the takeover of southern Iran as part of the creation of a land bridge for the transport of logistical aid to the Soviet Union. The United States did evacuate its forces from Iran, but its interest in the area did not abate. Clear testimony of this was Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) activity that led to the deposing of Mohammad Mussadeq and the elevating of the shah to power (August 1953). Afterward, the United States initiated the Baghdad Pact (Central Treaty Organization [CENTO] from 1959). Officially, however, the United States was not a member of these defense alliances, but its participation in military discussions pointed to its commitment to come to the aid of states in case of Communist aggression. For the next twenty-five years, most American attention was directed at Southeast Asia, but the Persian Gulf was not overlooked by American policy shapers. The oil embargo that was levied by the Gulf states in the wake of US support of Israel in the course of the Yom Kippur War brought about a cut in oil-extracting quotas, causing a rise in the price of oil. Following this outcome, the United States weighed plans for taking over the oil fields. In summer 1977, the Carter administration published Executive Order 18, which recommended operating American forces in military situations not directly related to the defense of Europe. The decision explicitly cited the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Korea. One of the most important

points of this document was that American forces had to be able to act independently on land bases or with the logistical support of friendly countries in the areas of operation.

But the deepening American involvement stemmed from three events that occurred in 1979-80: the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iran-Iraq War. Under the Carter and Reagan administrations, the Persian Gulf became the third strategic region in the framework of the global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The region gradually gained equal importance with the European and Northeast Asia arenas. Because the United States already had defense plans, as well as organic forces, that could immediately be put into operation for the two other regions, there was urgent need to find political and military ways of operating for the defense of the Persian Gulf.

From America's point of view, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a direct continuation of the strengthening of the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the Arab Sea with its success in obtaining naval bases on the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and Iraq. The events of 1979-80 led President Jimmy Carter, in his annual address to the American people, to state that any attempt by an external force to take over the Persian Gulf would be considered a threat to the vital interests of the United States and that such a threat would receive a response by all the means required, including military force. This statement became the Carter Doctrine (1980), and it has constituted the theoretical-political basis of American policy toward the Persian Gulf to this day. The political declaration quickly turned into a military act. In March 1980, the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) was set up, and at the same time Washington began sending economic and military aid to Afghanistan. The National Security Council advisor in the Carter administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski, described the Persian Gulf in that period as a third strategic region and compared the new US strategic commitment to that which faced President Harry S. Truman after World War II. Militarily, there began a permanent naval presence with the stationing of aircraft carriers that arrived from the Pacific command, and the United States started negotiations to obtain bases in the region.

The commitment that was declared toward the end of the Carter administration was continued and even expanded by President Ronald Reagan. In 1983, the Central Command (CENTCOM) was set up, replacing the com-

bined task force. With the establishment of CENTCOM, the concept that the Persian Gulf was at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) southern fringes or at Pacific Command's (PACOM) western periphery was effectively abandoned. The organization of power also accompanied military actions when the United States involved itself directly in the Iran-Iraq War by taking upon itself the protection of oil tankers. The continuation of direct American military involvement was a determined response by the Bush administration to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, followed in the Clinton administration by the enforcement of a no-fly zone over Iraq, and then US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and its protracted intervention in those countries. As these lines are being written, the United States continues to operate in Afghanistan in parallel with continuing attempts to stabilize Iraq's political and economic systems, along with strengthening its military forces in the event that the United States needs to take military action against Iran's nuclear program. Thus, we can argue that the Carter Doctrine may be seen as a starting point for US involvement, which has grown ever larger in the Southwest Asia space, especially in the Persian Gulf region.

Hunt and Levine's book argues for a historical process that has gone on for seventy years, and not for four separate events. Therefore, this methodology, involving long chronological observation and not each event as a separate essence, can also serve for examining American involvement in Southwest Asia (and in others parts of the world). The understanding that this is a continuous process can lead to new discoveries in the area of the conduct of American foreign policy and the factors influencing and shaping it. This is a book that determines that American foreign policy stems from imperialistic patterns and principles. Of course, one may argue

with this basic argument. However, this claim engenders discussion of the characteristics of American foreign policy and the wars that the United States conducted and is conducting throughout the world. Hunt and Levine's book is important, therefore, to anyone who deals with the history of American foreign policy, not only with the geographical and historical area of East Asia but also with other regions around the world, both from a historical viewpoint and from the viewpoint of processes that are currently taking place but whose roots took hold in previous decades.

#### Notes

[1]. On the parameters defining "imperialism," see the discussion in Herfried Münkler, *Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 4-8.

[2]. For a discussion of historical approaches to the Cold War, see Odd Rane Westad, "The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1, *Origins*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Rane Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3-6; and Ruud van Dijk et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2008), xxvii-xxix.

[3]. See James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, *Empire with Imperialism* (London: Zed Books: 2005), 109-112. This argument in regard to aggressive ideology as a motive for American foreign policy was presented in Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[4]. John W. Garver, *Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1993), 253-254.

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