

Behind the “anti-terrorism” mask: imperialist powers prepare new forms of colonialism

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From the outset of the military assault against Afghanistan, the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained that this is not a war for justice or security against terrorist attacks but is bound up with the geo-political aims of United States imperialism.

It has not taken long for a discussion of some of these wider aims to surface in the international media. The past days have seen a series of articles advocating both an extension of the war beyond Afghanistan and the establishment of neo-colonial forms of rule in a number of countries.

On October 8, the US ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte, delivered a letter to the UN Security Council which left no doubt that the Bush administration will extend the war beyond Afghanistan should it deem that to be necessary. According to the Negroponte letter, US military action had been taken in “self-defence” and the inquiry into the organisation of the September 11 attack was only “in its early stages.”

Then came the warning of wider military action. “We may find that our self-defence requires further actions with respect to other organisations and other states,” the letter stated.

Supporters of a wider war—particularly the launching of a military attack on Iraq—eagerly seized on the letter, and its insistence that the inquiry into the September 11 events had only begun. As columnist John Podhoretz put it in the October 9 edition of the *New York Post*: “The implicit point: When the inquiry goes beyond the ‘early stages,’ the United States will uncover connections between al Qaeda and ‘other organisations and other states.’ And when we do so, we will act as we deem fit ‘in accordance with the inherent right of individual and collective self-defence.’”

The same point was underscored, albeit in slightly more restrained language, in an article by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, senior fellows at the Brookings Institution, published in the *Financial Times* on October 10.

Citing Negroponte’s reference to “other organisations and states” they commented: “Much has been made in recent weeks about a supposed rift within the Bush administration about the overarching goal of the anti-terrorist campaign. In the early days, Colin Powell, the secretary of state, and some in the Pentagon led by deputy secretary Paul Wolfowitz, disagreed over whether to focus initially on Afghanistan or begin with a broader military campaign that included strikes against Iraq and other state sponsors of terrorism. Mr Bush settled on an Afghanistan-first strategy. But it would be a mistake to confuse this with an Afghanistan-only strategy.

“Mr Bush’s war against terrorism is therefore much broader than simply focusing on Mr bin Laden and the Taliban. It encompasses the al Qaeda network outside Afghanistan, Hizbollah, Hamas and other groups of ‘global reach’ as well as the states that continue to sponsor them—including possibly Iran, Iraq and Syria.”

The discussion is not confined to the selection of other targets for military attack, but goes to the broader question of what forms of rule must now be set in place by the imperialist powers at the conclusion of

military intervention.

Ten years ago the International Committee of the Fourth International warned that the US-led war against Iraq marked the opening of a new era of imperialism and colonialism. In the manifesto for its conference against Imperialist War and Colonialism held in Berlin in November 1991, the ICFI warned that the “ongoing and de facto partition of Iraq signals the start of a new division of the world by the imperialists. The colonies of yesterday are again to be subjugated. The conquests and annexations which, according to the opportunist apologists of imperialism, belonged to a bygone era are once again on the order of the day.”

Those warnings have been verified in all the events since then and in open declarations in the international press that the war against Afghanistan must see the return of the old forms of colonialism.

A new form of colony

This is the theme of an article by the right-wing British historian Paul Johnson entitled “The Answer to Terrorism? Colonialism.” published in the October 9 edition of the *Wall Street Journal*.

“America,” Johnson writes, “has no alternative but to wage war against states that habitually aid terrorists. President Bush warns the war may be long but he has not, perhaps, yet grasped that America may have to accept long-term political obligations too. For the nearest historical parallel—the war against piracy in the 19th century—was an important element in the expansion of colonialism. It could be that a new form of colony, the Western-administered former terrorist state, is only just over the horizon.”

Johnson then proceeds to give a potted history of the 19th century in which he asserts that the colonial expansion of the major imperialist powers, above all the British Empire, was aimed at bringing a halt to piracy. The purpose of this rewriting of history is all too transparent. It is aimed at covering over the fact that imperialist conquest in the 19th century had nothing to do with “piracy” but was the outcome of a struggle by the major capitalist powers to enhance their position in the global competition for profits, markets and resource, just as today’s war against “terrorism” is being pursued for the same aims.

