

# Why is NATO at war with Yugoslavia? World power, oil and gold

Editorial Board World Socialist Web Site  
24 May 1999

Since March 24, 1999, the military forces of NATO, led by the United States, have been subjecting Yugoslavia to a devastating bombardment. Flying more than 15,000 sorties, NATO has pummeled Yugoslav cities and villages, hitting factories, hospitals, schools, bridges, fuel depots and government buildings. Thousands have been killed and wounded, including passengers on commuter trains and buses, and workers at television broadcast and relay facilities. Civilian neighborhoods in both Serbia and Kosovo have been hit.

Little is being said by those who planned and launched this war about its long-term consequences for Yugoslavia, the entire Balkans and Eastern Europe as a whole. Much of the industrial and social infrastructure developed by Yugoslavia since the end of World War II lies in ruins. The Danube River, a vital economic lifeline for much of Central Europe, is impassable. In Serbia, the basic requirements of modern civilization—electricity, water, sanitation—have been struck repeatedly. As in Iraq, the full dimension of the havoc wreaked by American, British and French bombs will only become clear when the war ends and reports begin to seep out about abnormal mortality rates, especially among the young.

The assault on Yugoslavia has been justified by NATO and the media as a humanitarian effort to halt repression of the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The heavy-handed and cynical character of the propaganda campaign that has accompanied the bombing in its own way reflects the glaring contradictions in NATO's defense of the war. The crude demonization of Yugoslav President Milosevic, the wildly divergent claims of Serb massacres and Kosovan Albanian deaths, the endless claims of "genocide," and the barrage of TV images of suffering refugees are designed not so much to convince through the force of argument, as to wear down, inure and intimidate the public. "Opposition to NATO means support for the forced expulsion and mass murder of Albanians!" the establishment politicians and media pundits declare.

In the mobilization of public opinion behind the bombing of Iraq, the Clinton administration repeated endlessly the phrase, "weapons of mass destruction." Only by pounding Iraq day after day, the Clinton administration declared, could the world be saved from Saddam Hussein's invisible arsenal of deadly gases, germs and chemicals. In the war against Yugoslavia, "weapons of mass destruction" has been replaced with a more powerful and evocative mantra—that of "Ethnic Cleansing." The principal value of this phrase is that it conjures up the image of Nazi Germany. The "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo, NATO would have it, is the 1990s version of the Holocaust.

The comparison is so misleading and historically false as to be obscene. The Holocaust consisted of the rounding up of millions of Jews throughout all of Nazi-occupied and -controlled Europe and their transportation to death camps that were essentially assembly lines of mass murder.

Six *million* defenseless Jews were killed by the Nazis. This compares to an estimated two *thousand* people who were killed in Kosovo last year.

(The recent claims that 250,000 Albanian men have been killed, it must be added, are noxious fabrications, which have been contradicted by first-hand observers from Western newspapers.)

Even if the total number killed in Kosovo were doubled, the loss of life would still be smaller, even adjusting for differences in population, than in many analogous conflicts around the world (for example, Sri Lanka or Turkey). The comparison is not an argument for indifference to the suffering taking place in Kosovo. It does, however, reveal the grossly misleading character of the claims that have been used by NATO to justify its full-scale bombardment of Yugoslavia.

A further point about the *context* of the violence in Kosovo must be made. It commenced in 1998 with the outbreak of civil war between the Albanian nationalist and separatist Kosovo Liberation Army and the Yugoslav government, which sought to retain control of the province.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the publisher of the *World Socialist Web Site*, opposes all forms of national chauvinism. We hold no brief for the reactionary nationalism of the Belgrade regime. But it is a flagrant falsification of political reality to claim that the year of sectarian violence that preceded NATO's offensive was the exclusive handiwork of the Serbs. The KLA—financed with drug money and enjoying the behind-the-scenes support of CIA advisers—carried out its own campaign of terror against Serb civilians.

No small degree of hypocrisy is involved in NATO's pose as defender of the ethnic Albanian minority from Serbian repression. Consider the NATO member countries that have carried out even more extensive campaigns of "ethnic cleansing."

Two hundred thousand Serbs were expelled from Croatia in 1995 with US support. (Croatia has since become a US ally and one of NATO's "frontline states" in the war against Serbia). Over the past fifteen years, more than one million Kurds have been driven from their villages in Turkey, with the support of the US, including American military hardware. Turkey, meanwhile, retains NATO membership and participates in the bombing of Yugoslavia.

In the punishment inflicted on the Albanian population, Serbia trails far behind the savageries inflicted by the French on Algeria or the United States on Vietnam.

Had political conditions dictated, the US media could have presented the Israeli suppression of the *intifadah* in 1987-91 or the massacres that unfolded in Beirut in 1982 under the auspices of the Israeli state in no less inflammatory terms than last year's events in Kosovo.

