

Kosovo and East Timor: a reply to a WSWS reader

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1 October 1999

Below we publish the reply, prepared by Nick Beams, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to a letter sent to the WSWS on the Australian-led UN intervention into East Timor by a reader in New Zealand. For those who wish to read the text of the letter in full, a link is provided at the conclusion of this reply.

Dear NR,

While you praise our “excellent coverage of the Kosovo situation” and counterpose this to the material we have published on East Timor, it seems that you have either missed or misunderstood the most fundamental feature of the *World Socialist Web Site's* analysis.

In the many articles and statements produced on the Balkan War, the WSWS sought to expose the humanitarian posturing of the US and its European allies, and reveal the real economic and geo-political interests underlying their 11-week bombing campaign.

Now a new military intervention is underway, accompanied by a similar propaganda barrage proclaiming humanitarian concern—this time for the fate of the East Timorese people.

Are we seriously to believe that the very imperialist powers—Australia and New Zealand among them—that backed the murderous Indonesian regime while it slaughtered 200,000 East Timorese in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and which just six months ago launched a war for “oil, gold and world power” in the Balkans, have suddenly undergone a miraculous metamorphosis?

Or, rather, is it not the case that the military intervention in East Timor is being driven by essentially the same economic and geo-political concerns that underlay the US-NATO onslaught against Serbia?

You maintain that there are “significant differences” between Kosovo and East Timor because, in the latter case, military intervention has “UN approval”, does not involve “attacking civilian (or indeed any military) targets,” does not violate “any nation's sovereignty” and that “the forces going into East Timor are quite obviously there to keep the peace, [while] those which bombed Kosovo were set on war.”

Leaving aside, for the moment, the validity of these assertions, which we dispute, a more general methodological issue is raised. In your view, our attitude to the actions of the imperialist powers should be determined on an empirical, case-by-case basis.

Such an approach is fundamentally flawed. It detaches politics—manoeuvres in the UN, diplomatic initiatives, military action and ultimately war—from their economic foundations. But the politics of the imperialist nations are rooted in the historical development of world capitalism. They are inseparably bound up with the dominant role of finance capital and the unending struggle on the world market among vast transnational corporations for markets, resources and profits. These economic interests do not operate one day and then cease the next. Rather, they are the ever-present foundation, and the ultimate determining factor, of the policies and programs of the various capitalist governments.

In our analysis of the Balkan war, we explained that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakdown of the political framework of the Cold

War had ushered in a new era in the global struggle for control of raw materials, resources and strategic interests.

Whereas in the post-World War II period the imperialist powers had launched wars and organised military incursions under the banner of the global struggle against “Communism”, the new situation demanded a new ideology.

In their assault on Serbia, the US and NATO insisted that no economic or national interests were at stake—their motivations were entirely ethical and moral. Rightly dubbed “ethical imperialism”, these claims, far from being “new”, represented nothing more than a refurbishment of past ideology. They recalled the doctrine of the “white man's burden” and the struggle against the “iniquitous slave trade” under which the “scramble for Africa” proceeded at the end of last century.

The Balkan war was organised and led by the major powers—the US, Britain, France and Germany. But its lessons were not lost on the smaller ones, such as Portugal, Australia and New Zealand. They drew the conclusion that Kosovo signalled a new era: in the future, the pursuit of economic and political interests would have to be backed up by military force.

A recent interview with Australian Prime Minister John Howard conducted by the *Bulletin* magazine underscores this point. Recalling the Asian policy pursued under the previous Keating government, Howard remarked: “We looked as though we were knocking on their door, saying ‘Please let us in’, instead of realising we were always somebody they would want to have in because of our particular strength that [now] has been demonstrated. Despite the inevitable tensions that are involved [in East Timor] and some of the sensitivities, this has done a lot to cement Australia's place in the region.”

By “particular strength”, Howard meant military clout, backed by the United States.

Allow me to point out that while you insist there are “significant differences” between Kosovo and East Timor, Howard believes there is a “very interesting strategic parallel.” Whereas in the Balkans, there was “massive American involvement,” in the case of East Timor Australia has performed the role of a “deputy” with the US acting as “lender of last resort.” The use of a banking phrase is not misplaced. It demonstrates that Howard, at least, recognises that the East Timor campaign, necessarily couched in terms of “humanitarianism” and “peacekeeping,” is essentially bound up with vital economic and strategic concerns.