Johnson concludes his article by spelling out not only the other targets for attack but setting out the new forms of rule which should be established.

“America and her allies,” he writes, “may find themselves, temporarily at least, not just occupying with troops but administering obdurate terrorist states. These may eventually include not only Afghanistan but Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Iran and Syria. Democratic regimes willing to abide by international law will be implanted where possible, but a Western presence seems unavoidable in some cases.

“I suspect the best medium-term solution will be to revive the old League of Nations mandate system, which served well as a ‘respectable’ form of colonialism between the wars. Syria and Iraq were once highly successful mandates. Sudan, Libya and Iran have likewise been placed under special regimes by international treaty.

“Countries that cannot live at peace with their neighbours and wage

covert war against the international community cannot expect total independence. With all the permanent members of the Security Council now backing, in varying degrees, the American-led initiative, it should not be difficult to devise a new form of United Nations mandate that places terrorist states under responsible supervision.”

While Johnson directs his remarks to the Bush administration, across the Atlantic, Martin Wolf, the global economics columnist for the *Financial Times*, addresses the same call to British prime minister Tony Blair.

In an article entitled “The need for a new imperialism” published on October 10, he writes: “Mr Blair views today’s events as a chance to reorder the world. Yet even he may not realise how radical that reordering must be. The aim entails a transformation in our approach to national sovereignty—the building block of today’s world.”

“Failed states”

Wolf bases his call for a new imperialism on the concept of the so-called “failed state” of which Afghanistan is but an extreme example. Such “failed states”, he says, not only pose a threat to the rest of the world—providing a cradle of disease, a source of refugees, and a haven for criminals and providers of hard drugs—but reduce the lives of their own people.

Wolf cites the work of British diplomat Robert Cooper who pointed to the emergence of a “zone of chaos”, including Afghanistan. Such areas were not new, Cooper wrote, but were previously isolated from the rest of the world. “Not so today ... If they become too dangerous for the established states to tolerate, it is possible to imagine a defensive imperialism.”

The argument that the existence of “failed states” provides the justification for imperialist rule is as specious and hypocritical as Johnson’s invocation of piracy. The so-called “failed state” is a direct product of the interventions of the imperialist powers—organising coups, stoking up civil wars and ethnic conflicts for their own purposes, and arming repressive regimes—and the imposition of economic policies that have created a social disaster for people of these countries.

The impoverishment of the entire sub-Saharan region of the African continent, for example—the region of many such “failed states”—stems from the fact that in any year the repayment of loans and interest to the major Western banks and bodies such as the International Monetary Fund is greater than the entire budget for health and education.

But Wolf, like earlier proponents of imperialism, is not one to let facts stand in the way of his political agenda. He maintains the central problem confronting the “failed states” is that there is no organised state apparatus capable of imposing order, the precondition for civilised life. They become trapped in a vicious circle in which poverty begets lawlessness and lawlessness begets more poverty.

“Afghanistan,” he continues, “is an example of such a failed state: it is divided into mutually suspicious tribal groupings; it is desperately poor; war has become a way of life; the ruling regime funds itself with money from the export of hard drugs; and Osama bin Laden is the godfather.” The facts concerning the role of the US, in collaboration with the Saudi regime and Pakistan in financing the warring factions to the tune of at least \$10 billion, the support provided to the Taliban and the promotion of Osama bin Laden when it served the interests of the imperialist powers, are completely ignored.

The chaos caused by yesterday’s crimes is made the starting point for the perpetration of new ones, beginning with the establishment of colonial forms of rule.

“If a failed state is to be rescued,” Wolf writes, “the essential parts of honest government—above all the coercive apparatus—must be provided from outside. That is what the west is doing today in the former Yugoslavia. To tackle the challenge of the failed state, what is needed is not pious aspirations but an honest and organised coercive force.