In evaluating the claim of "ethnic cleansing," it should also be remembered that the major world powers have, on more than one occasion, cited ethnic conflicts as a justification for imperialist meddling, setting the stage for disaster. Let us recall that one of the most horrific episodes of the 20th century occurred in 1947 when Britain, citing conflicts between Hindus and Moslems in India, arranged for the establishment of the separate state of Pakistan. The violence that followed the partition claimed one million lives and created twelve million

refugees.

Likewise in Yugoslavia, imperialist intervention has had the objective impact of escalating the scale of communal violence and increasing the likelihood that it will spread to neighboring countries.

NATO now says that a primary purpose of its offensive is to return the estimated 800,000 ethnic Albanian refugees to their homes in Kosovo. Here cynicism reaches new heights.

An honest review of the sequence of events that led up to the refugee crisis refutes the claims of NATO. Mass flight began after, not before, March 24. Clinton's speech that day, in which he gave the official rationale for the war, spoke almost entirely of *preventing* an exodus. He pointed, in fact, to the danger that, without a NATO strike, the size of the existing refugee population might expand by "tens of thousands."

What actually happened? The bombing, destroying no small amount of Kosovo and terrorizing its inhabitants, set off a renewal in the fighting between Belgrade's forces and the KLA. Not tens but hundreds of thousands were made refugees.

Not all these consequences were unintended. The NATO powers had hoped that the air offensive would enable the KLA to push out the Serb forces, much in the same manner that the 1995 air strikes in Bosnia allowed the Croatian and Moslem forces to go on the offensive and drive out the Serbs.

As for the refugees themselves, they have been cynically used. Once the Kosovan Albanians were displaced in the aftermath of the bombing, NATO exploited their plight to drum up public support for the war, while providing only the most minimal aid to their makeshift camps, where conditions became so abhorrent that riots broke out. Even then only a relative handful of refugees were accepted into Western countries.

Some NATO military leaders have acknowledged—though their statements have gone largely unreported—that the depopulation of Kosovo works to their advantage, giving them a freer hand to initiate carpet bombing and prepare for a ground invasion of the province.

In regards to the return of the refugees, the logical question to ask is: Return to what? What portion of Kosovo's homes, workplaces, roads, bridges, and waterways has not been bombed by NATO?

"The propagandist's purpose," wrote Aldous Huxley in 1937, "is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human." In the present war, the demonization of the Serbs has been required by the scale of NATO's violence against the Yugoslav people.

By early summer, killings by NATO will surpass those by the Serb government and KLA that preceded the alliance's intervention in Kosovo. Prior to March 24, most estimates put the total number killed in Kosovo at about 2,000 in the course of one year of civil war. Since March 24, the number of Serbs and ethnic Albanians killed by NATO is well over 1,000.

NATO, to be sure, only makes "mistakes" whereas Serbia carries out "atrocities." Generally speaking, each new NATO claim of Serb plunder and murder follows rapidly on the heels of the latest proof of civilian deaths from NATO bombs. At any suggestion that NATO's cure is worse than the disease the spokesmen for the alliance become more shrill. "Has the real enemy been forgotten?"

An interesting question. It would seem the category of "enemy" is quickly expanding in scope. Initially, Albanian deaths and suffering were declared to be solely the fault of the Milosevic regime. In recent days, however, a more venomous strain has emerged in the propaganda war: the Serb population as a whole is to blame.

According to the new line, the Serb people have become corrupted, organically indifferent to the suffering of the Kosovan Albanians, and obsessed by an almost incomprehensible sense of victimization. According to many of the NATO propagandists, the remedy for this malaise is a ground invasion, the conquest of Belgrade and a prolonged occupation. This is described, reviving the terminology of 19th century colonialism, as a "civilizing" mission.

Propaganda requires simplification. It demands that the complexities of immense political conflicts be shoved aside and public opinion be confronted with a loaded question which allows only one answer. In the present war, that question is: "Doesn't ethnic cleansing have to be stopped?"

This simplification allows the media to portray Yugoslavia rather than NATO as the aggressor. The alliance, in a complete inversion of reality, is presented as conducting an essentially defensive war on behalf of the Kosovan Albanians.

To determine the nature of a given war, its progressive or reactionary character, requires not selective examination of atrocities, which are to be found in all wars, but rather an analysis of the class structures, economic foundations and international roles of the states that are involved. From this decisive standpoint the present war being waged by NATO is an imperialist war of aggression against Yugoslavia.

The US and the European powers that form the nucleus of NATO comprise the most advanced capitalist powers of the globe. Within each of these countries, state policies express the interests of finance capital, based on the major transnational corporations and financial institutions. The continued existence of the ruling class in these countries is bound up with the expansion of capitalism throughout the world.

As a scientific term, imperialism signifies a definite historical stage in the development of capitalism as a world economic system. It denotes fundamental objective tendencies in capitalism as it developed toward the end of the 19th and into the 20th century. The most important of these are: the suppression of free competition by the growth of huge, monopolistic business concerns; the increasing domination of gigantic banking institutions (finance capital) over the world market; the impulsion of monopoly and finance capital in the countries where capitalism had developed most strongly (Europe, North America, Japan) to spread beyond the national borders and gain access to markets, raw materials and new sources of labor throughout the world.

