

# EMPIRES OF THE WEAK

HOLLANDSCHE SCHIP.



THE REAL STORY OF EUROPEAN EXPANSION AND  
THE CREATION OF THE NEW WORLD ORDER

J. C. SHARMAN

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*J. C. Sharman*

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Dedicated to my family and Bilyana



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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONE OF THE GREAT pleasures of writing this book has been the opportunity to roam around considering historical questions that are fundamental to how we think about politics past, present, and future. The really big changes in international politics have little to do with the European major coalition wars that are often the staple of International Relations textbooks and scholarship. These wars have basically upheld the status quo of a fragmented Europe with a slowly changing cast of great powers (great by parochial European standards, if not always by more cosmopolitan global ones). So when it comes to transformations of international politics, perhaps it would be true to say that nothing interesting has happened in Europe for at least the last 500 years, perhaps even since the fall of the Roman Empire.

For the shifts that have fundamentally altered international politics we have to look elsewhere. Prominent amongst these transformations is first the creation of a global international system and the accompanying multi-civilizational order, second the briefer but vitally important period of European imperial world dominance for around a hundred years or so, and finally the even shorter span that saw decolonization and the return of Asian great powers. I am mainly concerned with the first of these topics, the creation of the first global international system. Dating roughly from the end of the fifteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, this centers on a process of European expansion that helped to knit together previously separate regional systems.

It's important not to read "European expansion" as synonymous with European conquest or empire. Instead, in Africa and Asia, the process of expansion owed much more to European submission than dominance. Particularly when they encountered Eastern empires far mightier than any European great power of the day, Europeans had little choice but to pay deference. Though they were quick to use violence whenever they thought they could get away with it, more important than military prowess in explaining expansion was

the coincidence whereby Europeans' goals were largely maritime—trade routes and port outposts—whereas local great powers were concerned with controlling land and territory, but largely indifferent to the seas. These complementary preferences allowed for a rough-and-ready coexistence. In addition, European ventures in the East and the Atlantic world were crucially reliant on the cultivation of local allies, patrons, and vassals. Finally, in the Americas, various pandemics allowed European adventurers to destroy local empires, though these well-known triumphs were balanced by lesser-known defeats. In the early modern period right through to the present, changes in military and political institutions across civilizations proceeded according to cultural prompts, largely independent of functional concerns about effectiveness and efficiency.

In making and backing these claims, relating to a huge range of times and places, this book either had to be very long or quite short. The reason for writing a short book is the hope of appealing to a somewhat wider audience inside and outside of academia that might not usually be much interested in history, and perhaps a few people who might not ordinarily read social science. But if there are benefits to a short book for both the author and the readers, it's only fair to acknowledge that there are serious costs as well.

The main penalty is the lack of room to really dig into and discuss all the brilliant work relevant to the topic that has informed my thinking. In getting feedback from various generous colleagues and three anonymous reviewers (of whom more below), a recurrent theme was that there are so many other authors, theories, and debates that could and should receive more attention in the text. These commentators are right: there are many authors, theories, and debates that could and should have received more attention (or even a mention). But by and large they haven't. It's very important to stress that this is not a sign of disrespect or disagreement with either the original authors, or those providing comments. Nor is it an effort to overstate the originality of this book by slighting the work I build on. Instead, it reflects a calculation that research, writing, and many other things are based on trade-offs, and that the cost of neglecting vast reams of earlier scholarship is nevertheless justified in having a shorter and more accessible book.

Although this book is less concerned with immersing the reader in existing scholarship, it is in part an attempt to gently nudge (rather than hector) us to think a bit harder about how Eurocentric we still are, and what this costs us. No doubt all right-minded, good-thinking people already agree that Eurocentrism in the abstract is a bad thing. But to see how much the problem is still with us one only has to look at the table of contents or indexes of most books on international politics and history to see the extraordinary predominance of European places, actors, and events, relative to the rest of the world. This book has some of the same bias, but I hope to a lesser degree.