How else are we to account for the fact that less than two weeks after the landing of troops in Dili, we find Howard invoking a new foreign policy doctrine, based on the assertion of national interests and the priority of Australia's defence capabilities?

In your letter you correctly point to “a touch of jingoism in the air and a degree of political posturing”. These are not, however, incidental factors. They express the essence of the military operation.

Again, you refer to “grave errors of judgment” regarding the UN-sponsored referendum and its aftermath. As in all historical events,

accident and miscalculation have no doubt played a role. But running like a thread through them all, the basic trend of development is clear: the East Timor intervention constitutes the starting point for the assertion of Australian interests in the Asia-Pacific region, backed up with military force. This is why Howard has foreshadowed a major review of Australian defence forces. His stated aim is to prepare further East Timor-style campaigns.

In a major speech to parliament on September 21, outlining the need to “put more resources into the combat capability of the Australian Defence Force”, the prime minister declared: “The government’s next white paper on defence will examine the likely demands on the ADF for regional peacekeeping, the evacuation of Australian nationals under difficult conditions and the capacity to participate in coalition operations.” The obligatory reference to “defend[ing] Australia from direct attack” was added as a kind of afterthought. The main emphasis was placed on responding to “other more likely contingencies.”

Howard did not detail what these might be, but the editorial writers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* did—referring to Papua New Guinea, antagonisms between China and Taiwan and between India and Pakistan, and even the possibility that before long “Australia may become locked in a conflict over competing claims to the resources of the Antarctic continent.”

There are further similarities between East Timor and Kosovo. NATO initiated its bombing campaign on March 24 knowing it would set off a series of revenge killings by Serb militias, resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the province. Their plight could then be utilised to stampede “public opinion” behind the war.

In East Timor, despite obvious differences, the underlying *modus operandi* was the same. Under pressure from Portugal, Australia and others, the UN proceeded with the referendum, in the full knowledge that the Indonesian military would unleash a wave of brutality against the East Timorese people.

Last March, even before the referendum plan had been adopted, the Howard government brought the Australian military to its highest state of readiness since the Vietnam War in order to be able to quickly respond to a UN “call” for “peacekeeping” forces.

You maintain that this UN authorisation constitutes a significant difference between East Timor and Kosovo, as if the UN were some kind of independent body protecting human rights. In fact, as history shows, and the case of both Kosovo and East Timor confirms, it functions as a kind of clearing house for the operations of the various great powers—a veritable “thieves kitchen” as Lenin described its predecessor, the League of Nations.

In the Kosovo situation, the US, Britain and France determined that the Security Council would not pass the necessary resolution, so they launched the war through NATO. After weeks of bombing, they then called in the UN to obtain Serbia’s capitulation and set up a Kosovo protectorate, retrospectively obtaining the UN’s imprimatur.

In the case of East Timor, the major powers—in particular, the US—were able to exert great economic pressure on Indonesia, threatening to “crash” the economy, in order to extract an “invitation” from Habibie for a “peacekeeping” force. The fact that the CNRT leadership backed the intervention does not alter its character, any more than the KLA’s demands for NATO bombing altered the imperialist character of the war against Serbia. Here too there are striking parallels: in the politics of the KLA and the CNRT.

You argue for support for the intervention in East Timor because it is designated as “peacekeeping”. But do not forget that the campaign in Kosovo was also conducted under the banner of morality and human rights.

In that case you agreed with the stand taken by the *WSWS* and its exposure of the real interests behind the “humanitarian” campaign. Does

the change in your attitude to our coverage on East Timor arise from the fact that the latest intervention is somewhat closer to home in New Zealand?

In both Australia and New Zealand a sharp shift to the right has occurred among the anti-war protestors of yesterday, several of whom opposed the war against Serbia. Marches and demonstrations have been organised to demand “troops in”. In New Zealand, the Labour Party opposition, which initially expressed some misgivings over the Kosovo campaign, has been at the forefront of demands for NZ to militarily intervene in East Timor, recognising that vital national interests are at stake.

Could it be that you have failed to undertake a sufficiently critical examination of this issue, leaving you vulnerable to the political pressure generated by these interests?

Supporting the UN’s military intervention, you ask: “And how else could the violent attacks on the East Timorese be halted except by sending in armed forces? Further diplomacy might have been effective but it seems unlikely that it would have been able to provide a fast enough response.”