Imperialism enjoys a predatory and parasitic relation to the less developed countries. Through its position of financial hegemony, using the vehicle of massive financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, imperialism is in a position to dictate policy to smaller states which rely on their credit. Through their domination of the world market, the imperialist powers drive down prices for raw materials and keep the smaller states impoverished. The more these countries borrow, the more destitute and dependent they become.

Finally, hanging over the weaker states is the ever-present threat of military bombardment. Whether they are to be apotheosized as "emerging democracies" or demonized as "rogue states" depends, in the final analysis, on where they fit in the unfolding strategic plans of world imperialism. Thus Iraq, supported by the US in its war against Iran during the 1980s, became the object of attack when it fell afoul of plans to strengthen America's grip over Middle East oil reserves.

The same is true of Serbia. In the 1980s Washington looked upon Slobodan Milosevic with favor to the extent that he initiated market policies and dismantled state industry in Yugoslavia. In the 1990s the rules of the game changed and Serbia became a thorn in the side of imperialist concerns. Milosevic joined Saddam Hussein on imperialism's list of "Most Wanted." The judgment of imperialism on any given country or leader can change abruptly because, as Prime Minister Palmerston said of the British Empire, it has neither permanent friends, nor permanent enemies, only permanent interests.

Yugoslavia is not an imperialist power but rather a small, relatively backward country that has been diminished over the 1990s by the secession of four of its former six republics. To be sure, Milosevic's role in this process was thoroughly reactionary. His exploitation of Serbian nationalism could hardly counter the chauvinist policies of Tudjman in Croatia, Izetbegovic in Bosnia, and Kucan in Slovenia. But Milosevic was

by no means the instigator of this process. Rather, he adapted himself—like so many other ex-Stalinists scoundrels in Eastern Europe—to the centrifugal social tendencies unleashed by the reestablishment of market economies.

Here the imperialist powers played a principal role, demanding the break-up of nationalized industries and the imposition of austerity policies that exacerbated simmering ethnic tensions. The economic pressure exerted upon Yugoslavia laid the objective foundations for the dissolution of the unified Balkan state. From 1991 on, the breakup of Yugoslavia was guaranteed by the political intervention of the major powers. Though a violent outcome of Yugoslav dissolution was predicted, the break-up was encouraged by Germany, which abruptly recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, and the US, which even more recklessly gave its approval to Bosnian secession in 1992.

Yugoslavia, moreover, is not a capitalist state of even regional stature. It has no transnational conglomerates. Yugoslav finance capital plays no significant role outside the borders of the country. To the extent that one can speak of a Serbian bourgeoisie, it is only now emerging from the layers surrounding Milosevic that enriched themselves by stealing state property in the process of dismantling Yugoslavia.

Comparisons of Serbia to Nazi Germany and Milosevic to Hitler are a combination of ignorance and deceit. Scientific political analysis does not consist in the hurling of epithets. The transformation of the Austrian corporal with a loud voice and a Charlie Chaplin moustache into the most monstrous embodiment of world reaction depended upon certain objective prerequisites—namely, the immense resources of German industry. Hitler was the leader of an aggressive imperialist power that sought to achieve the hegemony of German capitalism in all of Europe. Before Hitler's bloody offensive was halted, German domination stretched from the English Channel to the Caucasus Mountains, embracing the Balkans, including Yugoslavia. Hitler's military ambitions reflected the economic appetites of Siemens, Krupp, I. G. Farben, Daimler-Benz, Deutsche Bank and the other great German conglomerates.

Were it not for the tragic consequences associated with this distortion of historical reality, the comparison of Serbia to Nazi Germany and Milosevic to Hitler would be laughable. Serbia, to begin with, is not seeking to conquer foreign lands, but rather hold on to territory internationally recognized as falling within its borders. As for Milosevic, the main preoccupation of this “Hitler” has been to hang on to whatever he can of a rump federation whose borders have been shrinking year after year.

To sum up: This is a war by a coalition of major imperialist powers against a small, semi-backward country. It has a neo-colonialist character, trampling on Yugoslav sovereignty. Its aim is a type of NATO protectorate over Kosovo, which will likely resemble the NATO-IMF regime that runs Bosnia.

Once the fraudulent claims of the NATO spokesmen and the falsifications of the media are stripped away from this war, what remains? A naked aggression by imperialist countries against a small federation, in which the official reasons given for the onslaught serve as a smokescreen. Without the frenzied propaganda, it would be far more difficult to keep the public from inquiring into the actual reasons for the imperialist powers taking the road of military bombardment.

At the opening of this century, Rosa Luxemburg noted that capitalism is the first mode of production to have mass propaganda as a weapon at its disposal. “Humanitarianism” was, at the time of her comment just as today, a cover for taking by force that which was desired from the weaker countries. The “civilizing missions” of the US, England, France, Belgium, and Holland had the actual purpose of securing valuable raw materials, markets and geopolitical advantage over their major rivals. Likewise, today the attack on Yugoslavia aims to secure the material interests of the imperialist powers.

