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**FROM IMAGINED COMMUNITY TO SECURITY ZONE
TO INTERNATIONAL EMPIRE: THE MANY LIVES
OF THE MONROE DOCTRINE**

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Mondi occidentali. La dottrina Monroe al bicentenario**FROM IMAGINED COMMUNITY TO SECURITY
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DA COMUNITÀ IMMAGINATA A ZONA DI SICUREZZA A IMPERO INTERNAZIONALE.
LE TANTE VITE DELLA DOTTRINA MONROE

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ABSTRACT

[It.] Quella bicentenaria della Dottrina Monroe è una storia di adattamenti, trasformazioni e appropriazioni. La prima parte del saggio analizza i più significativi tra questi adattamenti. Il testo del 1823 concepiva l'emisfero occidentale come una "comunità immaginata" di repubbliche americane basata su un'identità condivisa, seppur un po' sfuggente, mentre il corollario del 1904 la trasformò in un sistema di sicurezza imposto dagli Stati Uniti. Infine, il suo dispiegamento all'interno del sistema interamericano nel corso del XX secolo portò alla creazione di un "impero internazionale" guidato dagli Stati Uniti. La seconda parte esamina la Seconda conferenza internazionale degli Stati americani (1901-1902), un episodio spesso trascurato nella storia del sistema interamericano che di fatto aprì la strada all'impero internazionale come tipologia di formazione imperiale operante nell'emisfero occidentale per tutto il XX secolo.

Parole chiave: Stati Uniti e America Latina – Dottrina Monroe – Diritto internazionale.

[Eng.] The bi-centennial history of the Monroe Doctrine is a history of adaptations, transformations, and appropriations. The first part of the essay discusses three major turning points. The text of 1823 envisioned the Western Hemisphere as an "imagined community" of American republics based on a shared, if somewhat elusive, identity, while the 1904 corollary transformed it in a US-enforced security system. Finally, its deployment within the inter-American system along the 20th century led to creation of a US-led "international empire". The second part discusses the Second International Conference of the American States (1901-1902), an often-overlooked episode in the history of the inter-American system that in fact paved the way for international empire as the type of imperial formation operating in the Western hemisphere across the 20th century.

Keywords: United States and Latin America – Monroe Doctrine – International law.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the sacred text of 1823 is a global history of adaptations, appropriations, and hybridizations. In the United States, slave-holding power in the Southern states invoked it against British abolitionism, nativists against other subversive European “isms”, protectionists against free trade, and so on. Starting from the late 19th century, several generations of Latin American liberal internationalists, legal scholars, and critics of US empire have sought to turn it into a multilateral framework protecting sovereignty and self-determination from armed intervention, territorial expansion, and post-colonial hegemony. Finally, outside the Western hemisphere, German and Japanese advocates of empire during the interwar years reinvented it as a foundation for their own spheres of influence¹.

It is also an inter-imperial and trans-imperial history, and not only because – by envisioning the US as a *primus inter pares* among American republics – it laid the ground for Washington influence over the Western hemisphere. Indeed, the doctrine would have been unthinkable without the collapse of the Spanish empire in the New World: it could only be enforced within the US’ larger, multidimensional collaborative partnership with the British Navy. Finally, it was instrumental in hiding the US empire-in-the-making. With its emphasis on republican values and alterity in relation to the European «system» and balance of power, it not only concealed the imperial nature of US continental expansion but also obscured the extent to which that expansion was crucial for creating a global order centered on the interests of 19th-century European powers. The Monroe Doctrine was thus part of what Nicholas Guyatt has defined the «double lie» of US exceptionalism². Reassessing the Monroe Doctrine after its first two hundred years of life therefore enables us to recognize that the US was a nation *and* an empire from the very beginning while also seeing how that imperial formation changed over time.

In the first part of this essay, I briefly sketch a broad trajectory of how the doctrine helped to conceptualize the Western Hemisphere as a US-led imperial space. In my view this entailed three steps: an «imagined community» of American republics based on a shared, if somewhat elusive, identity followed by a US-enforced security system at the turn of the century and, finally, an «international empire», defined by Paul Kramer as an imperial formation in which «order [is] produced through the coordination of multiple, ‘legitimate’ nation-states, the promotion, management, and disciplining of flows and connections between them, and disproportionate power within multilateral

¹ J. Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine. Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hill & Wang, 2011.

