

Two revealing comments on the war against Afghanistan

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Two recent newspaper articles—an editorial in the *Washington Post* and a comment piece in the *Financial Times*—have pointed to some crucial political issues arising from the US-led war against Afghanistan.

The *Washington Post* editorial provided a glimpse of the increasing unilateralism within the Bush administration, based on the assertion that the United States must exercise its global military dominance, unfettered by the demands of its “coalition” partners in the war on Afghanistan, or even its long-standing allies in Europe.

The *Financial Times* comment on the other hand, authored by Gordon Adams, a member of the Clinton administration from 1993 to 1997, took an opposite tack. It urged the US to form a long-term partnership with other nations to deal with the world’s problems, ranging from instability in the Balkans to the threat of recession. But the agenda it set out is so far removed from the present situation that it only served to make clear that the unilateralism advocated by the *Washington Post* represents the outlook of the dominant forces in US ruling circles.

The *Washington Post* editorial, published on October 22, began by pointing to the “relatively strong backing” Bush received from president Jiang Zemin of China and other Asian leaders at last weekend’s Asia-Pacific summit held in Shanghai, and to the importance of “the coalition” in the war against Afghanistan.

But it went on to warn that “the coalition” has a limited life. “[A]s the Afghan campaign continues and other targets in the war against terrorism develop, it will be worth remembering a caution offered the other day by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. ‘There is no single coalition in this effort,’ he said. Instead there should be ‘a number of flexible coalitions that will change and evolve.’ He added: ‘Let me re-emphasise that the mission determines the coalition, and the coalition must not determine the mission.’”

The editorial explained that the relevance of Rumsfeld’s remarks lay in the fact that the Bush administration was being advised that “any further action against terrorism must preserve ‘the coalition’—or, as Mr Jiang and others have suggested, be agreed on by the United Nations.” This was “a recipe for paralysis, advanced by those who oppose any forceful US action outside of Afghanistan or against any terrorist organisation other than Qaeda.”

Denunciations of China and of UN involvement are not unusual; in fact they have become almost par for the course. But then

followed an attack on the European powers and their opposition to the US moves for an attack on Iraq.

“Arab and European governments,” it declared, “are particularly worried about a potential US campaign against Iraq. Preferring the corrupt stability and business opportunities offered by Saddam Hussein to the elimination of his stores of anthrax, they whisper that any such move would be a revival of the Bush administration’s much disparaged ‘unilateralism’. What would ‘the coalition’ offer as an alternative? That’s easy: Pressure Israel, the most easily agreed upon ‘cause’ of Muslim anger.”

According to the editorial, an Israeli-Palestinian settlement would be worth working for and a new strategy against Iraq would have to be “prudently weighed” against other objectives. “But the reality is that the common wisdom of the coalition fails to account for the way the world has been changed by September 11. Problems that for decades have been ignored or regarded as secondary, such as the lack of political freedom or economic progress in the Arab states, where Islamic extremism is strongest, now must be at the heart of any serious long-term effort to combat terrorism.”

The significance of the assertion that “the world has been changed by Sept.11” and that this is yet to be recognised by what is disparagingly referred to as “the coalition” emerges from an examination of the history of the past decade.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened up vast areas of the world, previously out of reach, for penetration by the US and the other major imperialist powers. This meant that the balance of power, established on the basis of US hegemony at the conclusion of World War II was now in question as the possibility emerged for a new alignment of forces. The danger was that the US could be eclipsed. Consequently, the overriding issue that has concerned US strategists over the past decade is the maintenance of US global domination in the post-Cold War world.

As Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s National Security Advisor and a man still intimately involved in US foreign policy discussions, put it: “The last decade of the twentieth century has witnessed a tectonic shift in world affairs. For the first time ever, a non-Eurasian power has emerged not only as the key arbiter of Eurasian power relations but also as the world’s paramount power. The defeat and collapse of the Soviet Union was the final step in the rapid ascendance of a Western Hemisphere power, the United States, as the sole and, indeed, the first truly global power. ... [T]he issue of how a globally engaged America copes with the complex

Eurasian power relationships—and particularly whether it prevents the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic Eurasian power—remains central to America’s capacity to exercise global primacy” [Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 1997 pp. xiii-xiv].