For starters, the Western powers are positioning themselves to exploit Kosovo's abundant mineral reserves, which include substantial deposits of lead, zinc, cadmium, silver and gold. Kosovo also holds an estimated 17 billion tons of coal reserves. But this is merely the “small change” of imperialist calculations. The immediate material gains that might be plundered from Kosovo are dwarfed by the far greater potential for enrichment that beckons in regions further to the east where the NATO powers have developed immense interests over the past five years. It is astonishing that so little attention has been paid to the connection of this war to the world strategic ambitions of the US and the other NATO powers.

Just as the development of imperialism witnessed the efforts of the major powers to parcel out the world at the end of the last century, the dismantling of the USSR has created a power vacuum in Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia that makes a new division of the world inevitable. The principal significance of Yugoslavia, at this critical juncture, is that it lies on the Western periphery of a massive swathe of territory into which the major world powers aim to expand. It is impossible for the US, Germany, Japan, France, Britain and the other powers to simply look passively at the opening of this area. Unfolding is a struggle for access to the region and control over its raw materials, labor and markets that will far outstrip last century's “scramble for Africa.”

This process expresses the most profound requirements of the profit system. Today's transnational companies measure their success in global terms. No market in the world can be ignored by General Motors, Toyota, Lockheed Martin, Airbus or even Coca-Cola. These immense operations compete across continents to achieve dominance. For them, the penetration of one-sixth of the globe newly opened to capitalist exploitation is a life-and-death question.

The integration of this region into the world system of capitalist production and exchange is the most critical task facing the international bourgeoisie today. It is essential for the survival of capitalism into the 21st century. One only need ask: if at the beginning of the 20th century it was necessary for capitalism to divide and organize the world, how much more so today when all major corporate operations are global in character?

The United States is exploiting the dismantling of the USSR most aggressively. This is explained in part by the historical limitations that the Soviet Union placed on the US. American capitalism rose to preeminence relatively late, during World War I. In the very year—1917—that the US entered the war, the victory of the October Revolution in Russia set the stage for the establishment of the Soviet Union. For seven decades, an objective consequence of the existence of the USSR was that a vast portion of the globe was closed off to direct exploitation by US capitalism.

The demand of US capital to regain access to this territory, to claw back what had been lost, was the essential content of Washington's Cold War policy. The drive to “stop communist expansion,” when stripped of its exaggeration and falsification, expressed the relentless ambition of US banks and corporate powers to expand their reach into Eastern Europe and Russia in order to extract profits. The events of 1989-91 untied the hands of US capitalism in this arena.

Involved in the reintegration of the territory of the former USSR into world capitalism is the absorption, by massive Western transnational companies, of trillions of dollars in valuable raw materials that are vital to the imperialist powers. The greatest untapped oil reserves in the world are located in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan). These resources are now being divided among the major capitalist countries. This is the fuel that is feeding renewed militarism and must lead to new wars of conquest by the imperialist powers against local opponents, as well as ever-greater conflicts among the imperialists themselves.

This is the key to understanding the bellicosity of US foreign policy over the past decade. The bombardment of Yugoslavia is the latest in a

series of wars of aggression that have spanned the globe. Though they had certain regional motivations, these wars have been the US response to the opportunities and challenges opened by the demise of the USSR. Washington sees its military might as a trump card that can be employed to prevail over all its rivals in the coming struggle for resources.

"The Caspian region is one of the largest remaining potential resources of undeveloped oil and gas in the world," explained one Exxon executive in 1998, adding that the area might be producing as much as 6 million barrels of oil per day by 2020. He expects the oil industry to invest \$300-\$500 billion in the interim to exploit the reserves. The US Department of Energy estimates that 163 billion barrels of oil and up to 337 trillion cubic feet of natural gas are to be found. If the estimates are borne out, the region will become a petroleum producer comparable in scope to Iran or Iraq.

Western analysts also expect the Caspian region to become a major world gold producer. Kazakhstan, with 10,000 tons, has the second largest reserves in the world. Mining companies from the US, Japan, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Israel are already operating in the region.

Each of the major capitalist countries, and a number of developing regional powers, have their sights set on these resources. There is an acute awareness among the capitalist powers of the objective imperatives to intervene, expand their influence and secure their own interests to the disadvantage of their rivals. These needs are finding growing articulation in major policy journals, government hearings and editorials.

Here the debate within the US ruling elite is the most significant, and ominous. Since 1991, a frank discussion has been taking place among prominent US strategists concerning the country's new place in world affairs. In the absence of the Soviet Union, many have concluded, the US finds itself the master of a new "unipolar" world, in which it enjoys, at least for the present, unassailable dominance. What these strategists debate is not whether, but how this advantage can be leveraged.

Noteworthy is an article written by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former National Security chief under Carter, which was published in the September/October 1997 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. It is entitled "A Geostrategy for Asia."

