

Imperialism: Civil Services Examination Notes

Imperialism is the ideology and policy of extending the rule or authority of a country over that of another and its people either through military, economic or political means.

As imperialism is an important concept for the Civil Services Examinations, this article will explain the concept in great detail.

Origin of Imperialism

Although the earliest examples of imperialism can be traced back to the third millennium BC empires of Assyria and Babylon, the modern concept of imperialism arose in the 17th century with the rise in European colonialism.

The word 'Imperialism' comes from the Latin word "*imperium*", which means 'sovereign power' or simply 'rule'.

Often imperialism is associated with the word colonialism, but historians have always argued that although the two are closely related, they have their fundamental differences.

What was the purpose of Imperialism?

It has been debated that the main focus of imperialism has always been power projection and economic growth for the country carrying it out. Keeping the focus of European imperialism in mind, territorial expansion was largely focused on economic growth by collecting resources from subjugated territories and maintaining control either through military or political means. The British colonisation of India can be regarded as an example.

Types of Imperialism

Different types of imperialism were carried out by the European nations to achieve a wide-ranging set of political, military and economic goals, they are as follows:

1. **Colony:** A region our country governed directly by a foreign power. The example of this is British control of India and French control of Vietnam and Cambodia.
2. **Protectorate:** Where a country or a part of its territory has its own government but is under the control or 'protection' of a foreign power. The British protectorate of the Niger River delta was an example of a protectorate.
3. **Sphere of influence:** An area where an external power claims exclusive rights and privileges for trade and investment. Central Asian nations were under the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union through the duration of the Cold War

- 4. Economic Imperialism:** Independent but less-developed nations controlled by private businesses rather than by foreign governments. For example, American fruit-based companies had a monopoly on fruit production, particularly bananas, in the Caribbean region and some parts of Latin America. As these nations were dependent on the trade of bananas for the survival of their economy, they were at the mercy of the whims and fancies of these American fruit companies leading to coining of the term 'banana republics'.

You can find out more about the difference between Old Imperialism and New Imperialism through the linked article.

Results of Imperialism

English economist, John A. Hobson through his book, **Imperialism: A Study** (published in 1902) explains that free enterprise capitalism had a negative impact on the majority of the population who have practised imperialism or those that were at its receiving end. Hobson argued that the cost of maintaining overseas holdings drained money at home that would otherwise be used better in the home country. The investment made in the colonies due to the lower wages paid to the workers overseas, meant higher profits and higher rates of return.

This brought little benefit to the local workers in the colonies as they were paid substandard wages pushing them further into poverty. Despite domestic wages remaining high in the home nation, it left little scope for domestic growth as the outgoing capital put a strain on resources. In conclusion, Hobson argued that through the export of much-needed capital, the growth of domestic wages was put to a stop along, leaving no room for improvement in the standard of living whether at home or in the colonies.

Walter Rodney, a Guyanese economist, in his 1972 classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, proposes the idea that imperialism is a phase of capitalism which stated that "*Western European capitalist countries, the US, and Japan established political, economic, military and cultural hegemony over other parts of the world which were initially at a lower level and therefore could not resist domination.*" Walter argued that imperialism "*for many years embraced the whole world – one part being the exploiters and the other the exploited, one part being dominated and the other acting as overlords, one part making policy and the other being dependent*"

Frequently Asked Questions About Imperialism

What is the concept of imperialism?

Imperialism is the state policy, practice, or advocacy of extending power and dominion, especially by direct territorial acquisition or by gaining political and economic control of other territories and peoples.

What is the main purpose of imperialism?

Imperialism is simply a manifestation of the balance of power and is the process by which nations try to achieve a favorable change in the status quo. The purpose of imperialism is to decrease the strategic and political vulnerability of a nation.

Why is imperialism viewed in a negative light?

As a form of economic organization, imperialism is unnecessary and immoral, the result of the mis-distribution of wealth in a capitalist society. That created an irresistible desire to extend the national markets into foreign lands, in search of profits greater than those available in the Mother Country.