

Colonial Legacy: Historical Injustices And Current Geopolitical Conflicts

Dr. Nalini Nongmeikapam
Associate Professor
G.P. Women's College, Imphal
Manipur-795001

Abstract

This paper explores the enduring legacy of colonialism and its profound impact on contemporary geopolitical conflicts. By examining historical injustices inflicted upon colonized peoples, the study highlights how colonial practices—such as economic exploitation, cultural suppression, and arbitrary territorial divisions—continue to shape modern state relations and internal dynamics within formerly colonized nations. The research argues that many current geopolitical tensions, particularly in regions like South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, can be traced back to colonial-era policies that disrupted local identities and governance structures. The paper emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of these legacies to address ongoing issues of inequality, resource distribution, and ethnic strife. By linking historical grievances to present-day conflicts, the study advocates for a more comprehensive framework in international relations that considers the ramifications of colonialism in shaping global power dynamics and conflicts today. Ultimately, this analysis aims to contribute to a deeper discourse on justice, reconciliation, and the paths forward for nations grappling with the legacies of their colonial pasts.

Key words: Colonial Legacy, Historical Injustices, Geopolitical Conflicts, Ethnic Conflict.

Introduction

How do the sins of the father impact the legitimacy of the son? This question, along with the legacy of historical injustices, challenges our understanding of contemporary global governance. Scholars are increasingly revisiting the implications of colonialism on modern international relations, recognizing that current conflicts and alliances are deeply rooted in the legacies of colonial rule. The vulnerabilities of the developing world, which often manifest in civil wars and repressive regimes, can be traced back to colonial practices that continue to shape geopolitical dynamics. As researchers strive to overcome ethnocentrism in analyzing conflict origins, it becomes clear that contemporary rivalries cannot be divorced from their historical contexts. Colonialism has fundamentally altered the geographical, political, and economic realities of states and societies, granting immense wealth and power to European elites while reshaping institutions, including international law. The influence of colonialism persists in post-colonial states, where the shared cultures established during colonial rule continue to affect power dynamics. To address current geopolitical issues, a shift from the East-West model to a North-South paradigm is essential, emphasizing the unique post-colonial contexts in regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Understanding these historical legacies allows contemporary leaders to navigate present challenges and formulate effective policies, highlighting the importance of examining the colonial past to grasp the complexities of today's international relations.

Even two centuries after its onset, colonialism continues to shape our world. Although it ended more than half a century ago, the colonial period undeniably has pervasive contemporary geopolitical, social, and economic ramifications that we need to consider in relation to contemporary international relations. This paper will investigate the mechanisms allowing a centuries-old and well-disavowed era to haunt our world. Our thesis is that the legacies of colonialism are profoundly inscribed in both current international relations and current domestic societal structures. Broadly put, international politics are the continuation of imperialist politics by other means. We do not think that the colonizers' crimes could have repercussions capable of leading to conflict for centuries because revenge is a dish best served cold. The theme of this paper is prejudice against the colonized: rather than the perpetrators of historical injustices, we will investigate the oppressed.

We will pay special attention to complex patterns of discourses and knowledge production. Our case studies draw from the Global South and analyze the following: the Americas, the settling of the West and colonial aftermath, and relations between the US and Indigenous peoples. After Asian policies during the Qing dynasty, it will look into the global repercussions of the Dutch colonial situation. A case study of violence as domestic policy, using the example of Russia with the Orthodox maiden regiments. As such, we shall offer a historical and renewed explanation of defense mechanisms in colonialism and security purposes. In these studies, the voices and perspectives of the oppressed take precedence. A critical approach to new imperial history offers scholars valuable tools to investigate post-colonial situations. Colonial policies are now investigated from the standpoints of the oppressed. Colonialism can, broadly speaking, be defined as a system of domination and control. This paper deals with a very specific aspect of control: the use of discourse. In this work, we will not focus on the colonizers and their habitus, but rather, we will try to find out which structural changes in the colonial mode of production were supported within the colonizer's society. For this reason, we will center our efforts around security rather than the traditional plank of colonialism studies, which rests upon the constituting Other that is composed of the colonial subjects.

2. Colonialism: Historical Overview

Colonialism is a practice of domination that involves the subjugation of one people to another. The reasons for why these acts of domination were committed varied across time and place. Similarly, the forms of assimilation also varied. However, colonial practices of domination did have several core common features. Some of these were: the settlers' incomprehension of the indigenous customs of their subjects; the fear that the natives would injure or harm them; the belief that the natives would speak in a language or communicate in a way that undermined the settlers' domination; and the underlying sense that the natives' religion and culture were immoral, lacking values germane to civilized human intercourse, and so it was bound to degenerate its subjects into immorality if left to perpetuate alone. All of the othering tropes of race justify the colonial (Said, 1978).