² N. Guyatt, *The United States between Nation and Empire, 1776-1820*, in K. Hoganson, J. Sexton (Eds.), *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Vol II, 1820-1900, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 56.

bodies»³. While these three steps can be seen as consecutive, in reality they were often intertwined in their deployment on the ground.

In the second part, I focus in greater detail on what I see as a crucial moment between the second and third steps: the Second International Conference of the American States (Mexico City, October 1901-January 1902), an often-overlooked episode in the history of the inter-American system that in fact paved the way for international empire as the prevailing – although by no means only – type of imperial formation operating in the Western hemisphere across the 20th century.

2. THREE STEPS

The original version of the doctrine frames the Americas as a liberated zone, a republican space that is not only distant from but also more advanced than monarchical Europe. As Anders Stephanson put it in a penetrating critique of the exceptionalist outlook of the first and second generations of the founders:

Synchronic incompatibility between the principle of the Holy Alliance (i.e. reactionary Monarchy) in Europe and the Americas (i.e. republican independence, the government of the self) also entailed a diachronic aspect such that it would be unnatural, against the providential course of history, to regress from the latter to the former. The polarity between Europe and the Americas in general, the Holy Alliance and the United States in particular, was thus expressed at once spatially and temporally: the two spaces exist at the same chronological moment in two different historical epochs, the one qualitatively further ahead than the other⁴.

This was especially evident in the «non-colonization» principle outlined by John Quincy Adams. The American republics cannot be forced back to a colonial status, it posited, because they *already* are free and independent; they occupy a more advanced point along a linear progression whose most advanced stage is, of course, the US. The clock cannot be turned back. Furthermore, the stage of the Americas is more advanced because there is no hegemon in the traditional European sense of the word: the US sets the standards and provides the example, but it does not take responsibility for protecting its sister republics, offer guarantees, or act as a security provider (even while its imperial drive is being acted out in the North American continent through a rather brutal version of settler colonialism).

This dynamic can be observed in action at several moments, for example in the instructions sent by the Department of State to US ministers serving in the newly recognized republics. To encourage republican government in Spanish America, the Monroe administration directed its ministers not only to counter European influence, but also to urge the new states to follow the political example of the United States. By adopting written constitutions, guaranteeing individual rights, and subordinating «the military to the civil power», the new states would «ensure the liberties of the future generations». At the same time, Adams also supported plans for a «great American confederation» in the hemisphere. He advocated federalism both as an internal policy applicable to each nation and as a general principle for the states emerging from the collapse of the Spanish empire, as it was instrumental in fostering

³ P. Kramer, *Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World*, in *American Historical Review*, No. 5, 2011, 1348-1391.

⁴ A. Stephanson, *A Riff*, in *H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews*, No. 10, 2012.

political isolation, republican government, and liberal commerce. In fact, in their instructions to US agents Monroe and Adams also pressed the new states to adopt the commercial principles they associated with political liberalism. A few years later, Henry Clay's instructions to US envoys to the Panama Conference of 1826 – who, by the way, never made it to Panama – struck a similar chord. Those «infant states» must follow the exemplary Northern republic, its political institutions, and commercial practices, he asserted. Not a single word was uttered in terms of security and protection, however, and no entanglement was ever considered⁵.

And this brings us to the central purpose of Theodore Roosevelt's radical overhaul of the doctrine (1904): exercising police powers in the Hemisphere in the name of inter-imperial internationalism amounted to turning the Americas into a rather traditional imperial sphere. Shared identity, imaginary as it might be, was put aside if not replaced altogether by highly real and stark hierarchies of power and civilization, with the US obviously on top and race never too far from the surface. In this view, Latin Americans represented different stages of civilization: some of them had the potential to be at least partially uplifted, as the dividing line between savagery and civilization was defined by culture as well as by biology. There is indeed a vast literature on “America and the world” stressing the long-term inter-imperial and trans-imperial forces affecting the global projection of US power. While America had always been “an empire among empires” to some extent, this was especially the case with the 1898 shift and the overseas territorial expansion it triggered. Roosevelt himself personified this inter-imperial ethos. As he wrote to British top diplomat and close personal friend Cecil Spring Rice in 1904:

It was a good thing for Egypt and the Sudan, and for the world, when England took Egypt and the Sudan. It is a good thing for India that England should control it. And so it is a good thing, a very good thing, for Cuba and for Panama and for the world that the United States has acted as it has actually done during the last six years⁶.