If I have flagrantly disregarded much of the wise advice I received about including a more detailed literature review, it remains true that many of the key elements of my argument here I owe to those who were kind enough to comment on draft text or oral presentations. I was particularly lucky to begin the project at one very stimulating and supportive academic environment, Griffith University, and finish it at a very similar institution, Cambridge University. I thus had two sets of colleagues to exploit.

At the early stages in Brisbane, Sarah Percy and especially Ian Hall gave me crucial steers on what was wrong with my first cut at the project and, even better, how I might go about fixing it. I presented initial versions at Griffith, the Australian National University, and a little later at my current departmental home, Politics and International Studies in Cambridge, and the European International Studies Association. Some of these meetings have featured formal discussants who went well above and beyond their rather thankless mandate in working hard to understand and improve my rough drafts, and so thanks in particular to Daniel Nexon, Sean Fleming, and Alex Wiesinger. Similarly selfless was the commitment of the three anonymous reviewers of the draft manuscript; it was a privilege to have my ideas receive such careful and constructive treatment. Andrew Phillips taught me a lot about how to do this kind of research in various discussions over the years, some directly related to this book, others only tangentially. At Cambridge the Department and the History & International Relations group, organized by Maja Spanu and Or Rosenboim, has provided the perfect

setting for bringing this research to completion. In Cambridge and in London, Ayşe Zarakol, Duncan Bell, and George Lawson further helped me think through some big historical International Relations questions. I am also very grateful to David Runciman for providing the first link with Princeton University Press. At the Press, Sarah Caro performed an invaluable role in shepherding the manuscript through to acceptance and completion.

Though this research is very different from my other interest in tax havens, money laundering, and corruption, the common thread is that any research takes time, and getting time often requires money. The Australian Research Council has been extremely generous in providing this money through grants FT120100485 and DP170101395. Some similar arguments appearing in this book were first featured in the article “Myths of Military Revolution: European Expansion and Eurocentrism,” published in the *European Journal of International Relations*.

In some ways, the book marks a return to an even more ambitious failed project I tried almost forty years ago, “History of the Wold” [*sic*]. With any luck, having completed a primary, secondary school, and university education since that time will make for a somewhat more successful result second time around.

Speaking of the longer term, as ever my biggest thanks go to my family and Bilyana.

## EMPIRES OF THE WEAK



## INTRODUCTION

# The Military Revolution and the First International System

EUROPEAN EXPANSION from the end of the fifteenth century to the end of the eighteenth transformed the world in creating the first genuinely global political and economic systems. It was initiated by near-simultaneous voyages West across the Atlantic to the Americas, and South and East around the coast of Africa, across the Indian Ocean to Asia by explorers like Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. The subsequent growth of the European presence across the oceans is often said to be the result of superior military power: better weapons, and better organizations for using them. Known as the military revolution thesis, it argues that expansion was primarily the result of European militaries and states outcompeting opponents abroad, because Europeans were better adapted to the demands of war, having survived and learned from fierce competition at home. It is based on the assumption that competition produces more efficient organizations that are better adapted to their environment, thanks to a combination of rational learning and Darwinian selection.

In this book I question each element of this account, and suggest an alternative explanation. Europeans did not enjoy any significant military superiority vis-à-vis non-Western opponents in the early



modern era, even in Europe. Expansion was as much a story of European deference and subordination as one of dominance. Rather than state armies or navies, the vanguards of expansion were small bands of adventurers or chartered companies, who relied on the cultivation of local allies. Fundamental to the Europeans' success and survival was a maritime strategy that avoided challenging the land-based priorities of local polities, and in the Americas disease that brought about a demographic catastrophe. The greatest conquerors and empire-builders of the early modern era were in fact Asian empires, from the Ottomans in the Near East, to the Mughals in South Asia, and the Ming and Manchu Qing in China. Giving due attention to these great powers helps to correct the Eurocentrism that has so often biased earlier studies, and brings into question conventional cause-and-effect stories about war-making and state-making. A more cosmopolitan perspective reveals the diversity of the relationships between military and political development, in that there were many roads to different outcomes rather than one route to a common destination.