"America's status as the world's premier power is unlikely to be contested by any single challenger for more than a generation," writes Brzezinski. "No state is likely to match the United States in the four key dimensions of power—military, economic, technological, and cultural—that confer global political clout."

Having consolidated its power in its base in the Western Hemisphere, the US, Brzezinski argues, must make sustained efforts to penetrate the two continents of Europe and Asia.

"America's emergence as the sole global superpower now makes an integrated and comprehensive strategy for Eurasia imperative."

"After the United States," Brzezinski writes, "the next six largest economies and military spenders are there, as are all but one of the world's overt nuclear powers, and all but one of the covert ones. Eurasia accounts for 75 percent of the world's population, 60 percent of its GNP, and 75 percent of its energy resources. Collectively, Eurasia's potential power overshadows even America's."

"Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent. A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. A glance at the map also suggests that a country dominant in Eurasia would almost automatically control the Middle East and Africa."

"With Eurasia now serving as the decisive geopolitical chessboard, it no longer suffices to fashion one policy for Europe and another for Asia. What happens with the distribution of power on the Eurasian landmass will be of decisive importance to America's global primacy and historical legacy."

Because he does not expect the US to dominate Eurasia single-handedly, Brzezinski sees American interests being best served by securing a leading role, while facilitating a balance among the major powers favorable to the US. He attaches an important condition: "In volatile Eurasia, the immediate task is to ensure that no state or combination of states gains the ability to expel the United States or even diminish its decisive role." This situation he describes as a "benign American hegemony."

Brzezinski sees NATO as the best vehicle to achieve such an outcome. "Unlike America's links with Japan, NATO entrenches American political influence and military power on the Eurasian mainland. With the allied European nations still highly dependent on US protection, any expansion of Europe's political scope is automatically an expansion of US influence. Conversely, the United States' ability to project influence and power relies on close transatlantic ties."

"A wider Europe and an enlarged NATO will serve the short-term and longer-term interests of US policy. A larger Europe will expand the range of American influence without simultaneously creating a Europe so politically integrated that it could challenge the United States on matters of geopolitical importance, particularly in the Middle East."

As these lines suggest, the NATO role in Yugoslavia, where it has undertaken offensive military action for the first time since its inception, is clearly seen in US ruling circles as a step which will enhance America's world position. At the same time, NATO expansion into Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic is effectively the expansion of US influence in Europe and the world.

Brzezinski's particular perspective on this region is not entirely novel. He has resurrected, in a form adapted for use by the US under present conditions, the traditional geopolitical strategy of British imperialism, which long sought to secure its interests in Europe by playing one rival on the continent against another.

The first modern "Eurasian strategy" for world domination was elaborated in Britain. Foreshadowing Brzezinski, imperial strategist Halford Mackinder, in a 1904 paper, "The Geographical Pivot of History," maintained that the Eurasian land mass and Africa, which he collectively termed "the world island," were of decisive significance to achieving global hegemony. According to Mackinder, the barriers that had prevented previous world empires, particularly the limitations in transportation, had largely been overcome by the beginning of the 20th century, setting the stage for a struggle among the great powers to establish a global dominion. The key, Mackinder believed, lay in control of the "heartland" region of the Eurasian land mass—bounded roughly by the Volga, the Yangtze, the Arctic and the Himalayas. He summed up his strategy as follows: "Who rules east Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the world-island; who rules the world-island commands the world."

Notwithstanding assumptions that were later criticized by bourgeois commentators, Mackinder's writings, like Brzezinski's today, were followed closely by the major statesmen of his time and exerted a profound influence in the great power conflicts which shaped the first half of this century.

For reasons both of world strategy and control over natural resources, the US is determined to secure for itself a dominant role in the former Soviet sphere. Were any of its adversaries—or combination of adversaries—to effectively challenge US supremacy in this region, it would call into question the hegemonic position of the US in world affairs. The political establishment in the US is well aware of this fact.

The US House Committee on International Relations has begun holding hearings on the strategic importance of the Caspian region. At one meeting in February 1998, Doug Bereuter, the committee chairman, opened by recalling the great power conflicts over Central Asia during the 19th century, then dubbed the "great game."

In the contest for empire, Bereuter noted, Russia and Britain engaged in an extended struggle for power and influence. He went on to say that “one hundred years later, the collapse of the Soviet Union has unleashed a new great game, where the interests of the East India Trading Company have been replaced by those of Unocal and Total, and many other organizations and firms.”

“Stated US policy goals regarding energy resources in this region,” he continued, “include fostering the independence of the States and their ties to the West; breaking Russia's monopoly over oil and gas transport routes; promoting Western energy security through diversified suppliers; encouraging the construction of east-west pipelines that do not transit Iran; and denying Iran dangerous leverage over the Central Asian economies.”

As Bereuter's comments indicate, Washington foresees substantial conflict with the regional powers in the pursuit of its interests. If considerable friction was initially manifested in gaining access to Caspian oil, an even greater degree of strife has emerged in the maneuvers to bring it to Western markets.