There is no doubt that many would agree with you. While retaining certain suspicions about the motivations and role of their own governments, you, and they, have nevertheless concluded that no viable alternative exists to the present course of action.

But why is it that you see only two possibilities: either military intervention or diplomatic activity by the same imperialist powers responsible for creating the catastrophe in the first place?

Why does any perspective based on the independent mobilisation of the working class and oppressed masses, advancing their own solution to the myriad problems created by imperialism, seem to be out of the question?

Obviously a great deal hangs on this issue. If the working class and oppressed masses cannot advance their own program to meet the crisis in East Timor, they cannot do it anywhere. The broad mass of the world’s people are simply victims of the disasters created by imperialism, reduced to pathetically appealing to its representatives’ “humanitarian” ideals.

This conception is rooted in the profound crisis of perspective in the international workers’ movement. And responsibility for this rests precisely with those middle class radical tendencies that have formed the basis of the “protests” demanding “troops in”.

Their evolution as cheerleaders for imperialist militarism is not accidental. It is the outcome of the inherent logic of their politics, which have always been based on a rejection of the independent role of the working class.

In the post-war period, protest politics was based, not on the working class but on the bureaucracies that dominated it. Just as Stalinism constituted, for the radical tendencies, “really existing socialism,” so in the advanced countries the “really existing labour movement” comprised the social democratic, trade union and Communist Party apparatuses. In the oppressed colonial countries, the radicals glorified petty-bourgeois nationalist and guerrilla movements on the grounds that they were conducting an “armed struggle” against imperialism.

But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes and the rapid shift to the right by the labour and trade union bureaucracies, there has been a corresponding shift in “radical” politics. The longstanding rejection of any independent role for the working class now finds its consummate expression in the demand for imperialist intervention—first in the Balkans and now in East Timor.

The evolution of Xanana Gusmao and the rest of the East Timorese leadership exemplifies this process. Gusmao makes no appeal to the millions of Indonesian workers, students and peasants, now engaged in a life and death struggle against the military regime in Jakarta.

Rather, following in the path of Mandela and Arafat, he has stepped from an Indonesian jail cell onto the imperialist circuit. This week he

shared a platform in New York with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright one day, visiting Washington the next for discussions with officials of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. No doubt he has informed them of the wonderful investment opportunities, especially for US, Portuguese and Australian mining companies, which the CNRT will provide in an “independent” East Timor.

The continuing tragedy in East Timor is, in the final analysis, the outcome of the absence of any independent political struggle by the East Timorese, Indonesian and international working class. It is the terrible price being paid for the protracted domination of opportunist politics and the consequent crisis of political perspective.

Unless and until this crisis is overcome, through the fight to refound the international workers' movement on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective, this price will continue to be paid—in East Timor and internationally.

The struggle for this perspective will not bring about instant solutions. There are no short cuts in the resolution of long outstanding historical problems. But the rejection of such a perspective, on the grounds that the only viable solution is the intervention of imperialist armies, will most assuredly create the conditions for new disasters.

If you support military intervention then, like it or not, you bear a responsibility for the havoc it produces. It should be recalled that US intervention in Panama and Somalia, to name just two examples, has worsened the situation for the mass of the population.

The solution to the problems confronting the East Timorese people does not lie in the establishment of a statelet on half an island, set up as a military protectorate under the control of the imperialist powers. The wealth from the oil reserves under the Timor Sea—a not inconsiderable factor in the motivations of the imperialist powers—will not flow to the Timorese people, but will be rapidly appropriated by transnational companies whether of American, Portuguese or Australian origin.

The only way forward lies in the development of a unified struggle of the working class and oppressed masses of East Timor, Indonesia and throughout the region against imperialism and its servants in the national ruling classes.

The forces for the realisation of such a perspective are already coming on to the scene. Even as the troops go into Dili, students, youth and workers are battling on the streets of Jakarta against moves by the Indonesian military to establish new “emergency laws” as it prepares to unleash the violence inflicted in East Timor against the working class and masses across the archipelago.

This developing movement must be armed with a genuine socialist perspective, based on the assimilation of all the lessons of the 20th century. Only in this way can the horrendous legacy of imperialist domination be overcome and a new chapter opened up in the struggle to secure a future free of oppression.

Sincerely,

Nick Beams

See: Full text of letter from WSWs Reader



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact