

Welcome to Colonialism 2.0

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The assault on Libya by a coalition of mostly Western nations begs the question: Is colonialism making some sort of a comeback? While their economies are collapsing in slow motion, it is hard to picture Western countries prospecting for real estate across the globe, as they did 300 years ago. But as unreal as it seems, it is happening.

Few will shed tears for Gaddafi because it was his impetuosity that cost Libya its freedom; of more concern is the fact that after 40 years the country's considerable oil wealth has reverted to Western control. Iraqi oil too is flowing west. Iran could very well be the next target of American and British warplanes.

Ironically, it is when the West is weak that the emergent nations of Asia and Africa have reason to worry. Colonialism 2.0 isn't just a catchphrase; it is simple economics: the wealthy will always need to be vigilant against the desperate.

In the 18th and 19th centuries when the world was being colonized by the likes of Spain, Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and the Dutch, India and China were the two richest countries in the world, together accounting for over 50 per cent of world GDP. And yet the two giant Asian nations ended up under colonial jackboots.

If you think colonization happened when the East was decadent and the West was rising or that India and China neglected their militaries and ignored the foreign threats lurking at their shores, you couldn't be more wrong. Both countries had very powerful armies and naval flotillas led by able commanders.

Military edge

In the early 1700's, India's legendary Admiral of the Fleet, Kanhoji Angre, routed the British, Dutch and Portuguese navies on the high seas. For 33 years until his death in 1729, the Indian remained undefeated. The British were so pissed they called him a pirate.

Indian ships of that time were so advanced in design and durability that the British inducted them into their fleet. In the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, Horatio Nelson's flagship HMS Victory was an Indian built vessel.

According to the Indian Navy's website, "This so agitated British shipbuilders on the River Thames that they protested against the use of Indian built ships to carry trade from England. Consequently, active measures were adopted to cripple the Indian shipbuilding industries."

The southern Indian kingdom of Mysore was the first in modern history to use rockets in war, and they used it with deadly effect against the British in the Battle of Guntur in 1780.

The literally shell-shocked British army fled from the battlefield. A few unexploded rockets were later shipped to the Royal Arsenal in London, where William Congreve, the British weapons expert, reverse engineered them to launch modern rocketry in Europe.

Most Indian rulers also possessed keen geopolitical awareness. For instance, they did not allow European merchants to keep garrisons or conduct inland trade. When Thomas Roe, the British monarch's emissary, landed in western India in 1616, he was made to wait a year before the Indian emperor granted him an audience. Three years later, Roe despite many entreaties and considerable bowing before the grandees at Delhi, returned without a trade treaty because the emperor saw no point in trading with a country that had not one product or commodity to offer India.

Thin end of the wedge

However, one slip-up by a weak emperor let in the hordes. A hundred years after Roe's exit, an English embassy had a stroke of luck when one of its members, William Hamilton, a physician of questionable medical skills, managed to relieve the figurehead emperor of severe pain in his groin. The emperor gratefully signed a decree giving the British inland trading rights, customs duty exemptions, and the right to keep a garrison. The rest as they say is history.

According to professor Rajesh Kochhar, emeritus scientist at the Indian Institute of Science Education & Research, Chandigarh, "These exemptions gave the English traders commercial advantages not only over other European companies but also over Indian traders. More importantly, the various official orders granting trade concessions gave the British a cause to defend, with military strength if needed." Does that sound familiar?

Return of the East

Today, the east is rising once again. Economists are stunned by the unprecedented flow of manufacturing, finance and wealth to the east. Magid Igbaria, former professor of management information systems at Tel Aviv University, wrote in *The Virtual Workplace*: "For all but the last 500 years of human history, the world's wealth measured in human capital and in goods was concentrated in Asia. During the past five centuries, the world's wealth has been concentrated in the West. This era is coming to an end. Today, the great concentrations of human capital, financial power, manufacturing power, and informed power are once again accumulating in the East."