While tens of billions in oil production deals have already been signed by Western oil companies, there has yet to be an agreement on the route of the main export pipeline. For the reasons cited by Bereuter, Washington adamantly insists on an east-west path to avoid Iran and Russia.

This is a matter of concern at the highest levels of US government. Last fall, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson told Stephen Kinzer of the *New York Times*, “We're trying to move these newly independent countries toward the West. We would like to see them reliant on Western commercial and political interests rather than going another way. We've made a substantial political investment in the Caspian and it's very important to us that both the pipeline map and the politics come out right.”

A number of strategists have argued for an aggressive US policy in the region. One, Mortimer Zuckerman, the editor of *US News & World Report*, warned in a May 1999 column that the Central Asian resources may revert back to the control of Russia or a Russian-led alliance, an outcome he calls a “nightmare situation.” He wrote, “We had better wake up to the dangers, or one day the certainties on which we base our prosperity will be certainties no more.

“The region of Russia's prominence—the bridge between Asia and Europe to the east of Turkey—contains a prize of such potential in the oil and gas riches of the Caspian Sea, valued at up to \$4 trillion, as to be able to give Russia both wealth and strategic opportunity.”

Zuckerman suggests that the new conflict be called “the biggest game.” The superlative term is more fitting because today's conflict has “worldwide and not just regional consequences. Russia, providing the nuclear umbrella for a new oil consortium including Iran and Iraq, might well be able to move energy prices higher, enough to strengthen producers and menace the West, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. In the words of Paul Michael Wihbey, in an excellent analysis for the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, the ‘nightmare scenarios of the mid-1970s would reappear with a vengeance.’”

The director of a US think tank bluntly laid out the military implications of the newfound interest in the region. In a 1998 document, Frederick Starr, the head of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University, pointed out that half of the NATO states have a major commercial stake in the Caspian. He then added that “the potential economic rewards of Caspian energy will draw in their train Western military forces to protect that investment if necessary.”

The prospect of a military conflict between one or more of the NATO countries and Russia is not simply a matter of speculation. Writes Starr: “In no country is NATO membership more assiduously sought than energy-rich Azerbaijan, and nowhere is the possibility of conflict with the Russian Federation more likely than over the export of Azeri resources.”

In 1998 the country participated in all of the 144 NATO “Partnership for Peace” exercises.

The rationale for war offered in the present campaign against Yugoslavia could easily be reapplied should US ruling circles decide to intervene militarily in Central Asia. There are ethnic conflicts in nearly every country there. The three states through which Washington would like to see the main oil export pipeline pass are exemplary in this regard. In Azerbaijan, military conflict with the Armenian population has continued for more than a decade. Neighboring Georgia has seen sporadic warfare between the government and a separatist movement in Abkhazia. Finally, Turkey, which is to host the pipeline terminal, has waged a protracted campaign of repression against the country's minority Kurd population, who predominate precisely in those regions in the southeast of the country through which the US-backed pipeline would pass.

The point is not lost on the present US administration. In a speech to US newspaper editors last month, Clinton stated that Yugoslavia's ethnic turmoil was far from unique. “Much of the former Soviet Union faces a similar challenge,” he said, “including Ukraine and Moldova, southern Russia, the Caucasus nations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the new nations of Central Asia.” With the opening of these regions, he noted, “the potential for ethnic conflict became, perhaps, the greatest threat to what is among our most critical interests: the transition of the former communist countries toward stability, prosperity and freedom.”

But the aggressive attitude taken by the US towards intervention in Yugoslavia and the prospect of future American inroads in the Caspian region will not be received with indifference around the world.

The potential for a conflict with Russia, it should now be clear, has actually increased over the past ten years. So too has the likelihood of a major clash between the US and one or more of the European powers. The European bourgeoisie will not be content to forever accept a subordinate status to the US. Its position would be continually eroded as the US sought to press its advantage. Inevitably, conflicts will develop over how the spoils of Central Asia and Eastern Europe are to be divided between the US, Germany, France, Britain and Italy.

Recently, European editorialists and politicians have protested the growing US involvement in European security affairs and its push for NATO expansion. What must they make of US plans, such as those outlined by Brzezinski, for a massive extension of US power into Europe and Asia?

The tensions are already quite visible. The military intervention in Yugoslavia comes amidst a year of growing trans-Atlantic trade conflicts. The European powers, moreover, have long been searching for a means to undermine the hegemonic role of the US in world trade, establishing a monetary union and creating the Euro to rival the dollar as a world reserve currency. Furthermore, the leading power in the European monetary union, Germany, has a substantial commercial stake in Eastern Europe and Russia. The prospect of US-Russian conflict and instability in Moscow puts its position in jeopardy.

Further US-Japan conflict will also follow. The island nation, a major oil importer, has its own interests in the Caspian region and no shortage of trade disputes with the United States. To the extent that the US sees a greater military role as a key to its success in Central Asia, demands will be put forward by ruling circles in Japan to end the post-War restrictions on the size and range of its military.