So much for US exceptionalism. Theodore Roosevelt's corollary transformed the Monroe Doctrine both as a cornerstone of U.S. foreign relations and as an identity-making tool. His “Big Stick” version was part of a new orientalist discourse that recast the place of the United States in the world – from the new, righteous half of a divided West with Europe as the villain to the assertive member of an extended, transatlantic West with a global, barbarian South as the villain. His reading of the doctrine combined the cultural premises of civilizational imperialism with the assertive claim of US police powers in the Western hemisphere, with the latter apparently lying at the core of Roosevelt's worldview at least as much as the former.

3. NEGOTIATING IN MEXICO CITY

While Washington was building and enforcing its security system in the Caribbean and Central America, as the multiple gunboat diplomacy-style interventions in the area aptly show, a new kind US-led imperial

⁵ J. Lewis, *The American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783-1829*, University of North Carolina Press, 1998; C. Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions*, W.W. Norton, 2016; P. Gleijeses, *The Limits of Sympathy: The United States and the Independence of Spanish America*, in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, No. 3, 1992, 481-505.

⁶ Theodore Roosevelt to Cecil Spring-Rice, 18 January 1904 in E. Morison (Ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. III, *The Square Deal*, Harvard University Press, 1951, 699.

formation was taking shape. The US role in the Second International Conference of American States (Mexico City, October 1901-January 1902) is an early example of the US-led international empire that fully emerged in the good neighborly inter-American relations of the interwar years. Here I will try to show how this case study sheds light on the intersection between US internationalism, international law, and empire.

I focus on John Barrett, one of the two diplomats of the US delegation at the conference. He later served as US minister in Argentina, Panama, and Colombia before finally acting as director of the Bureau of American Republics from 1907 to 1924 (renamed Pan American Union in 1910, this entity morphed into the Organization of American States in 1948). A publicist turned diplomat who embodied the pro-business, internationalist agenda of early-20th century progressive Republicans, Barrett was an influential advocate of a US-led hemispheric order⁷.

Drawing on Barrett's exchanges with John Bassett Moore, Frederick W. Holls, and other prominent members of the US legal, academic, and political establishment before and during the conference, I show how Barrett navigated between divergent interpretations of US hegemony, Pan American cooperation, and international law. Examining this navigation is useful, I believe, to show why the many lives of the Monroe doctrine are relevant to understanding the many shapes and forms of US empire.

Barrett's immersion in Inter-American affairs at Mexico City is relevant for a wider discussion of US empire only if we first clarify a few methodological assumptions. First, it should be rescued from a traditional, US diplomatic history approach and reassessed through the lenses of the growing "America and the world" subfield and its engagement with the history of empires in particular. Kramer's notion of international empire is a case in point. US empire in the Americas should not be understood in a vacuum, but rather within a set of inter-imperial tensions and trans-imperial connections, as well as forms of local resistance and regional dynamics⁸. Second, the attempt here is to both take imperial history seriously and not fall prey to the view Tanya Harmer has called the historiographical Monroe Doctrine, that is, studying hemispheric matters in isolation from global context. Finally, an investigation of the sources and nature of US power remains at the core of my research. Therefore, I am also receptive to recent calls to re-center the focus on the US, the state, and domestic factors⁹.

Barrett found himself navigating troubled waters in Mexico City. On one hand, since the US was an early proponent of arbitration as an alternative to European-style power politics, it had to reconcile its old, legalist tradition with its newly acquired imperial status in the Americas. On the other, most Latin American republics sought to appropriate the US' Pan American discourse and legal tools to curb US expansion within a multilateral framework. Voluntary arbitration was now more suited to the former, while mandatory arbitration was more suited to the latter.

