

How Europe's history of interstate rivalry is linked to global imperialism – and why it still matters today

What were the origins of European imperialism? Drawing on a new study, [Jan P. Vogler](#) explains that centuries of European interstate rivalries were an essential contributor to historical imperial expansion by the continent's major powers. He outlines three mechanisms that link interstate competition to colonial expansion and illustrates them through two historical cases.

On the surface, it may seem like imperialism is a relic of the past. The subjugation and exploitation of peoples and territories around the world by European empires reached its peak long ago, in the late nineteenth century. Then, through a long process of decolonisation during the twentieth century, the countries of the Global South gained formal independence.

But this formal end to European empires is overshadowed by their manifold and persistent legacies. For example, the global distribution of income is stubbornly durable: in general, the richest countries from the early twentieth century are [still the wealthiest countries today](#) and, for the most part, the poorest countries from that time also remain among the poorest. Although some East Asian states have been able to catch up with the West, overall, there is little movement in relative global income rankings. Similarly, scholars have also argued that the effects of imperialism are still visible in the domestic [economic](#), [political](#), and [infrastructural](#) characteristics of many former colonies.

While imperialism has shaped the world and its [diverse effects](#) are [still visible today](#), the debate on its *most important causes* has not been settled. A multitude of economic, cultural, and political theories exist that all aim to explain why European rulers engaged in the acquisition and exploitation of colonies. In this respect, I recently wrote [an article that introduces a novel theory](#) fully focused on the crucial role of European interstate rivalries.

Specifically, I suggest that three mechanisms associated with these rivalries led to global colonial expansion. Those are first, rulers' desire for relative prestige gains through territorial expansion; second, significant budget pressures that resulted from recurring interstate warfare; and third, the creation of powerful interest groups in the forms of navies and armies that had a vested interest in the long-term continuation of imperialism.

Prestige gains

A key component of European interstate rivalries was rulers' desire for relative prestige gains. Victories in war and the associated land acquisitions improved not only the military and economic power of political elites, but also played a key role in determining their *relative status*: by enlarging their territorial spheres of influence, rulers gained the recognition of their peers.

But the occupation of new territory in Europe was usually very difficult for a variety of reasons. Among those reasons was that other ruling elites on the continent typically had access to comparable military technology and tactics, that is, significant defensive capacities.

The same was not true with respect to polities in other world regions. There, European militaries often profited from a stark asymmetry in military technology and tactics that allowed them to occupy large swathes of territory against much less significant resistance. Accordingly, in rulers' constant zero-sum struggle for relative prestige through territorial acquisitions, the establishment of overseas colonies generally represented an easier means to improving their status.

Budget pressures

A second, *material* factor shaped ruling elites' incentives for imperial expansion: budget pressures that resulted from the escalation of military expenditures during episodes of warfare. When major powers faced each other on the battlefield or in naval combat, budget deficits due to military purchases sometimes reached unprecedented levels. Consequently, rulers sought for ways to alleviate the fiscal burden from ballooning levels of debt.

Early episodes of colonial expansion had already delivered massive inflows of silver and gold to European states. And, although not all colonial enterprises turned out to be profitable, there was a widely held belief among political elites that imperialism was generally lucrative (or at least had significant potential to be so). Thus, rulers sought to establish colonies and charge tariffs from colonial trade because they anticipated that these would be crucial additional sources of tax revenue.

Interest groups

The third and final mechanism is the creation of powerful interest groups. Specifically, although armies and navies initially merely represented 'tools' in the hands of rulers to effectively wage wars, these organisations and their leaderships soon developed their own genuine interests and political agendas. After all, the state had equipped them with significant material and coercive capacities, which implied that the state had given them not only the *means*, but also the *incentives* to find a permanent (peacetime) purpose that would legitimise their access to these resources.

Thus, when direct military confrontation ended, militaries found it in their interest to promote imperial expansion as the next best purpose to support their social and economic position. As the establishment of colonies often rested on coercion (and thus required superior military power), it became a natural source of relevance to militaries – and especially to naval forces.

Historical rivalries

We can see these three mechanisms at work by considering two separate well known rivalries among major European powers. The first rivalry is the one between England and France in the eighteenth century. Especially the aforementioned mechanisms regarding budget pressures and the formation of interest groups are highly relevant and visible in this time period.

As a result of a series of major wars that started in 1688, both England and France experienced dramatic increases in public expenditures and subsequently sought to establish and maximally exploit colonies and colonial trade to address these budget issues. Furthermore, the English Royal Navy became an extremely powerful organisation that profited from and lobbied for the continuation of imperial expansion. In comparison, the French navy was not as well funded and could not develop into as strong an interest group as its British counterpart, which might partly explain France's generally less successful colonial expansion in this century.

The second historical episode that helps us understand these mechanisms is the rivalry between Imperial Germany and Great Britain that started in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this historical rivalry, the desire by rulers for prestige gains through colonies is particularly visible. Both British and German elites were convinced that a colonial empire was a necessary means to maintain their country's great power status.

In this respect, German foreign secretary (later Reich chancellor) Bernhard von Bülow infamously demanded 'a place in the sun' for the German Empire. Moreover, through its access to significant resources, especially in the late nineteenth century, the German navy rapidly developed into a politically powerful actor and its officers embraced an ideology of 'navalism'. According to this ideology, too, colonies were a necessary means to great power status. Thus, both the mechanisms regarding prestige and interest groups are highly visible in this specific great power rivalry.

Why imperialism still matters

It is clear that Europe's contemporary international position is directly related to its past. In addition to the fact that the current global distribution of income and political power clearly reflects the era of imperialism, the existence of the European Union is a direct result of centuries of intense military rivalries among states.

The most important insight in this sense is that these two major underlying historical phenomena are closely related. Sustained and intense rivalries among European great powers were an *essential cause of imperialism*. And because these historical phenomena continue to shape the world we live in, we must not only understand both in their full complexity, but also examine the multifaceted connections between them.

For a more detailed account of these arguments and historical cases, see the author's accompanying paper in the [Journal of Historical Political Economy](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Maksim Shutov](#) on [Unsplash](#)