Open conflict between the US and China is inevitable. China, a historically oppressed country and not an imperialist power, is, however, well on its way to the restoration of capitalism and aspires to be a major regional economic power.

Such a development, as the present anti-China hysteria in US newspapers reveals, is vehemently opposed by a substantial section of the American ruling elite. The expansion of US influence in Central Asia poses a direct and immediate threat to China because, among other

factors, the expansion of the Chinese economy is directly dependent on access to petroleum. Its oil needs are expected to nearly double by 2010, which will force the country to import 40 percent of its requirements, up from 20 percent in 1995.

For this reason, China has already expressed interest in a pipeline that would transport Caspian oil eastwards and signed, in 1997, a \$4.3 billion deal to secure a 60 percent stake in a Kazakh oil facility. The US will undoubtedly seek to undermine its activities in this region.

Around the world, governments fear that they could very well become the next target of military action, should they buck US demands. This apprehension is hardly confined to the lesser-developed countries on the US enemies' list. One can be sure that Paris and Berlin are greatly concerned about US intentions in Europe and that the Pentagon has plans for war with France and Germany which can be quickly pulled off the shelf.

These two countries are cited as examples to make another important point. Not every future US conflict is certain to be as one-sided as the present one. Washington will before long find itself at war with an adversary that is not all but defenseless.

The Central Asian region, strategically vital and rich in natural resources, will not be peacefully divided among the major world imperialist powers as it is reincorporated into the structure of world capitalism. As Lenin wrote in 1915, speaking about the division of the colonial countries by the imperial powers: "The only conceivable basis under capitalism for the division of spheres of influence, interests, colonies, etc., is a calculation of the *strength* of those participating, their general economic, financial, military strength, etc. And the strength of the participants in the division does not change to an equal degree, for the *even* development of different undertakings, trusts, branches of industry, or countries is impossible under capitalism. Half a century ago Germany was a miserable insignificant country compared with the Britain of that time; Japan compared with Russia in the same way. Is it 'conceivable' that in ten or twenty years' time the relative strength of the imperialist powers will remain *unchanged*? It is out of the question."

Updating Lenin's assessment by substituting the present leading powers for those of 1915 raises the question: Will the US, Europe and Japan somehow manage to peacefully come to terms on such issues as the awarding of trillions of dollars of petroleum and construction contracts, the elaboration of trade agreements and the establishment of military pacts? No affirmative answer is possible.

The major powers will also seek to take advantage of local conflicts. The growth of local antagonisms will be heightened, not attenuated, as Central Asia is integrated into the global system of production and trade. As Western financing for major oil projects increases, the stakes in regional ethnic conflicts will escalate. When command of territory carries with it billions in oil export revenue, fighting will only become more fierce.

Already, the conflict in the Abkhazian region of Georgia has halted pipeline construction more than once. What is more, the penetration by Western capital has been accompanied by IMF-directed austerity measures. These changes have further pauperized the vast majority of the Central Asian people while enriching a few. Like Russia, the Caspian and Caucasus republics have seen the creation of an extremely wealthy, but narrow layer of "New Kazakhs," "New Azeris," etc., even as overall output and wealth have fallen since 1991.

These developments portend a new division of the world, which will be decided by the principal imperialist powers and backed by their armies. The coming military conflicts will take place in a region of the world even more explosive than the Balkans. All the major protagonists possess nuclear weapons, raising the prospect of yet a third major imperialist conflict within the space of a century, with potential devastation and loss of human life on a far greater scale than the first two combined.

This is the significance of the present military action against Yugoslavia and the growth of militarism generally. Kosovo is a testing ground for wars that will follow in the former Soviet region.

The war is, at the same time, an expression of immense contradictions within the home countries of imperialism. These underlying social tensions will be exacerbated by the war itself. The whole of the 20th century has shown that periods of imperialist rapacity are inevitably accompanied by an intensification of social conflict within the metropolitan centers of imperialism.

The internal social structures of the US and the states of Western Europe are torn by intense class contradictions. The past two decades have witnessed a profound material polarization in these countries. A thin layer enjoys wealth on a scale never before seen in history. The remainder of the population lives in varying degrees of economic anxiety, distress and, among a substantial layer, extreme hardship and deprivation. All signs point to the continuation, even acceleration, of this basic tendency.

The social conflicts have taken a malignant form to the extent that they have remained politically inarticulate. The United States for its part gives the impression of a society on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Public life is punctuated by outbreaks of violence by schoolchildren that have left the country in a state of semi-shock. No explanation, beyond the most banal, has been offered by officials or experts for these explosions of violent anti-social behavior. In their own way, however, they testify to the brutality of contemporary American life and the suppressed antagonisms that lie just under the surface.

This point suggests yet an additional motivation for the bombing of Yugoslavia. The father of imperialist policy-making at the end of the last century, Cecil Rhodes, noted the social-psychological benefit of aggressive militarism in providing an outlet for social pressures that had accumulated within the imperialist countries themselves. Aside from its direct and indirect economic interests in the present conflict, the American bourgeoisie sees the opportunity to direct pent-up frustration and distress at an outside target.