From the vantage point of Washington DC, balancing its imperial internationalism with the alternative internationalism of hemispheric anti-imperialism advocated South of the Rio Grande was quite a complex balancing act, all the more so in light of domestic reactions to the occupation of the Philippines. However, the looming construction of an interoceanic canal in either Nicaragua or the Colombian province of

⁷ S. Prisco III, *John Barrett, Progressive Era Diplomat: A Study of a Commercial Expansionist, 1887-1920*, University of Alabama Press, 1973.

⁸ K. Hoganson, J. Sexton (Eds.), *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain*, Duke University Press, 2020.

⁹ D. Bessner, F. Logevall, *Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations*, in *The Texas National Security Review*, No. 2, 2020, 38–55.

Panama – the “battle of the routes” in full swing at that moment¹⁰ – indicated that the former was clearly prevailing over the latter. In fact, after passing on several invitations extended by local actors during the 19th century, the US was finally ready to build an isthmian canal and go imperial. The domestic consensus over a US-made canal in Central America seemed the obvious outcome of the increasing asymmetry in power and resources within the Western hemisphere that the war of 1898 had just magnified. However, this determination raised a host of diplomatic, legal, and other issues vis à vis both Britain, the imperial partner/competitor in the region, and the republics of the Western hemisphere, where anti-Yankee sentiments were one of the very few common denominators of a rather weak Latin American shared identity. It was crucial for the US to carve out some degree of freedom to act within the loose multilateral frameworks of the imperial club, on one hand, and the inter-American system, on the other.

At the inter-imperial level, Washington secured its freedom of action through the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty with London (1901), virtually a blank check on canal matters that cancelled previous commitments of joint Anglo-American action on a trans-isthmian canal dating back to the mid-19th century. The US could now build and fortify the canal with no Suez-like “internationalization” standing in its way¹¹. The green light from London was by no means the end of the story, however, unless we treat the Western hemisphere as an empty space or the passive object of US domination. South of the Rio Grande, the prospect of the US having a free hand was worrisome, even more so after the 1898 war had triggered new fears of domination by the “coloso del Norte” and strengthened the determination to resist it. It was in this tense context that Theodore Roosevelt decided to revive the inter-American system launched by James Blaine with the First International Conference of the American States and convened a second conference, to be held in Mexico.

Mostly considered a rather uneventful conference by diplomatic historians, the timing and context of this meeting make it an interesting vantage point for studying long-term trends in the trajectory of liberal internationalism. On one hand, the war of 1898 and subsequent domestic and Latin American reactions led the Roosevelt administration to counter accusations of US imperialism and try to arrange inter-American relations on a more consensual basis. On the other, as the Hague Convention of 1899 saw the emergence of arbitration as a peaceful solution to controversies among states, legalist views of the international order became increasingly popular across the Western hemisphere. Finally, as the construction of an interoceanic canal was impending, inter-American relations and tensions were coming under more global scrutiny than ever before. In Mexico City, therefore, US-sponsored Pan Americanism offered the ideal platform for Washington to advance its hegemonic agenda and, for most Latin American republics, provided an opportunity to resist this agenda. For all parties involved, international law played a crucial role in defining notions of national sovereignty and regional integration.

4. A LEGALIST MONROE DOCTRINE

The major issue on the table was arbitration as a tool for the peaceful resolution of international disputes and the backbone of a US-led multilateral order in the Western Hemisphere. While the trans-isthmian

¹⁰ D. Miner, *The Fight for the Panama Route. The Story of the Spooner Act and the Hay-Herrán Treaty*, Columbia University Press, 1940.

¹¹ J. Major, *Prize Possession: The United States Government and the Panama Canal 1903-1979*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 26-29.

canal was not on the official agenda, the tension between the legal and material infrastructure under construction in the Americas was quite obvious to the delegates. To what extent could Roosevelt's determination to «take the isthmus» (and by extension the circum-Caribbean) be reconciled with the early stages of a multilateral Pan American project the foundations of which lay in a shared legalist view of internationalism and, specifically, arbitration? This question was all the more relevant given the different brands of legalist internationalism circulating in the US and Latin America whose influence and credibility had been further enhanced by the 1899 Hague Convention on the peaceful settlement of international disputes.