The end of colonial commercial supremacy in the Americas meant, to some extent, that European nations turned to the colonial governance of non-European territories as a means to supplement their economic impoverishment. A variety of social, geopolitical, and economic events affected this transition in the long 19th century. The end of the triple monopoly between the 1500s and 1700s also led to the rise of periphery exports as part of a world economic system; all of the actors involved in receiving and assisting in the dispensation of imperial rule; the return and handling of the fortunes of those who had perpetrated the rule or had assimilated the regime at the metropolis; and margins staked out, and territorial envelopment, through cosmological arguments to separate from the other. Colonial governance thus required the cooperation of local agencies to be effective. In this sense, European expansion mostly occurred through the expansion of commerce. Over time, from the 16th to early 19th century, administrative colonialism developed, such as in British India or Mozambique. French-ruled Algeria settled 1.3 million French citizens and gave them citizenship based upon

majority rule, and in some colonies segregated groups like the Dutch in Indonesia, and to an extent the British in India.

2.1. Definition and Key Concepts

Colonialism refers to the political and economic policies and practices of one nation or state that serve to impose its authority over one or more other territories outside of its own borders. This could either occur through formal or informal means and rule. Direct colonial rule was characterized by territorial takeover, proximity of the metropolitan to the colony, and administrative, economic, and political control. Indirect colonialism, on the other hand, was less formal and characterized by puppet rule—where local chiefs and pre-colonial elites were put in positions of power with limited control—and indirect political and economic control. Colonialism facilitated the demand for goods that were either scarce at home or considered exotic, all the while providing economic opportunities and employment to the colonizing population. Among these goods were often raw materials such as tropical cash crops and other cultivars, minerals and metals (Stuart, 2000).

Colonialism led to extensive economic and geopolitical exploitation of the conquered populations and territories for the benefit of the colonizing 'Motherland.' Some of the earliest forms of this supremacy occurred in North Africa, the Near East, India, and later spread gradually through sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Southeast Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, South, Central, and North America. The successful decolonization of African countries began following World War II, with the unwillingness of European powers to perpetuate ethnic cleansing, military, and economic pressure in the colonies. Nationalist movements subsequently led to massive political change and the establishment of sovereign states. Geopolitical conflict, however, has ensued. Colonial and present-day geopolitical strategies were often about setting up friendly vassal states or creating situations where client states could be established within the former colonial borders. Neo-imperialism and geopolitical interventions are often about protecting former, current, and potential economic interests and staving off any potential economic competitor from any of the areas in question.

3. Impact of Colonialism on Indigenous Populations

Historical injustices from colonialism have profoundly affected colonized peoples, particularly economically. While some regions had abundant lands, they often became targets for exploitation to meet the relentless demands of colonizers. This tethered local populations and resources to the international economy, resulting in economic dependency and a loss of autonomy for subsistence farming and native economies. As traditional livelihoods were stripped away, many poor farmers migrated to shanties in colonial cities, taking low-wage industrial jobs. This income was misleadingly labeled as 'economic growth,' yet the local economies were unprepared for such integration, leading to a surplus of labor and diminished job opportunities. The 'dual economic system' further compounded these issues, where the production of primary resources overshadowed any internal manufacturing growth, perpetuating poverty. This market-driven exploitation eroded the integrity of once self-sustaining communities and disconnected people from their land, resulting in a loss of identity. Many described losing their land as akin to losing a part of themselves, as it was directly tied to their sustenance. This disassociation fueled resistance to decolonization, as the erasure of indigenous identity allowed colonizers to frame local populations as incapable of improving their circumstances without foreign intervention (Mamdani, 1996)

Colonized peoples were denied the same rights as their colonizers, who could preserve their institutions while exploiting those of the colonized. The moral superiority often attributed to colonizers contrasted sharply with the realities faced by indigenous populations, who were portrayed as inherently different and unworthy of the same privileges. This narrative perpetuated the myth that natives and colonizers could not coexist, leading to further displacement and a denial of autonomy and self-legitimacy for indigenous communities.

