ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional
Imperialism and Colonialism

Paper 2 · Unit 20

Old and new imperialism, the scramble for Africa and the theories that explain them: 30 marks in four years, asked twice on new imperialism specifically.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Imperialism and colonialism: South and South-East Asia, Latin America and South Africa, Australia and New Zealand; imperialism and free trade, the new imperialism.

Old and new imperialism distinguished

Asked in 2025 on whether new imperialism continued old practices or marked a fundamental shift, and in 2026 for its features. The distinction is the whole unit.

- **Old imperialism**, roughly 1500 to 1800, was **coastal, commercial and company-driven**, seeking trade goods, bullion and plantation produce through forts, factories and licensed monopolies.
- **New imperialism**, roughly 1870 to 1914, was **territorial, state-directed and comprehensive**, seeking formal annexation, administrative control and the direct incorporation of whole societies.
- Scale is the most obvious difference, since roughly a quarter of the world's land surface changed hands between 1870 and 1914, and Africa went from about ten per cent to about ninety per cent European-controlled.
- **Motives** shifted from trade goods to **raw materials, protected markets, investment outlets and strategic position**, reflecting industrial rather than mercantile priorities.
- **Technology** made it possible, and the steamship, the telegraph, the breech-loading rifle, the Maxim gun and above all **quinine** as a prophylactic against malaria opened the African interior.
- **Ideology** accompanied it in social Darwinism, the civilising mission and Kipling's white man's burden, which supplied a moral vocabulary that old imperialism had not required.
- For the 2025 question, the defensible answer is **both**: continuity in the underlying pursuit of profit and power, and a genuine shift in scale, method, motive and ideology.

Imperialism and free trade

Named explicitly in the syllabus and the most sophisticated idea in this unit.

- **Gallagher and Robinson's** 1953 article *The Imperialism of Free Trade* argued that the mid-Victorian period was not anti-imperial but pursued the same ends by informal means.
- **Informal empire** meant control through trade dominance, investment, debt and the threat of force without formal annexation, and Latin America, China and the Ottoman Empire are the standard cases.
- Their rule was **trade with informal control if possible, trade with rule if necessary**, which reframes the whole nineteenth century as continuous expansion under changing methods.
- **Free trade treaties** imposed by force are the evidence, and the Opium Wars of 1839 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860 opening China are the clearest instance.
- **India** is the case that undercuts any claim that free trade was anti-imperial, since Indian tariff autonomy was removed precisely so that free trade could operate in Britain's favour.
- **Annexation increased** when informal control failed or when rivals threatened to exclude British trade, which is Gallagher and Robinson's explanation for the shift after 1870.
- The concept is worth carrying into Section A answers, since it explains why Britain both preached free trade and ruled India directly without contradiction on its own terms.

KEY TERMS

Informal empire — Control exercised through trade, investment and the threat of force without formal annexation, as in Latin America and China.

The scramble for Africa

The emblematic episode of new imperialism, and the one most likely to be asked for as illustration.

- **Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885**, convened by Bismarck, set rules for the partition including the principle of effective occupation, and no African representative attended.
- **Leopold II's Congo Free State** was the conference's most notorious product, a personal possession run for rubber and ivory whose atrocities were exposed by E. D. Morel and Roger Casement.
- **Britain** took Egypt in 1882, the Sudan after Omdurman in 1898, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Kenya, Uganda and Rhodesia, pursuing Rhodes's Cape to Cairo ambition.
- **France** built a west and equatorial African empire from Senegal to Chad, and the **Fashoda incident of 1898** brought Britain and France close to war before French withdrawal.
- **Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain** took the remainder, and Italy's defeat at **Adowa in 1896** left Ethiopia one of only two African states to retain independence alongside Liberia.
- **African resistance** was substantial and is usually omitted, including the Ashanti wars, the Zulu victory at Isandlwana in 1879, the Maji Maji rebellion of 1905 to 1907 and the Herero and Nama war in which German forces committed genocide.
- **Boer War of 1899 to 1902** demonstrated the costs of the new imperialism to the imperial power itself, and the British use of concentration camps damaged its moral standing internationally.
- **Suez Canal** from 1869 is the strategic key to the whole African partition, since British occupation of Egypt in 1882 to secure the route to India set off the chain of claims and counter-claims that followed.
- **Boundaries** drawn at Berlin ignored existing polities and ethnic distributions entirely, and the OAU's 1963 decision to retain them made the arbitrary lines permanent.

