

SEP meetings in Australia

The war in Afghanistan: the socialist perspective

Part 2

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This is the second and concluding part of a report delivered by Nick Beams to Socialist Equality Party public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne on November 4 and 8 respectively. The first part was posted on November 9.

The US had maintained its global dominance after World War II on the basis of the political relationships established in the Cold War. Now that the Cold War was over, how was US global hegemony to be maintained? It is this question, above all others, which has dominated the thinking and discussion on US foreign policy over the past decade.

One of the most prominent figures in that discussion has been Zbigniew Brzezinski—the author of the Afghan intervention. Allow me to cite some passages from his book *The Grand Chessboard* published in 1997.

“The last decade of the twentieth century,” he wrote, “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.

“Eurasia, however, retains its geopolitical importance. Not only is its western periphery—Europe—still the location of much of the world’s political and economic power, but its eastern region—Asia—has lately become a vital centre of economic growth and rising political influence. Hence, the issue of how a globally engaged America copes with the complex Eurasian power relationships—and particularly whether it prevents the emergence of a dominant antagonistic Eurasian power—remains central to America’s capacity to exercise global hegemony” [*The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, pp. xiii-xiv].

Brzezinski goes on to point out that the power which dominates Eurasia controls two of the world’s three most advanced and economically productive regions. Control over Eurasia brings control over Africa. Eurasia contains most of the world’s wealth, both in its enterprises and what lies beneath the soil. “Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played” [p. 31].

This analysis makes clear the significance of the three wars launched by American imperialism over the last 10 years. It is not only insiders such as Brzezinski who openly point to the long-term strategic goals of the US. The significance of the struggle for raw materials and resources—especially those which have become available since the collapse of the USSR—is apparent to anyone who penetrates behind the various justifications offered by the imperialist powers for their latest military interventions.

For example, an article entitled “The New Geography of Conflict”

published in the May-June 2001 edition of the US journal *Foreign Affairs* contained some interesting observations. The author began by pointing out that in October 1999 a significant decision was taken by the US military that reflected a change in strategic thinking. Central Asia was removed from Pacific Command to Central Command. Previously, Central Asia had been viewed as being of peripheral concern.

“But the region, which stretches from the Ural Mountains to China’s western border, has now become a major strategic prize, because of the vast reserves of oil and natural gas thought to lie under and around the Caspian Sea. Since Central Command already controls the US forces in the Persian Gulf region, its assumption of control over Central Asia means that this area will now receive close attention from the people whose primary task is to protect the flow of oil to the United States and its allies.”

The article went to point out that the new prominence of Central Asia was part of a wider transformation in US strategic thinking. Whereas in the Cold War, military planning was dominated by the confrontation between the US and the Soviet, now other considerations have emerged.

“Behind this shift in strategic geography is a new emphasis on the protection of supplies of vital resources, especially oil and natural gas. Whereas Cold War-era divisions were created and formed along ideological lines, economic competition now drives international relations—and competition over access to these vital economic assets has intensified accordingly.” This means, the author continued, that “security officials have begun to pay much greater attention to problems arising from intensified competition over access to critical materials—especially such as oil that often lie in contested or politically unstable areas.”

Another article in the September-October issue of *Foreign Affairs* entitled “Caspian Energy at the Crossroads”, also points to the crucial significance of the resources of this region.

“Although the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries will continue to dominate the global energy market for decades to come, oil and gas development in the Caspian Basin could help diversify, secure, and stabilize world energy supplies in the future, as resources from the North Sea have done in the past. The proven and possible energy reserves in or adjacent to the Caspian Basin region—including at least 115 billion barrels of oil—are in fact many times greater than those of the North Sea and should increase significantly with continuing exploration.

“Such plentiful resources could generate huge returns for US companies and their shareholders. American firms have already acquired 75 percent of Kazakhstan’s mammoth Tengiz oil field, which is now valued at more than \$10 billion. Over time, as the capital generated from Caspian energy development spreads to other sectors, US firms in other industries—from

infrastructure to telecommunications to transportation and other services—could also benefit.”

Herein lies the geopolitical significance of Afghanistan. It borders the Caspian Sea region, which contains the world’s second largest reserves of oil. Moreover, it provides the possibility for a pipeline to transport these supplies to the US and other international markets—a pipeline which will not be under the control of Russia, nor pass through Iran.

Neo-colonial forms of rule

The renewed struggle for raw materials and resources by the imperialist powers necessarily brings with it the revival of the forms of rule that emerged at the end of the 19th century.

In the resolution of the International Committee prepared for the Berlin conference we explained that: “The conquests and annexation which, according to the opportunist apologists of imperialism, belonged to a bygone era are once again back on the order of the day.”

Not surprisingly, the war against Afghanistan has been accompanied by calls for the establishment of new forms of colonialism. The right-wing British historian Paul Johnson kicked off the discussion with an article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “The Answer to Terrorism? Colonialism”. According to Johnson, one of the reasons for the establishment of the British Empire was the need to halt piracy. The fight against terrorism might need the establishment of new forms of colonies.

One could say that it is a little bit rich for a spokesman for British imperialism to be denouncing piracy. After all, some of the “primitive accumulation” of wealth of the British Empire came from the activities of that most famous of pirates, Sir Francis Drake.

“America and her allies,” Johnson wrote, “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 political presence seems unavoidable in some cases.”

Then came an article by Martin Wolf, the global economics commentator for the *Financial Times*, entitled “The need for a new imperialism.” Wolf centred his analysis on so-called “failed states”. Ruled by corrupt elites, these states could not provide the basic foundations for economic growth and became havens for terrorism. The only way the cycle could be broken was by the establishment of a new state—a coercive apparatus set up from the outside. Of course Mr Wolf did not bother to analyse how the economic policies of the major capitalist powers, along with the banks and international financial institutions, have created the conditions for deepening poverty. Nor did he bother to explain how the various warlords and military leaders of these so-called failed states have all been armed and financed at one time or another by the major capitalist powers.

The opinion page editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, Max Boot, obviously inspired by the contribution from Paul Johnson, decided to air his views. In an article entitled “Colonize Wayward Nations,” he maintained that the US had to be more expansive and more assertive in the struggle to achieve its goals. The problem, he said, was not too much American assertiveness but too little.

“Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets. Is imperialism a dusty relic of a long-gone era? Perhaps. But it’s interesting to note that in the 1990s, East Timor, Cambodia, Kosovo and Bosnia all became wards of the international community. This precedent would easily be extended into a

formal system of UN mandates modelled on the mandatory territories sanctioned by the League of Nations after the defeat of the German and Ottoman empires in World War I. Unilateral US rule may no longer be an option. But the US can lead an international force under UN auspices ...”

Boot suggested two immediate targets—Afghanistan and then Iraq. Never mind that absolutely no evidence has been found to link Iraq with the attacks of September 11, the US should move in any way to finish off the job that was not completed under the first Bush administration in 1991, he insisted.

Attacks on democratic rights

It is not difficult to reveal the underlying material and economic interests which form the driving forces for the foreign policies of the US. But these economic concerns cannot be discussed openly. Brzezinski, who makes clear that the heart of US foreign policy is the preservation of American global dominance, is all too well aware of the fact that the management of a global empire presents political problems.

“It is a ... fact,” he writes, “that America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America’s power, especially its capacity for military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy attained international supremacy. But the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands popular passion, **except in conditions of sudden threat or challenge to the public’s sense of domestic well-being**” [Brzezinski pp. 35-36, emphasis added].

These remarks help provide an understanding of the relationship between the events of September 11 and the war which is now unfolding.

When the two planes were driven into the World Trade Center this provided the US administration with the pretext for setting in motion a military offensive. We do not know whether 20 years after the event, as in the case of Brzezinski and the backing for the mujaheddin in Afghanistan, some security operative or one-time member of the administration, will come forward to provide the inside story to events of September 11—and perhaps help answer the question as to what the US intelligence agencies knew about what was to take place.