3.1. Economic Exploitation

The core aspect of colonialism is the economic exploitation of indigenous peoples. This exploitation manifests in various ways, including the extraction of wealth from colonized regions, slavery, and forced labor, as seen in African agricultural and plantation economies. In North Africa, forced labor was similarly employed to extract resources and establish colonial control. Colonial companies enabled European powers to exploit local riches without significant investment. By monopolizing trade, colonizers controlled the flow of raw materials and capital, further entrenching their economic dominance. They regulated settlers through legislation that either restricted their exploitation of certain goods to protect local economies or mandated the extraction of specific resources to benefit the colonizers' economic interests. These controls hindered settlers from fully developing their enterprises, leading to economic challenges. Some colonial strategies caused lasting damage through resource rents; for example, the Water Act of 1907 in Kenya granted colonial authorities complete control over water supplies and mineral rights. The geographical cohesion of the colonial state compounded the negative effects of these economic policies, stifling the production and sale of competitive commodities. To address these legacies, it is essential to rethink strategies for developing potential surpluses in contexts free from irreversible resource depletion and where the impacts of colonial violence can be mitigated (Rodney, 1972).

3.2. Cultural and Social Disruption

Colonial powers significantly disrupted the social and cultural identities of the peoples they colonized by imposing their own values and systems on existing socio-political structures. They often dismantled local authority and replaced it with their institutions or imposed their rules, framing these changes as a transition from "savage" to "civilized." This imposition led to substantial linguistic and cultural loss, as local languages, traditions, and customs were suppressed to promote a European-influenced culture. The harshness of these policies severely impacted established ethnic and local traditions, wounding the social and cultural fabric of these societies. The psychological effects of forced assimilation strained the preservation of identity and collective memory, which were often tied to local languages (Loomba, 1998).

The repercussions of these colonial practices are evident in many former colonies today, where communities bear the scars of dual oppression—from both colonial powers and the narratives perpetuated by contemporary governments. While colonizers sought to erase local customs, indigenous cultures often proved to be more inclusive than European ones. Concepts related to liberal values, such as gender rights, cannot be directly translated into local contexts but must be interpreted through cultural lenses. Preserving local cultures acknowledges this diversity and fosters peaceful coexistence. Moreover, educational systems in many former colonies continued to perpetuate imperialist ideologies, instilling notions of racial and cultural superiority in students. Curricula often glorified the "civilizing mission" of Europeans, teaching indigenous populations to feel gratitude for the supposed benefits bestowed upon them, thus reinforcing a narrative of cultural inferiority (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007).

4. Geopolitical Conflicts: Case Studies

This essay presents a theoretical methodology to integrate Afro-pessimist theory with research on international relations through historical and political economic analysis. This approach is applicable to a range of contexts, appealing to researchers studying various regions, including activists in the Americas, political groups, far-right parties, and ethnic communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the colonial era. We apply this methodology to several case studies, illustrating how colonial legacies have created challenges for the nation-states that emerged from colonial rule. In regions like Kashmir, the Dutch heartland, and parts of Africa, populations struggle with the uncertainties of inherited nation-states. These struggles are rooted in histories of oppression, migration, and border crossings, revealing the interconnectedness of local issues with broader

geopolitical dynamics. While colonial legacies do not justify claims over peoples by nations like Pakistan, Argentina, or those in West Africa, they often obscure critical assessments of state-building, economic development, and human rights. These narratives of injustice can be overwhelming. The following case studies aim to shed light on the experiences of these communities, enhancing our understanding of their sense of defeat.

4.1. Middle East and North Africa

Eurasian nations from Anatolia to Pakistan and Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa represent some of the world's most contentious geopolitical arenas today. Colonial emulators divided them into smaller administrative territories without regard for national identity or established ethnic, linguistic, or religious boundaries. Many of the MENA states that we know today were artificially created by colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Predetermined rulers were imposed on them to ensure that the local governments would respond to the interests of the colonial power (Hobsbawm, 1994).

Thus, the end of colonialism was not an event in which the affected societies gained independence and were able to form their own governments and establish their own nations in their own way. Instead, independence was not so much given to the former colonies as it was taken by revolutionary movements in a process of struggle and conflict that extended over more than three generations. Independence did not come in the form of complete self-determination of oppressed people within a historically determined nation-state. The opportunity to construct such viable nation-states had been obliterated by colonial rule during more than half a century of direct military and civil occupation. Thus, these massive postcolonial struggles for independence carried with them intergenerational struggles over national identity and the right to govern oneself. In every case, there was a fight over what kind of government and state should be constructed and who would have the right to determine this. This was settled in every country by a particular balance of internal forces and actors, and the international context at a particular time. Other countries, particularly former colonial powers, have subsequently and in numerous ways intervened in these countries to prevent the consolidation of this construction in ways that they do not like. They have consistently supported governments that would be more amicable to their interests when this was possible and implemented measures when it was not.