Indeed, in 30 years India is predicted to overtake the US, even though it is only one-fourteenth the size of the US economy now. That is an incredible rate of wealth accretion.

The question is will the US and Europe simply watch the world go past? On the contrary, there is a concerted effort by a US-led coalition to stop this trend. Here are a few ways the West is trying to stay on top:

Base instincts: Today the US-led coalition has over 750 military bases across the globe. Despite the huge costs, this extension of military power is essential to their hegemony. A slew of European nationalities has followed the American military in its misadventures around the world. No empire in history has attempted such sweeping control. In Pliny's days the Roman, Indian and Chinese empires co-existed in their spheres of influence and never

attempted to destabilise each other. The good old days.

Divide and rule: The Americans are playing up India as a major “regional” power allied with the West. This is not only insulting to the Indians (why should India only be a regional power?), it also scares the hell out of the Chinese. The communists in Beijing, therefore, come out with kneejerk statements calling for India’s breakup, which in turn makes the Indians consider China a natural enemy. Amazingly, in the past 2500 years, China and India never had even a skirmish, until the British arrived on the scene and planted the seeds of border problems.

Climate bogey: After polluting the environment for more than a century, the West now wants India and China to reduce emissions. It’s a thinly disguised attempt to slow these rapidly growing economies. India’s Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh has done an about turn and now his views seem to align with Western interests, which led to key Indian negotiators quitting in disgust. Newsweek, the Pentagon mouthpiece masquerading as journalism, was sufficiently pleased with Ramesh to label him the “global rock star of climate change”.

Dollar gambit: Wouldn’t you feel almighty if you obtained a license to print US dollars off your home printer? While the rest of the world has to earn a living the hard way, the Americans just print dollars to pay their bills. Need a few hundred billion dollars to pay for the war in Iraq? Want to buy Venezuelan oil? Russian titanium? No problem. The US mint cranks the lever and billions of dollars start rolling off the presses. In fact, in recent years even that pretense has been given the heave-ho – now trillions of dollars are generated electronically in the accounts of the US Federal Reserves. It’s as simple as that.

There is another way the dollar trade works against the interests of non-Western countries. Countries like China and Russia invest their earnings in US treasury bonds; these dollars are used by the Americans to maintain their global military supremacy, build increasingly modern weapons, and reward their allies with cash, weapons, and security umbrellas.

WTO: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has called it “archaic, undemocratic and inflexible” and dominated by a small group of developed countries which indulge in protectionism. One of its aims is to pry open the agricultural markets of Asia, including India. Incidentally, India has the highest number of farmer suicides in the world.

Nixing nuclear tech: The 11th commandment: Thou shall not acquire nuclear technology. Indian and Japanese nuclear scientists perfected the fast breeder reactor (which generates more nuclear fuel than it uses) so they never have to look outside for hard-to-get uranium). However, most likely under US pressure, both nations have quietly shelved their technologies.

Space crunch: America’s space ambitions are currently grounded because of deep cuts. India has the world’s largest number (177) of satellites in space. NASA is aware of it; it is looking at joint ventures with the Indian Space Research Organisation which has reliable rockets and something like 20,000 engineers and scientists. Few are aware that during the 1990s, India requested the Russians for a role in the International Space Station, but the Americans said no. Now NASA wants a free ride on Indian rockets, and India’s feckless politicians are happy to oblige.

According to former Panama ruler General Manuel Noriega, who now languishes in an

American prison despite doing decades of dirty work for the CIA, “if there is someone willing to buy a country, there is someone willing to sell it.” Worryingly for emerging nations, there are plenty of collaborators like Noriega in their midst willing to sacrifice national interests for a few million dollars in a Swiss bank account and green cards for their families.

In the first era of colonialism, the then dominant Eastern nations opened up their economies and territories to comparatively backward Western nations over a span of several decades, finally ending up as their colonies. Under the guise of globalization and ‘free’ trade, Colonialism 2.0 could happen in much the same way.

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