The three wars launched by the US over the past decade—the Gulf War of 1990-91, the war against Yugoslavia in 1999 and now the war against Afghanistan—have been bound up with the maintenance of global supremacy. In particular, they have centred on the vital issue of control over the resources of the Eurasian land mass, above all oil and gas, first in the Middle East and now in Central Asia.

But in asserting its military power, the US has become increasingly frustrated with the constraints and restrictions imposed by relationships established in an earlier period and which served different purposes. In the Gulf War of 1990-91, the US still had to deal with other major powers in the United Nations. The war concluded with a sense of anger in US ruling circles—unabated after the passage of 10 years—that its objectives were not met, and the military should have continued on to take Baghdad.

In the US war against Yugoslavia, the UN framework was largely cast aside, and the attack was conducted under the auspices of NATO. But here, too, conflicts with its European allies, in particular Germany, proved to be a source of frustration.

In the war against Afghanistan, the US has proceeded with a different *modus operandi*. UN agreement was not sought, because, as the letter from US ambassador John Negroponte to the Security Council made clear, it was a war for “self-defence.” Neither was it launched through NATO, despite the organisation’s declaration of full support.

What has been changed by the events of September 11 is that the US is determining its course of action and forming new relationships in conditions where the allies of yesterday may not necessarily be those of today and tomorrow. US decisions will not be subject to the constraints that others might seek to impose.

As the *Washington Post* editorial put it, the calculus used to judge the importance of acting against such “rogue states” as Iraq has changed. “To act effectively in this new world, the United States will not only have to form different sorts of coalitions, it may have to take action against some of the current members of the Qaida alliance. In that sense, the greatest danger to the war on terrorism is not that the Bush administration will resort to unilateralism. It is that the United States will fail to act aggressively and creatively enough, over time, to break the current coalition apart.”

In other words, “acting aggressively” in pursuit of its strategic interests, the US must be prepared to come into conflict not only with the lesser powers that currently make up “the coalition”, but the major European powers as well, should that become necessary.

The comment by Gordon Adams in the *Financial Times*, entitled “Remember the rest of the world”, began by cautioning that in the “war on terrorism” it was necessary not to “lose sight of the underlying dynamics and risks in the international system.”

“The coalition against terror is not a coalition to solve all other international problems. The underlying tensions and threats have not disappeared ... Indeed with, the focus on terrorism, some

problems could become more dangerous because they have been left to fester.”

“Al Qaeda did not sweep the international agenda clean,” Adams warned. “Instability in the Balkans continues; Russia’s economy falters, its democracy is unstable and conflicts riddle the new states on its periphery; the Middle East is now a powder keg; Pakistan and India are near war; Indonesia is close to collapse; the Taiwan Straits remain a danger zone, central Africa is still in flames; international crime and the drugs trade worsen; and recession is spreading.”

The publication of this list—and it could easily be extended—amounts to an indictment of the global capitalist order. Ten years after the “triumph of the market” it is plunging the world into chaos.

How is this chaos to be overcome? According to Adams, stability will only come about through a “systematic global engagement by the US, in a long-term partnership with other nations” which will “resolve the underlying problems that give birth to terrorism.”

“All the tools of statecraft will be needed: American diplomacy and assistance to ensure political stability and economic growth; policies that ensure the globalised economy benefits all and not just a few; a commitment to expand democracy and freedom; partnership with the Europeans in guaranteeing security as Europe’s borders; engagement to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back into the peace process; exchanges and assistance in North Korea; a global coalition to battle international crime and drug cartels; international agreements that restrain weapons of mass destruction; global efforts to reduce atmospheric pollution; and a US military committed to keeping the peace it helps create.”

The mere setting down of such a wish list for stability serves to underscore the fact that it is impossible to achieve. Just weeks after the events of September 11 and their seizure by the US as the pretext for the launching of another war to further its global objectives, Adams’ prescriptions sound like an echo from a distant past. The logic of events is not driving towards international collaboration to bring peace and prosperity but to what Leon Trotsky once described as the “volcanic eruption of US imperialism.”



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