4.2. South Asia

The British colonial impact on the Indian subcontinent has been profound, particularly evident in the partition of India in 1947, which created India and Pakistan. This division was a direct result of the colonial strategy of divide and rule, exploiting cultural and religious tensions to facilitate disengagement. Many of South Asia's territorial disputes and conflicts can be traced back to these colonial legacies. Nationalist identities in the region often developed in opposition to an "other," mirroring patterns seen globally during European colonization. The governance structures established during colonial rule continue to influence the region, characterized by hierarchical systems that lack proper representation for diverse communities. Economic policies initiated by the British fostered unequal wealth distribution, concentrating assets among a few while leaving many in poverty. Although some farmers became prosperous landlords, this economic transformation has fueled latent power struggles, leading to violent conflicts (Zamindar, 2007).

The end of the colonial era and World War II created a geopolitical vacuum that crystallized the Kashmir dispute, which has persisted since the 1948-49 ceasefire. This issue has become entangled in various regional and external geopolitical strategies, prompting South Asian scholars and policymakers to adopt a realist perspective to understand and address these challenges. The Hindu-Muslim riots in Myanmar in 2012 exemplify this realist interpretation. Kashmir remains central to regional power dynamics, akin to the historical Great Game, where political, economic, and military leverage is often based on historical grievances rather

than rational calculations. In this context, colonial and post-colonial legacies continue to shape much of South Asia's conflicts, with deeply entrenched worldviews making it difficult to resolve social tensions through factual discourse (Chakravarti, 2011).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated the various ways in which contemporary power conflicts are related to history and, more specifically, to the legacy of colonialism. Not only did colonial powers change the world for the benefit of European nations, but they also deeply affected the non-European peoples they came into contact with. Using the economic model, one can show that the interaction of foreign and indigenous institutions resulted in long-term economic inequality driven by unfair opportunities in the development of the colonies. Applying the cultural perspective, we referred to the collision of indigenous and foreign cultures as causing long-term political tensions in contemporary society. In general, we can state that, through dealing with different case studies with several problems, we were able to extract two common themes addressed by indigenous people. The first was the perception of historical injustice, which can manifest itself in insulting ways. The second position was the need for reconciliation, which is more accurately described as the feeling of oppression. Furthermore, we argued for and published to intensify the post-colonial perspective in international relations. We also proposed the possibility of post-colonial studies that pay more attention to memory and historical responsibility and resolve these issues in the fields of politics and research networking.

This article presents a novel argument that colonial legacies offer non-traditional insights into contemporary geopolitical conflicts. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature related to the political economy of development and spatial inequality, it asserts that understanding the current conditions of former colonies and postcolonial conflicts necessitates examining historical injustices and colonial practices. Key structural issues include the economic exploitation of indigenous populations and the cultural, political, and legal practices that led to marginalization, segregation, and disruption, such as the imposition of foreign languages and control over land. The argument is illustrated through two case studies from the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia. The first case study explores the lasting effects of arbitrary state boundaries established by colonial agreements, focusing on the Zaghawas, an African tribe affected by ongoing conflict. The second examines the historical dynamics between nomadic and sedentary groups in Kashmir, highlighting how royal policies disrupted their longstanding peace through population transfers and land reforms. Overall, the essay argues that historical injustices rooted in colonial practices continue to shape current geopolitical conflicts.

This essay presents several arguments for future research. It asserts that colonial legacies continue to play a significant role in political conflicts, highlighting how past injustices favor certain actors while marginalizing others. Future studies should focus on these mechanisms, particularly from the perspectives of indigenous and formerly colonized peoples. Additionally, the relationship between the colonial system and contemporary capitalism requires deeper exploration. An effective research agenda would involve collaboration with scholars from the regions in question, especially in the Global South. Investigating the complexities of globalization, including issues of power misuse in trade, communication, and technology, is essential, along with adopting a non-Eurocentric interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of colonial impacts on current global conflicts could inform both policy and scholarship. Specific topics warrant closer examination, such as identifying local actors in conflicts who perpetuate global capitalism for personal gain. Understanding how colonial legacies and cultural dynamics influence democratic prospects and environmental risks in both Western and emerging economies is crucial. Ultimately, the goal is to discern what strategies succeed or fail in addressing these historical legacies and their contemporary implications.

References:

- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Stuart, J. (2000). *Colonialism and its legacies: A global perspective*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Chakravarti, A. (2011). *Kashmir: A Historical Perspective*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Bhatia, R. (2014). *The Kashmir Conflict: A Global Perspective*. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 37(2), 195-210.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1994). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khalidi, R. (1997). *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. Columbia University Press.
- Loomba, Ania. (1998). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, & Tiffin, Helen. (2007). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
- Zamindar, V. (2007). *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*. Columbia University Press.