This alternative perspective contrasts with the traditional view of European expansion being a state-directed effort, premised on using the same tactics and technology as in warfare between Europeans. It brings into question the idea of tight cause-and-effect connections between new weapons, tactics, large standing armies, and the rise of the sovereign state. More broadly, the argument put forward here contradicts and supplants the model of military competition producing efficient, well-adapted fighting organizations through some combination of learning and elimination.

The significance of the process by which the first global international system was created is in many ways obvious. Vast, ancient, and previously isolated civilizations came into regular contact with the rest of the world. People, goods, diseases, and ideas circumnavigated the globe for the first time, transforming societies and ecologies in their wake. Yet for the purposes of this book, I concentrate on a few key implications for world politics, but also for the way we study it.

We have had a connected, global international system for around 500 years, a period often seen as synonymous with the era of Western dominance. The assumptions that have underpinned the study

of the international system and the theories developed to explain it both start from this premise of Western military and political hegemony. But in fact, for more than half the time there has been a global international system, it was not dominated by the West. On the contrary, European nations were puny in comparison with Asian great powers like the Mughal or Chinese Ming and Qing empires in terms of population, riches, and military might. The fact that this has often not been recognized illustrates how deeply warped our sense of the historical development of international politics is and has huge implications for our understandings of the past, present, and future. Biases of place and time have not only systematically overstated the importance of European powers while understating the importance of those from other regions, they have also fixed a single, deterministic path of military-institutional development as constituting the historical norm.

The history of warfare is crucial as the raw material for generating and testing many social science theories. Military force has been regarded as the ultimate decider in world politics. The military revolution thesis that recurring wars between the great power drove military innovation and state-building in Europe, which subsequently gave these states a competitive advantage they used to dominate non-European polities, is a bedrock of much historically oriented social science. It has informed our understandings of the rise of the sovereign state and the modern state system. Scholars are increasingly interested in the rise and fall of the international orders. The period from 1500 to the end of the eighteenth century gives us an example that is at once intimately connected to our own through myriad historical legacies, while being distinct enough to jolt us into an appreciation of how a pluralistic global order works, absent the domination of any one civilization. How much of what we think we know about the way international politics works is really a parochial, Eurocentric perspective on the way *Western* international politics works? The early modern period uniquely has a potential to answer this question.

From the conventional historical perspective of a “Columbian” or “Vasco da Gama” epoch of military-driven European dominance, the prospect of a global international system not dominated by the West, sparked by concerns about rising powers like Japan, or more

recently China and India, looks historically unprecedented—a leap into the unknown. Putting early modern Asian great powers in their proper context would make such a future world seem much less remarkable or strange; perhaps it would be a return to the historical norm after a relatively brief period of imbalance. This is one way that changing our views about the past can fundamentally change our views of the present and the future.

In looking at the way history informs our theories of how international politics works across time, I offer some thoughts on the relationship between the disciplines of history and social science. A key conclusion is that historians and social scientists share more similarities than either often likes to think. I also emphasize what those in the social sciences, especially International Relations and political science, can learn from recent revisionist historians' work about relations between Europeans and other civilizations in Africa, Asia, and the Americas to supplant the military revolution thesis. Any effort to understand a topic as huge as the creation and workings of the early modern global international order requires the insights of different disciplines.

### *The Shape of the Argument*

A recent book observes that “in all the debate, few scholars have actually tested [the] claim that the military revolution underlay European colonialism. To what extent did Europe’s military innovations between 1450 and 1700 actually provide Europeans an edge in warfare?”<sup>1</sup> The evidence I present in Chapters 1–3 shows that the military revolution thesis simply does not fit with the evidence from either Spanish conquests in the New World, or Portuguese, Dutch, and English engagements in Asia and Africa.

