

British foreign policy adviser calls for a new imperialism

Robert Cooper, *The postmodern state and the world order*, Demos, Second Edition 2000, ISBN 1-84180-010-4 *Re-ordering the world—the long-term implications of 11 September*, Foreign Policy Centre, 2002, ISBN 1-903558-10-7

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Foreign Office Adviser Robert Cooper's call last month for the development of a "new imperialism" initially caused outrage amongst sections of the press and some Labour MPs. That one of Prime Minister Tony Blair's closest foreign policy advisers could make such an unabashed appeal was considered at best ill-judged. Especially after the UK government, fresh from its involvement in the US led war against Afghanistan, was involved in talks with the Bush administration on renewing its war against Iraq.

Yet Cooper's views were hardly secret. He first floated his neo-colonialist agenda back in 1996, in his book *The postmodern state and the world order*. His subsequent essay, published as part of a compilation in *Re-ordering the World—the long-term implications of 11 September* earlier this year, is largely a heavily edited version of his first, but with a different conclusion.

In both, Cooper argues that the Western powers had been too quick to proclaim the establishment of a "new world order" in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc regimes, and the subsequent war in the Persian Gulf.

Paralleling the "end of history" thesis advanced by Francis Fukuyama, Cooper states that the path has been cleared for the triumph of the free market across the globe. But he argues this should not blind the major powers to the reality that the world is less unified since the end of the Cold War. Not only had the Cold War created a balance of power framework that helped stabilise the international system for decades, but its end coincided with, and was the product of, a more fundamental change.

According to Cooper, "the revolutions and the re-ordering of alliances" that took place in 1989, could only be compared with Peace of Westphalia in 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years War. This agreement, which first established the principle of territorial sovereignty, laid the basis for the "balance of power and the sovereign independent state," that had come to define European and world relations. The upheavals of 1989 signalled an end to this framework.

Cooper states that the experiences of the 20th century, the First and Second World Wars, and the Cold War had made it clear that a change in the state structures was required. Consequently "a new form of statehood, or at least states which are behaving in a radically different way from the past", have emerged, which are "less absolute in their sovereignty and independence than before". He makes these points as unsubstantiated assertions—the entire chapter on the "Old World Order", i.e. from the

Holy Roman Empire until 1989, covers just six short pages. He presents a virtual idiot's guide to the history of European and world civilisation. First there were empires, then there were small states, then small states plus a balance of power system, then small states, the balance of power system, plus empires again, and finally, with the Cold War, empires based on the superpowers.

Cooper is indifferent to making a genuine analysis of the emergence and development of the nation state system. His reference to the past is only in order to provide a quasi-historical disguise for raw political ideology—namely to declare an end to national sovereignty (albeit only in certain areas) and to justify a new round of empire building. His main thesis is that the emergence of new forms of state systems is by no means uniform, and this is the source of the profound disunity and instability now facing the globe.

The world can now be divided into three types of states, he continues. First there is the pre-modern world where the state has lost legitimacy and subsequently its monopoly of force. Such states include Somalia, Afghanistan, Liberia, parts of former USSR such as Chechnya, Burma and parts of South America.

Secondly, there is the modern world, the classic state system, where the nation state retains the monopoly of force and is prepared to use it against another. Order in this part of the world can be maintained only due to a balance of power or some hegemonic force. Cooper gives as an example the Gulf region, where the US is "obliged to become the balancing element". These states still operate on the basis of "the recognition of state sovereignty and the consequent separation of domestic and foreign affairs, with a prohibition on external interference in the former".

Finally, there is the postmodern state. Here the traditional state system is also collapsing, "but into greater order than disorder". This world does not rely on a balance of power, nor does it emphasise sovereignty or the separation of domestic and foreign affairs. National borders have grown increasingly irrelevant due to the changing role of the state and the impact of new technology. The postmodern state epitomises the liberal ideal, he continues, as it eschews all "forms of collectivism such as class, race, state". Instead it sets its value on the "individual, hence its unwarlike character since war is essentially a collective activity". "In the postmodern state, the individual has won and foreign policy becomes the continuation of domestic concerns beyond national boundaries, not vice versa. Individual consumption replaces collective glory as the dominant theme of national life. War is to be avoided; empire is of no interest".