“There are two reasons why the idea will cause horror: imperialism

remains suspect; and the effort will be costly. Yet these objections can be met. Some form of United Nations temporary protectorate can surely be created.”

Greater US assertiveness

Another call to “colonise wayward nations” with the application of a “dose of US imperialism” was published in the *Australian* of October 15. Written by Max Boot, the opinion page editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, the article takes issue with suggestions that the September 11 attack was some kind of “payback for US imperialism.”

“In fact,” Boot declares, “this analysis is exactly backward: the September 11 attack was the result of insufficient American involvement and ambition. The solution is to be more expansive in the US’s goals and more assertive in their implementation.”

According to Boot, the problem in Afghanistan was not that the US armed the mujaheddin in Afghanistan in order to wage a proxy war against the Soviet Union during the 1980s but that it pulled out of Afghanistan with the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989. Boot attacks previous military actions by the Clinton administration—the withdrawal from Somalia after the death of 18 US soldiers and the sending of cruise missiles, not soldiers, against the training camps of Osama bin Laden in 1998—as insufficient and “displays of weakness” that “emboldened our enemies to commit greater and more outrageous acts of aggression.”

“The problem, in short, has not been excessive American assertiveness but insufficient assertiveness. The question is whether, having now been attacked, the US will act as a great power should.”

Boot leaves no doubt as to the model of “great power” action he has in mind—British imperialism of the 19th century.

“It is striking—and no coincidence,” he continues, “that the US now faces the prospect of military action in many of the same lands where generations of British colonial soldiers went on campaigns. Afghanistan, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Arabia, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Palestine, Persia, the North-West Frontier (Pakistan)—these are all places where, by the 19th century, ancient imperial authority, whether Ottoman, Moghul or Safavid, was crumbling, and Western armies had to quell the resulting disorder.

“Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.”

Like Paul Johnson, he invokes the League of Nations mandatory territories of the inter-war period as providing the model and notes that the process has already started in the 1990s with the placing of East Timor, Cambodia, Kosovo and Bosnia under UN rule.

“Unilateral US rule may no longer be an option. But the US can lead an international occupation force under UN auspices with the co-operation of some Muslim states.”

Boot singles out Afghanistan and Iraq as the two states where the imposition of this new form of rule could begin and voices the widely held opinion in US ruling circles that a mistake was made when the US did not march on to Baghdad in the Gulf War. Now it has an “opportunity to rectify this historic mistake.” And any legal quibbles should be quickly pushed aside.

“The debate about whether Hussein was implicated in the September 11 attacks misses the point. Who cares if he was involved in this particular barbarity? He has been involved in so many barbarities over the years—from gassing the Kurds to raping the Kuwaitis—that he has already earned himself a death sentence a thousand times over.”

The US should turn its attention to Iraq after dealing with Afghanistan, Boot argues. “Once Hussein is disposed [through a US invasion and occupation], an American-led, international regency in Baghdad, to go along with the one in Kabul, should be imposed.”

The value of these articles is that they make all too clear that under the banner of the global fight against terrorism the imperialist powers, led by the United States, are preparing nothing less than the re-organisation of

the world through the imposition of military power. This has immediate political consequences. Militarisation of international relations inevitably implies militarisation of politics at home: imperialism is incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

Furthermore they all make one significant omission as they harken back to the “glory days” of British imperialism. The carve-up of the world in the latter part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th did not bring peace and prosperity. Rather, it led to two inter-imperialist wars, resulting in hundreds of millions of deaths as the major capitalist powers—the US, Britain, Germany, France, and Japan—inevitably came into conflict with each other in the global struggle for resources, markets and spheres of influence.

These writers pass over these experiences in order to provide a justification for the opening of a new epoch of imperialist conquest. But the working class will ignore these historical lessons at its peril. Against the program of the imperialist powers it must advance its own independent perspective—the unification of its struggles on an international scale and the re-organisation of the world on socialist foundations as the only basis for peace and prosperity. That is the program advanced by the ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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