At the same time, it recognizes the limitations of such diversions and already plans to further refashion internal policy to correspond to its imperialist ambitions. The country will continue to be remade as a high-tech garrison, where the bulk of public expenditure will be devoted towards military purposes abroad. Social programs will increasingly be replaced by naked domestic repression. This basic approach will be replicated in the other major imperialist states.

As for democratic rights, they are far from secure. The actual attitude of the ruling elite on this question has been revealed far more clearly in its actions in the present war, as it bombed Serbian television stations and threatened to close the Internet, than in all its official legal guarantees and public declarations.

To the frustration of government officials, the military brass and the media, the majority of people in the NATO countries are not possessed of war fever. The latter day jingoists are confined largely to the political establishment. The overall mood in the broad public is one of perplexity and disquiet. To the extent that this sentiment has not developed into organized opposition to the war, it is largely the result of the process of political abandonment of masses of people by organizations to which they previously gave their allegiance.

The war has revealed the complete bankruptcy of the established political parties that once presented themselves as the champions of the working class and socialism. From the social democratic, Labor and Stalinist parties have come not merely the supporters, but the leaders, of the present war. To more experienced observers, this does not come as a surprise. Such organizations had long demonstrated their political subservience to the markets and big business and been integrated into the apparatus of imperialism. The war has revealed only the *completeness* of the process of political decay. Where once they represented an obstacle to

the political and economic demands of capital, though not a genuine socialist alternative to imperialism, today they are entirely right-wing bourgeois parties.

The war has illuminated another feature—perhaps better described as a “void”—in the political landscape: the absence of a socially-critical and self-sacrificing intelligentsia. There has been from academic experts virtually no critique of the arguments and assumptions that have served as the justification for the war. To the extent that dissenting intellectual voices have been heard, they come as a rule from the right, demanding a more aggressive policy. Disappeared, perhaps even from memory, are the days of protest, campus teach-ins and scrutiny of the claims of the state.

How did this situation arise? Much can be learned from an analogous political transformation that occurred in the first part of the 20th century. The outbreak of war in 1914 witnessed a whole layer of the labor bureaucracy and social democracy provide political support to the bourgeoisie in each country. Parties and political leaders that had officially adopted policies of opposition to imperialist war abandoned their avowed principles, voted for war credits, and insisted that the working class defend the state. The catastrophic consequences of their decision, which fell most heavily on the European workers, are well known.

Lenin saw the material explanation for this phenomenon in the process of corruption of a segment of trade union officials and social democratic leaders by imperialism. The brutal exploitation of the colonies and the theft of their resources enabled the European bourgeoisie to share enough of its spoils with the official labor leaders to obtain their acquiescence to the dictates of imperialism.

An analogous phenomenon has occurred in the recent period. A whole layer of those who were radicalized by the experiences of Vietnam, the events of May-June 1968 in France and the militant labor conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s abandoned, during the past two decades, their opposition to imperialism and reincorporated themselves into the middle class life. Of these ex-radicals, not a few saw their material fortunes skyrocket with the stock market takeoff in the 1990s. This has produced a dramatic realignment in their politics. Some of the most fervent advocates of the present war are drawn from this layer.

The process of enrichment, of course, has not been confined to those with a history of radical politics. As noted above, a small layer, in percentage terms, has grown rich, but this constitutes a significant number of individuals. One percent of the US owns forty percent of its wealth. This speaks to the astronomical living standard enjoyed by more than two and a half million people. Beneath them, an additional ten to twenty percent of the population has seen its fortune grow considerably over the past twenty years. Similar figures could be listed for the other major capitalist countries.

It is from this wealthy layer that the political leaderships of all the official parties, the media, and no small number of academics are drawn. The accumulation of wealth has provided the political cement holding the war drive together and fostering demands for its expansion among the ruling elite.

The Wall Street boom, however, has been a two-sided process. The run-up in share values has demanded the adoption of a new regime of austerity, “labor flexibility” (i.e., job insecurity) and increased exploitation of the laboring population in the imperialist centers and around the world. Just as the production of the *nouveau riche* in the 1980s and 1990s created a new constituency for imperialism, it created a vastly larger audience for an anticapitalist and antimperialist movement among the international working class. The growth of the world proletariat; the lowering of living standards among the majority of the advanced countries; the impoverishment of much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America; and the declining prospects for youth are leading objectively to a movement of revolutionary social change.

The stage has been set for the transformation of this objective potential into a conscious political force. What is required today, above all, is the struggle for socialism among the workers, intellectuals, and youth who will form the nucleus of such a revolutionary movement. The confusion of Marxism with its reactionary antithesis, Stalinism, must be cleared away through political education. A fight must be taken up against all ideologies that directly or indirectly work to perpetuate the present system. These efforts must find their highest expression in the construction of a unified socialist political party of the international working class.

To this aim the *World Socialist Web Site*, the voice of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is dedicated.

See Also:

US-NATO attack on Yugoslavia

[Complete list of WSWS articles]



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**