The supreme example of Cooper's version of a postmodern capitalist utopia—a world of individual consumers without contending class interests or national conflict—is the European continent, where European integration represents a “conscious and successful effort to go beyond the nation state”, even to the degree of pooling security arrangements. Cooper cites as evidence of this new state system the integration of a reunified Germany within the European Union. For decades Germany had disrupted the continent's balance of power, and it had seemed possible only to solve this problem through the country's division. That it had proved possible to reunify the country, without it presenting a threat to the rest of Europe, is only because a new “postmodern system” had been created, in which the European countries recognised they had collective interests and sought to share responsibility for maintaining or achieving them.

This transnational framework does not mark an end to the nation state, he continues. Nor is this desirable. But it does signal the development of a new type of power system. And because the European continent was the focus of this systemic change, it must play a leading role in confronting disorder in other parts of the world. His essay is primarily aimed at Europeans, Cooper writes, for “they face the twin challenge of making the new model of security work on their own continent while living with a world that continues to operate on the old rules”.

Cooper is less sure who else is worthy of membership of his idealised postmodern state system. Canada makes the grade—though the reasons for this are not explained. But Cooper's verdict on Europe's major economic and military rivals is more guarded. The US possibly does so, but only “up to a point” since it is unclear whether it accepts “the necessity and desirability of interdependence, or its corollaries of openness, mutual surveillance and mutual interference to the same extent as some European governments now do”. He is magnanimous though, speculating “the knowledge that the defence of the civilised world rests ultimately on its shoulders is perhaps justification enough for the US caution”.

Japan also scrapes into the postmodern world, although Cooper again hedges his bets. Japan is postmodern by “inclination although unfortunately surrounded by premodern states and so may have to revert for defensive purposes”. Russia could go in any direction.

With Europe at the centre of this enlightened international community, and the US and Japan in or on the edges, certain achievements can be made, he continues, purely through the exercise of economic power. Countries like China can be made to agree to certain commitments if they wish to trade with the rest of the world. Unfortunately this is not enough, for “most non-European states” resent “the cooperative world system... because it interfered with their full exercise of sovereignty.” Consequently, faced with a crunch point the multilateral system can be blown away. For Cooper, “the image of domestic order and international anarchy is false on one level”, as “anarchy remains the underlying reality in the security field for most parts of the world”.

With this reality in mind, the problem of the new postmodern state system is that “because the most powerful states have by and large come round to the same way of thinking, they no longer want to fight or conquer”. But this loss of “imperial urge” has led to what he calls “zones of chaos”.

Cooper stands reality on its head. The “zones of chaos” that he points to—Afghanistan, Burma, and South America—are not the result of Western indifference towards these regions. On the contrary, the ruined economies, lack of genuine democratic participation, civil wars and ethnic conflicts are the direct outcome of imperialist exploitation and political intrigue—both overt and covert. From Africa to Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, the Western powers have intervened time and again—arming various factions here, imposing political leaders there, deposing others elsewhere.

None of this worries Cooper unduly, as he proceeds to pile assertion upon absurdity. The disinterest in Empire also means Lord Palmerston's

claim that nations have no permanent allies, only permanent interests, is outdated. The opposite is the case, he insists! Whilst states retain certain interests, such as protecting their “citizens from invasion”, by and large within the postmodern world there are “no security threats in the traditional sense”, as none of them consider invading one another. What is defined as a “vital national interest” can change according to political or economic circumstances, but “friendships” between nations, codified in institutions like NATO and the EU, “constitute something analogous to a bond of marriage.”

Cooper's insistence that there is no longer any real possibility of a conflict of interests between the major powers is central to his thesis. He may place certain caveats on this with regard to the US and Japan's worthiness, but he insists that all have a vested interest in collectively policing the world.