Internationalism with a legalist twist had a long history within the US, even though exceptionalist assumptions and unilateral practices might suggest otherwise. Throughout the 19th century, arbitration and neutral rights performed a dual function. On one hand, they protected the interests of a commercial power that pursued integration into the global economy and, at the same time, disentanglement from the European balance of power. On the other, they were instrumental in supporting the American mission bent on redeeming the international sphere through the civilizing impact of law¹². After the war of 1898, however, US legalist discourse turned from a republican firewall to a tool of empire. As the US was a nation of laws, a legal infrastructure was needed to discipline its imperial acceleration and eventually its colonial domination, as illustrated by the Insular Cases decided by the Supreme Court¹³.

The clash between advocates and critics of overseas expansion was so harsh, and the Filipino resistance to US occupation so fierce, that US empire clearly needed good lawyers.

In Mexico City, therefore, the US delegation was obliged to walk a fine line between reviving the progressive vision and legal foundations of Pan Americanism even while also diluting its multilateralism and gaining the free hand needed to build the canal and, by extension, a US-led hemispheric empire. This is why Theodore Roosevelt instructed US delegates to advocate for voluntary arbitration, much less binding than the compulsory arbitration proposed by the US during the first Pan American conference¹⁴. Separately, he also urged Secretary of State John Hay to adopt a very cautious stance on Latin American republics' accession to the Hague convention, as this would have accelerated their integration into international society and weakened the separation between the Old and New Worlds: «It might not be appropriate for the delegates of the United States to urge [...] accession to the Hague Convention. Such a step, if it is deemed advisable by those republics, may be left to their own initiative»¹⁵.

Similarly, most actors from the Latin American camp were more than ready to play the Pan-American game according to the rules of international law, which they had been practicing for decades both among themselves and vis à vis the US. To be sure, radical anti-imperialists such as José Martí, José Enrique Rodó and Rubén Darío denounced US legalism as nothing more than a hypocritical fiction and façade for legitimizing Washington's double standards. As Martí wrote in 1899 in one of his articles as a correspondent

¹² B. Coates, *Legalist Empire: International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 26-31.

¹³ G. Neuman, T. Brown-Nagin (eds.), *Reconsidering the Insular Cases. The Past and Future of the American Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2016; B. Sparrow, *The Insular Cases and the Emergence of American Empire*, University Press of Kansas, 2006

¹⁴ US Senate, *Report, with accompanying papers, of the delegates of the United States to the Second International Conference of American States, held at the City of Mexico from October 22, 1901, to January 22, 1902*, 57th Congress, 1st session Sen. Doc. 330, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1902, 34.

¹⁵ Theodore Roosevelt to John Hay, 8 October 1901, John Barrett Papers (hereinafter JBP), Library of Congress, Washington DC, box 19.

covering the first Pan American Conference, «arbitrage would an excellent thing if [...] this still adolescent republic [...] would yield its own appetites to arbitration»¹⁶.

At the same time, however, there was an influential political and legal tradition appropriating US-led Pan-Americanism and enlisting it in its anti-imperial agenda. Alejandro Alvarez in Chile and Luis Maria Drago in Argentina reframed the Monroe Doctrine as a guarantee for territorial integrity vis à vis US and European interference as well as a legal basis for a multilateral order. By the same token, arbitration came to be embraced south of the Rio Grande as a tool for peacefully settling international disputes and containing the US' imperial drive by means of internationally recognized legal procedures¹⁷. At the dawn of the 20th century, therefore, the Latin American landscape was fluid, multifaceted, and proactive. Anti-imperialism was a powerful glue, but it did not always prevail over local tensions and conflicts (e.g. between Chile and Peru over Tacna and Arica); the US hegemonic push, exemplified at that time by the impending canal in Central America, triggered reactions of varying degrees of intensity in different parts of the hemisphere; finally, influential actors in Mexico and the so-called ABC countries were open to forms of selective cooptation promoted by Washington and ready to turn the discourse and practices of legalist Pan Americanism to their own advantage¹⁸.