Theories of imperialism

The examinable theoretical content. Four positions, each with an author and a mechanism.

- **J. A. Hobson** in *Imperialism: A Study* of 1902 gave the underconsumption argument, that maldistribution of income at home produced surplus capital which sought outlets abroad, and that imperialism served financiers rather than the nation.
- **Lenin** in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* of 1916 adapted Hobson, arguing that monopoly capitalism and finance capital necessarily export capital and divide the world, making imperialist war inevitable.
- **Joseph Schumpeter** countered that imperialism was an **atavism**, a survival of pre-capitalist warrior aristocracies, and that capitalism properly understood is pacific and trade-seeking.
- **Strategic explanations**, associated with **Robinson and Gallagher's** *Africa and the Victorians*, argue that the scramble was driven by the need to protect existing interests, above all the route to India after the occupation of Egypt.

- **Peripheral explanations** in the same work hold that crises on the periphery, rather than metropolitan pressure, drew reluctant European governments into annexation.
- Evidence against the economic theories is substantial, since most British investment went to the settler colonies, the United States and Latin America rather than to the new tropical acquisitions.
- **Public opinion and the popular press** supplied political energy that no economic theory captures, since imperial adventure sold newspapers and imperial exhibitions drew mass audiences across Europe.
- The balanced position: economic motives were real but selective, strategic calculation explains the timing and the specific acquisitions better, and nationalist rivalry and ideology supplied the political energy.

Asia, the Americas and the settler colonies

The syllabus names South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, so the answer must range beyond Africa.

- **Southeast Asia** was partitioned between Britain in Burma and Malaya, France in Indochina, the Netherlands in the Indies and the United States in the Philippines after 1898, with only **Siam** surviving as a buffer.
- **China** was not annexed but reduced through **spheres of influence**, treaty ports, extraterritoriality and indemnities, which is the classic case of informal empire.
- **Latin America** was formally independent and economically dependent, first on British capital and then on American power, and the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 formalised a right of intervention.
- **Settler colonies** followed a different path, since Australia, New Zealand and Canada received responsible government and dominion status while their indigenous populations were dispossessed.
- **Australia** was claimed under **terra nullius**, the doctrine that the land belonged to nobody, which was not overturned in Australian law until the Mabo judgement of 1992.
- **New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi in 1840** created obligations that were then disregarded, and its English and Maori texts differ materially on the crucial question of sovereignty.
- **South Africa** combined settler colonialism with mineral extraction after the diamond and gold discoveries, and the 1910 Union entrenched racial exclusion that became apartheid after 1948.
- **Japan** complicates every theory by becoming an imperial power itself, taking Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910, which shows that imperialism was not uniquely European and not simply a function of industrial capitalism at a particular stage.
- **India** is the largest colonial possession and the model for much of what was attempted elsewhere, so a Section B answer that ignores it misses the obvious comparator.

Last-mile revision

- Old imperialism coastal, commercial, company-driven; new imperialism 1870-1914 territorial, state-directed, comprehensive; quinine, telegraph, Maxim gun.
- Gallagher and Robinson 1953 on the imperialism of free trade; informal empire in Latin America, China, the Ottomans; Opium Wars 1839-42 and 1856-60.
- Berlin 1884-85 and effective occupation; Leopold's Congo; Fashoda 1898; Adowa 1896; Maji Maji 1905-07; Boer War 1899-1902.

- Hobson 1902 underconsumption; Lenin 1916 finance capital; Schumpeter's atavism; Robinson and Gallagher on strategy and the periphery.
- Siam and Ethiopia and Liberia as survivals; terra nullius overturned only in Mabo 1992; Waitangi 1840 with differing texts.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating new imperialism as purely economic. Most British investment went to settler colonies and the Americas, not to the new tropical possessions.
- Presenting the free trade era as anti-imperial. Gallagher and Robinson showed it was expansion by informal means.
- Omitting African resistance. Isandlwana, Adowa, Maji Maji and the Herero war belong in any scramble answer.
- Forgetting Asia and the settler colonies when the syllabus names them explicitly alongside Africa.
- Using Lenin without noting the evidence against him, which is the pattern of investment flows.

Mains Practice

Review the features of the 'New Imperialism' in the context of the revival of colonialism in the nineteenth century.

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

Did new imperialism represent a continuation of old colonial practices or did it mark a fundamental shift in global power structure? Discuss.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

“British imperialism in South Africa from 1867 to 1902 was influenced to a large extent by the capitalist mining of diamonds.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2023