But as Lenin explained in his polemic against the German theoretician of “ultra-imperialism”, Karl Kautsky, all alliances between the major powers, “are *inevitably* nothing more than a ‘truce’ in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the grounds for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars; the one conditions the other, producing alternating forms of peaceful and non-peaceful struggle on *one and the same* basis of imperialist connections and relations within world economics and world politics” (Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, p.111, Progress, 1975).

This is the essential flaw in Cooper's thesis. He argues throughout as if the major powers can simply decide to set aside their differences in order to pursue a common political agenda. But as Lenin insisted, imperialism is not a policy, but a complex set of economic and social relations characterised by an objective conflict between the major powers over who controls the world's markets and resources.

Cooper cannot ignore this underlying reality completely. He states, “Land and natural resources (*with the exception of oil*), are no longer a source of power for the most technologically advanced countries, ” (emphasis added) he states blithely. And later, “It is probably a vital Western interest that no single country should come to dominate world oil supplies.”

But if oil is the source of power, then why is it not in the interests of one of the Western powers to establish their own domination over its supply? Cooper does not say. Instead he relies on a readership that is more concerned with Cooper's pro-colonial propaganda message than with an attempt to honestly come to grips with political reality. But high level think tanks such as Demos and the Foreign Policy Centre, as well as Cooper himself, are fully aware that control of oil supplies has not only been the major factor in Western intervention into the Balkans, the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea region, but is the key focus of potential conflict between the major powers.

Cooper's call for the unity of the Western powers is in order to ensure their collective domination over any rivals—even if at present they are only regional powers—that may emerge. Powerful states, such as India, China and Brazil, have the capacity to become “destabilising actors”, he says. “Any of these states could, if things went badly wrong for them, revert to a pre-modern state. But it could be equally alarming if things went right for them. The establishment of internal cohesion had often been the prelude to external expansion... the arrival of any cohesive and powerful state in many parts of the world could prove too much for any regional balance of power system to contain it.”

And again, “In the pre modern world, states (or rather would be states) may be dangerous because they are failures; in the modern world, it is the successful states which are potentially dangerous”.

Clearly, any of those countries outside Cooper's “postmodern” orbit are damned whatever they do. If the “establishment of internal cohesion” within these countries is “alarming”, and threatens “global stability” then it stands to reason that the objective must be to keep these countries in a

state of constant instability and dependence.

This is nothing other than a rationale for imperialist intervention, and that is precisely what Cooper proposes. Not the nasty old-fashioned imperialism, which was driven by territorial interests and which is so unpopular, Cooper soothes, but a “new imperialism”—one that arises “from defensive motives” or “in pursuit of an idea”.

Cooper elaborated on this in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks, in the compilation published by the Foreign Policy Centre, with a foreword by Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The new imperialism must be one “acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values”, he writes, and could take two forms. First, there is the “voluntary imperialism of the global economy”. This would entail “failed” or “failing” nations being helped into the global economy in return for which they “open themselves up to the interference of international organisations and foreign states”.

The second form, is the “imperialism of neighbours”, whereby as the price for keeping security in their own backyards, the more powerful nations basically take over neighbouring countries, again voluntarily. The UN protectorates in Bosnia and Kosovo are Cooper’s models, as much of the aid, military hardware and personnel, and economic restructuring are the responsibility of the EU.

Every statement Cooper makes is a barely concealed apology for the forcible subordination of much of the world’s people to the dominant powers. His assertion that small nations “voluntarily” accept the economic dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund stands reality on its head. The leaders of these states, who in many instances act without any internal democratic accountability, are told by their masters to impose austerity measures and market reform or face economic ruin. Similarly, regarding the fact that the establishment of United Nations protectorates in Bosnia and Kosovo came after Western intervention had encouraged the break-up of Yugoslavia, provoked civil war and the destruction of whole towns and cities with tons of bombs and explosives, there is not one word.

Whilst acknowledging the important role played by the UN in the Balkans, Cooper is not persuaded that it can provide the main vehicle for the new imperialism—primarily because it operates on the basis of the “old world of state sovereignty”. Consequently it can only “defend the status quo not create a new world order”.