These were the troubled waters that Barrett – then a quite inexperienced diplomat with very little knowledge of Latin America and hemispheric matters – had to navigate (the other career diplomat of the US delegation was William Buchanan, former US Minister in Argentina and director of the Buffalo Pan American Exposition). Hardly a legal expert, before and during the conference Barrett shaped his views on international law through an extended correspondence with the political and legal establishment in the US, including John Bassett Moore, the first chair of international law in the United States at Columbia Law School, and Frederick Holls, a leading member of the US delegation in The Hague and international expert on arbitration. This exchange sheds light on the wide array of orientations circulating regarding the role of international law within US internationalism, as well as their political and cultural assumptions at an important juncture in the rise of US empire.

There was no unanimous consensus that the «gentle civilizer of nations»¹⁹ might work its wonders across the Americas, as Barrett's exchange with the Solicitor of the Department of State William Penfield shows. A renowned expert on and practitioner of arbitration, Penfield appeared as counsel for the United States in the first case – that of the “Pious Fund” of the Californias – before the Permanent Court at The Hague. He appeared again before The Hague Tribunal in the Venezuelan Arbitration in 1903-1904; at other times and before other tribunals, he represented demands against Peru, Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Salvador, and Mexico. In his view, plans to build a multilateral order on legal grounds were inevitably impeded by cultural and racial factors: «The Spanish race, through countless generations of

¹⁶ J. Martí, *The Washington Pan-American Congress*, in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *Inside the Monster. Writings on the United States and American Imperialism*, Monthly Review Press, 1975, 355.

¹⁷ G. Grandin, *The Liberal Traditions in the Americas: Rights, Sovereignty, and the Origins of Liberal Multilateralism*, in *American Historical Review*, No. 1, 2012, 82-86; J.P. Scarfi, *In the Name of the Americas. The Pan-American Redefinition of the Monroe Doctrine and the Emerging Language of American International Law in the Western Hemisphere, 1898-1933*, in *Diplomatic History*, No. 2, 2016, 189-218; J.P. Scarfi, A. Tillman (Eds.), *Cooperation and Hegemony in US-Latin American Relations. Revisiting the Western Hemisphere Idea*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹⁸ R. Salvatore, *Hemisphere, Region, and Nation. Spatial Conceptions in US Hispanic American History*, in J.P. Scarfi, A. Tillman (Eds.), *Cooperation and Hegemony in US-Latin American Relations*, cit.

¹⁹ M. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations. The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870-1960*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

oppression and superstition, has become perverted, mentally and temperamentally, in its ideas of justice. Its conceptions and methods in this respect are as far asunder from those of the Anglo-Saxon race as the poles»²⁰.

Similarly, the associate justice of the Supreme Court David Brewer believed that racial difference undermined US-led hemispheric governance and shared rules for the settlement of disputes and pecuniary compensation: «It is hardly to be expected that the United States will be willing to submit its claims, or those of its citizens, to a court composed of one member of each of these several states, the large majority of whom are of another race [...] with different habits of thought and different judicial procedure»²¹.

Moore and Holls saw things differently: they believed arbitration, and by extension international law, could work in the Western hemisphere. In fact, these tools were in the best interests of the US at a time when the nation found itself caught between old notions of an empire of American liberty and new notions of an empire of transatlantic civilization.

The correspondence between Barrett, Moore, and Holls illuminates how notions of US hemispheric empire and international law overlapped in complex ways. Moore embodied the legalist understanding of American internationalism. His correspondence with Barrett highlights two recurrent themes central to his vision. First, international law was not the door to universal peace; it was a technique for ensuring the rational management of international tensions and limiting conflicts. Second, the American experience throughout the 19th century showed that arbitration had been a crucial element of this technique and should continue to play a key role in shaping and implementing an American vision of international affairs. Consequently, when Barrett consulted him from Mexico concerning a draft agreement involving a severely diluted understanding of that indispensable component of the internationalist tool kit, he was not pleased:

It embodies a principle which is the simple and absolute negation of the idea of arbitration, when it excepts disputes involving “national honor.” Such an exception is not to be found in The Hague Treaty, nor in the Olney-Pauncefote Treaty, nor in the first Pan-American Treaty. Of course, it was deliberately excluded. I do not suppose that anyone familiar with the history of wars and of attempts to settle international disputes would attach much importance to a treaty of arbitration containing an exception of disputes affecting “national honor”. It seems to me that no one can read the papers, which you enclose, without feeling that the person who prepared them entertains a distrust of the process of arbitration²².