To begin with, the styles of warfare Europeans used abroad were almost completely different from those that they used at home. With rare exceptions, neither the tactics, nor the armies, nor the organizations fit the templates of the military revolution thesis and great power war in Europe. The volley fire by massed musketeers protected by pikemen that came to dominate warfare in Western and Central Europe was almost never used elsewhere. Instead of the massive armies states deployed in Europe, expansion in the wider

world was propelled by tiny expeditionary forces. Furthermore, in most cases these forces were essentially private, being ad hoc bands of adventurers or chartered “company sovereigns.” Different circumstances in different locations called for different responses, undermining the idea that there was one, superior, European way of war.

More fundamentally, by and large, there was no general European military superiority over other civilizations in this period. The *conquistadors* achieved their most famous victories in the Americas thanks to a combination of disease, local allies, and cold steel,<sup>2</sup> while their less well known defeats belie the myth of their invincibility. Europeans maintained their toeholds in Africa under the sufferance of African rulers. On the rare occasions the Portuguese and others challenged African polities to war before 1800, they generally lost. Europeans adopted a general position of deference and subordination to the manifestly more powerful empires of Asia, from Persia, to the Mughals, to China and Japan. Once again, the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and Russians were all on the receiving end of sharp defeats in the exceptional instances they clashed with these empires. Finally, at home in Europe and the Mediterranean, Europeans struggled to hold out against the Ottomans, and experienced consistent disappointment in their military ventures in North Africa.

So far this is all rather negative; if not the military revolution, what, then, does explain the first few centuries of European expansion? It’s important to spell out the main elements of my positive thesis. First, a reminder that expansion is not at all the same thing as domination or conquest.<sup>3</sup> In early modern Africa and Asia, the European presence was overwhelmingly maritime, focusing on militarized control of seaborne trade through key ports and sea lanes. In contrast, most powerful local polities were largely indifferent to the seas, being concerned with control of land and people. This coincidence of complementary maritime and terrestrial preferences allowed for a rough co-existence between the “lords of land” and “masters of water.” Despite a general European posture of deference to more powerful local rulers, certainly it was not all peace and harmony. Expansion involved a great deal of violence. At a more tactical level, European coercion of weaker African and Asian

actors rested on the cultivation of local allies, and military, logistical, political, and cultural adaptations to varying local contexts. Finally, in the Americas, as noted, there was the additional factor of disease and demography that laid low the most powerful empires, and consistently sapped the strength of indigenous resistance thereafter.

Taking a less Eurocentric, more wide-ranging view of the interaction of war, politics, and society from the Western to the Eastern extremity of Asia further undermines key tenets of the conventional wisdom. The Chinese, who invented and developed gunpowder weapons from 900 to 1200, had already reached most of the key milestones of military and administrative modernity centuries before Europeans. The Ottomans and Mughals constructed polities that commanded far more people, money, and military power than any of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European counterparts. The Mughals overawed the essentially trivial European presence on the fringes of their domain until the unraveling of their empire at the beginning of the 1700s. The Ottomans steam-rolled their opponents, first by destroying the last remnants of the Roman Empire, then conquering Arabia, North Africa, and Southeast Europe.

How does an understanding of these Asian polities change our perspective on developments in Europe? First, it disconfirms the idea of a single path to military effectiveness, of sequences of necessary and sufficient causes, either technological or tactical, by which war makes states. Second, it undermines stereotypes according to which relatively transient successes by small European polities are too often portrayed as epochal triumphs, whereas mighty, long-lived Asian empires are characterized as merely failures waiting to happen.

The discussion so far may seem to be avoiding the obvious retort: the Europeans won in the end. In response, the concluding chapter examines the lessons drawn from the early modern period in light of the subsequent experiences of the nineteenth-century “new imperialism,” when European armies carried (almost) all before them. It then contrasts the “new imperialism” with the subsequent European contraction in the twentieth century characterized by decolonization, and Western defeats at the hands of various Communist and Islamist insurgencies. It makes the point that the