This disregard for national sovereignty when it comes to the oppressed nations is key for Cooper. He writes against former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, for his concern over abandoning sovereignty and adopting a “foreign policy driven by morals and domestic policies.” Kissinger had warned, “Once the doctrine of universal intervention spreads and competing truths contest we risk entering a world in which, in GK Chesterton’s phrase, ‘virtue runs amok’.”

Cooper insists that the Western intervention in Kosovo and Bosnia proved that the West was capable of intervening in the “domestic affairs of a state by force not consent”, but did so in pursuit of an ethical principle rather than territorial aims. Moreover, Kissinger fails to understand that his version of “competing truths” does not exist in Europe, which now shares common values, making “postmodern intervention feasible in a European context”.

There you have it. The future is European, and it is the benign Europeans, as bearers of the new postmodern system, that must now take up their responsibilities. Cooper waxes lyrical about the EU enlargement programme as an example of his “voluntary imperialism”. Whereas previous empires imposed their laws and systems of government on a subjugated people, “in this case no one is imposing anything”. Like Rome in its day, the EU can function as a “cooperative Empire”, providing “its citizens with some of its laws, some coins and the occasional road,” and bringing “liberty and democracy” to its constituent parts. Whether a country, as a precondition for “volunteering” for membership of the new

European empire should first have its economy strangled or its infrastructure reduced to rubble, he does not state.

At any rate, making the smaller nations an offer they cannot refuse may be enough. But if not, Cooper warns, the postmodern countries must not allow themselves the luxury of too much liberty and democracy. They must “get used to the idea of double standards”, he states. “Among ourselves, we operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative security”, but we “should not forget that in other parts of the world the law of the jungle reigns.” And “when we are operating in the jungle, we also must use the law of the jungle”. This means that when dealing with the “more old fashioned kinds of state outside the postmodern continent of Europe, we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era—force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary for those who still live in the 19th century world of every state for itself”.

Cooper’s views have proved immensely popular and influential within the Labour establishment. Many have noted that he is prolific in a way not usually allowed for foreign office advisers. His intellectual fingerprints were in evidence all over several high profile speeches made by government ministers. At last October’s Labour Party conference, Blair had called for the US initiated “war against terrorism” to become the starting point for a reorganisation of the entire world. Referring to the September 11 terror attacks, he asserted, “This is the moment to seize. The kaleidoscope had been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us”.

Later that month Foreign Secretary Jack Straw gave a speech before the International Institute of Strategic Studies, which borrowed heavily from Cooper. Warning that global stability was threatened by “distant and misgoverned parts of the world” and “failed states”, countries like Britain had a duty to create “order out of chaos”.

Cooper’s “new imperialism” has become the official ideological underpinnings of Labour’s foreign policy. And anyone surprised by his openly pro-colonialist statement has either had their eyes closed for the last few years, or is engaged in self-deception. After all, the Blair government has conducted more wars and interventions than any other in recent history.

Indeed, the initial outcry that greeted Cooper’s remarks was far from universal. Cooper has his admirers and defenders, not the least of which is the *Guardian* newspaper, the intellectual home of British liberalism. Columnist Hugo Young wrote that Cooper’s views “though controversial” were “not crazy”. The newspaper’s March 29 editorial stated that Cooper “is someone with things to say that deserve to be heard and not caricatured”. He is no “colonel Blimp”, but speaks as “a committed European who wants to extend the EU model, and its values, to the rest of Europe and who believes that global stability and liberty provide the best context for it”.

Whilst this was praiseworthy, it continued, in one crucial respect Cooper had failed to bite the bullet:

“There is everything to be said in principle in favour of a new world moral order”, but “the problem that Mr Cooper ignores and that seems not even to trouble Mr Blair any more is that the only one currently on offer is for the rest of the globe to be remade in America’s image and in the interests of the security of the US and its corporations. If there is any such thing as an acceptable postmodern imperialism, this most certainly is not it.” For any new imperialist agenda had to recognise that “America is a threat to global order too”.

So much for Cooper’s insistence on the existence of a postmodern system of cooperative states. For the *Guardian*, the new imperialism presupposes the assertion of European interests in opposition to those of the US. And Cooper, and by extension the Blair government, should wake up to this reality.

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