That is, the US could not credibly take on the legalist mantle in world affairs while, at the same time, selling a highly watered-down version of it to its hemispheric neighbors in order to preserve total freedom of action in the Americas. Such tension between multilateral preaching and unilateral impulses had to be kept in check in Mexico City, or else construction of the canal would deal the final blow to the very notion of a US-led inter-American system. In the end it was voluntary arbitration that provided the silver bullet, and the dense, months-long Barrett-Holls exchange was crucial in this respect.

²⁰ William Penfield to John Barrett, 1 November 1901, JBP, box 19.

²¹ David Brewer to John Barrett, 16 November 1901, JBP, box 19.

²² John Bassett Moore to John Barrett, 21 November 1901, JBP, box 19.

A legal scholar of German descent with deep transatlantic ties, Holls had served as secretary for the US delegation in The Hague and played a significant role in establishing the Permanent Court of Arbitration. As Mexico had been the only Latin American republic to join the Court, the Pan-American conference of 1901-02 was also a forum to discuss integrating the hemisphere into the international legal system taking shape at that time across the Atlantic. Following his advice, the US delegation pushed a cautious middle road, on the one hand advocating for the accession of Latin American nations to The Hague system with reservations on «purely American questions» and, on the other, opposing Latin American proposals aimed at creating a parallel system based on a separate court and stronger limitations on US action. As he wrote Barrett, commenting on a proposal from Guatemala: «We don't need another International court any more than a cat needs two tails; and if you can translate this sentence into choice Spanish and din it into the ears of all your colleagues you will do a great service to the cause of International Arbitration»²³.

Holls was reacting to the Latin American pressures that Barrett was struggling to contain, as this and many other fragments of their exchange illustrates. «There is a very strong sentiment running through the Conference for obligatory or compulsory arbitration», Barrett wrote. And, continuing:

There is little doubt that every country in South and Central America would vote for such a treaty, if the United States favored it, with the single exception of Chile [...]. As long as the United States cannot agree to a compulsory treaty, we are hoping to reach some kind of a compromise – possibly the Court of Claims might be made obligatory [...] and thus satisfy the sentiment which exists in the Conference²⁴.

Eventually that compromise was reached, and Barrett was able to reassure his mentor at the White House:

The wisest solution to this problem of Arbitration before the Conference will be the passing of a resolution practically confirming and approving The Hague treaty, with Mexico and the United States as Signatory Powers to The Hague treaty inviting the Central and South American nations to become adherent to that Convention [...] to the effect that in adhering to The Hague treaty the American Republics wish it distinctly understood that strictly American questions must be decided by tribunals of which American judges must form a majority, and that these tribunals must ordinarily sit on American soil [...]. In this way the Pan-American idea could be preserved and protected without organizing an entirely new International Permanent Court with separate permanent offices²⁵.

The conference produced more or less binding resolutions on a wide array of issues: the reform of the Bureau of American Republics and establishment of an «international American bank»; public health and intellectual property. Extradition and «protection from anarchism» were also part of the deal, predictably so after the killing of President William McKinley by Leon Czolgosz at the Pan-American Exposition in September 1901²⁶. However, the compromise on arbitration was the most consequential

²³ Fredrick Holls to John Barrett, 6 November 1901, JBP, box 19.

²⁴ John Barrett to Fredrick Holls, 26 November 1901, JBP, box 19.

²⁵ John Barrett to Theodore Roosevelt, 18 November 1901, JBP, box 19 (emphasis in the original).

²⁶ *Second International American Conference. Organization of the conference, projects, reports, motions, debates and resolutions*, Typographical Department of Government Printing Office, Mexico, 1902.

aspect. As Holls wrote Barrett, that deal and the recent Anglo-American Treaty were two sides of the same coin:

I am myself satisfied that the Conference will do nothing of great importance on the subject of arbitration [...]. I know that the President is absolutely opposed to compulsory arbitration in any form, and he would simply not send a treaty to the Senate which provided for it. Personally, as I have always written you, I should prefer to see the Hague treaty adhered to by all the South American republic, provided a satisfactory American protocol were also adopted... The new Hay-Pauncefote Treaty has been announced today [...]. I think the treaty constitutes one more reason why our hands should remain as free as possible in Central and South America²⁷.

5. CONCLUSION

This arrangement was part of a diplomatic and legal infrastructure that was at least as consequential as the war of 1898 in paving the way for US hegemony in the region, as it signaled the rise of an “international empire” that – unlike gunboat diplomacy or territorial expansion – was very much in synch with 20th-century liberal internationalism. To the extent that this kind of imperial formation is defined among other things by «disproportionate power within multilateral bodies», what took place in Mexico City definitely fits the description.

Asymmetries of power are best understood by stepping outside the conference halls and considering the major issues looming in the background. As the canal was a main point of contention for most parties involved, Barrett dutifully reported to John Tyler Morgan, the undisputed authority on the subject in the US Senate: «There is a sort of suggestion in the attitude of the Mexicans to the effect that the United States and Great Britain, in negotiating the Treaty, have entirely forgotten that there are any other nations on earth», he conceded. However, he was confident that the sister republics of the hemisphere would eventually fall into line, even on the most sensitive issue of controlling the canal in wartime:

While the Latin American countries recognize that the United States intends to control the canal in every way, both in times of peace and in war, the majority of them are not willing to go on record as favoring absolute United States control which prevents the Canal from remaining neutral in the event of war. No delegate of any state is, however, willing to rise in the Conference and oppose absolute control by the United States [...]. They stoically face the situation and say nothing unkind about the absolute authority of the United States, but they are unwilling to create the precedent of giving up in formal resolutions all claims to neutrality [...]. All of Latin-America has made up its mind that there is no use whatsoever in making any ado over the question of the control of the Canal, and has consequently decided to accept the situation gracefully. There is no doubt that the majority of countries are anxious to see it constructed as quickly as possible and that they hope to reap great benefits therefrom²⁸.

To conclude, the Monroe Doctrine was very much alive in Mexico City. This early stage of a US-led international empire in the Americas was a preview of many dynamics at play in following decades: the

²⁷ Fredrick Holls to John Barrett, 6 December 1901, JBP, box 19.

²⁸ John Barrett to John Tyler Morgan, 14 December 1901, JBP, box 19.

tension between US internationalism, empire, and international law; the interaction between hemispheric and global policies and institutions; and finally, the agency of anti-imperial subjects and the influence of alternative internationalist strategies.

If the projection of American power during the 20th century can be seen as the outcome of a long-term tension between internationalist visions and nationalist priorities, as Eileen Scully and others argue²⁹, the shapes and forms of this US-led hemispheric empire are an important prism through which to reassess that global projection. However, this reassessment requires a serious engagement with imperial history rather than the deployment of one-size-fits-all definitions, or generic condemnations, of empire.

In fact, bringing to light the agency of anti-imperial actors within multilateral settings is all well and good. Their voices and achievements have been neglected for too long. We should keep in mind, however, that by focusing on these international fora we emphasize certain metrics of power at the expense of others. Such an approach risks overestimating the weight of intellectual and institutional dimensions over the economic and, more generally, material ones.

The Monroe Doctrine has indeed lived many lives and, if “international empire” is to some extent its latest incarnation, it is still with us even today.

²⁹ E. Scully, *The United States and International Law: From the Transcontinental Treaty to the League of Nations Covenant, 1819-1919*, in J. Sexton, K. Hoganson (Eds.), *Cambridge History of America and the World*, Vol. II, 1820-1900, Cambridge University Press, 2021.