Be that as it may, we do know that the terrorist attack was eagerly seized on by the Bush administration as a means of presenting a “sudden threat or challenge to the public’s sense of well-being”. If the effects of the terror attack start to wear off, we have the continuing outbreaks of anthrax.

As Brzezinski rightly noted, it is difficult to wage an imperialist war under conditions of democracy. That is why the “war against terrorism”—supposedly to preserve freedom and democracy—has seen a stepping up of attacks on democratic rights.

A year ago, we made the point that the elevation of Bush to the US presidency through the 5-4 Supreme Court vote, and the collaboration in this coup d’état by all sections of the so-called liberal mass media, along with the apparatus of the Democratic Party, made it clear that no section of the ruling class had an interest in defending even the most minimal elements of democracy.

There was not the semblance of a constituency within the bourgeoisie for the defence of even the right to vote. Now that the votes have been counted, and it is clear that Gore won the election, the results have been suppressed by the major news organisations which carried out the count. They have other things on the political agenda.

The launching of the war against Afghanistan brings into the open processes which have been rapidly developing since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990s. That is, a new struggle for the division and re-division of the world by the major imperialist powers has

begun. This has the most far-reaching political implications.

It is highly significant that various economic commentators and political pundits have called for the return of colonialism—the mask of freedom and democracy is being stripped off and the real aims are coming into the open. Likewise, we find that in the US a raging battle is going on among the ruling elites over when to launch a war against Iraq. No matter that there is no evidence connecting it to the events of September 11, or that that anthrax outbreaks are most likely to have been carried out by extreme right wing groups from within the US; Iraq must be attacked and the so-called failed or “rogue” states subjected to colonial domination.

But those who would harken back to the glory days of the British Empire always leave out one question: where did the struggle for colonies lead to? The outcome was the eruption of World War I. The struggle by each of the major capitalist powers for colonies, markets and spheres of influence eventually brought them into conflict with each other. Two world wars were the result. The present conflict contains the seeds of future inter-imperialist conflicts. The allies of today, in the war against terrorism, can become the open enemies of tomorrow.

The Australian elections

A struggle for the re-division of the world has opened up and this process dominates politics. This is one of the lessons to emerge from the election campaign in this country. In one sense it could be said that the fact that the election in Australia is being held under conditions of the launching of a war is a matter of accident.

The bipartisan character of the response of the two major parties is not an accident. As we explained in our election statement, there is a political law at work here. The deeper the gulf between the official apparatuses and the interests and needs of the mass of the population, the closer together they move.

No dissent or opposition can be tolerated. This is seen in the response to the comments by Labor candidate Peter Knott, who made the indisputable point that the attack on the United States is a consequence of previous US policies. One might say this is not so much a political position as a simple statement of fact, given the support which the US and its allies provided to the development of Osama bin Laden and other clerical fascist and terrorist groups when it suited their purposes at earlier period. But Knott, who from the outset insisted that he supported the war and the involvement of Australian troops, has been forced to recant under the threat of disendorsement.

The politics of militarism and war mean deepening attacks on the democratic rights and social position of the working class at home. The major imperialist powers have launched a war without end, under conditions where the world economy is moving into what may well turn out to be the most serious and sustained recession since the 1930s.

The concurrence of these two events is not accidental. At the most fundamental level it is the expression of processes arising from within the global capitalist economy itself. The drive for raw materials, for resources, for spheres of influence, is rooted in the final analysis in the continuing pressure to sustain the rate of profit.

Likewise the collapse and/or merger of major companies and the relentless destruction of jobs—whether in conditions or so-called economic growth as has been experienced over the past 10 years or in a period of recession like that we are now entering—has the same origin.

The eruption of imperialist war and the attacks on the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class are part of the same process. The capitalist ruling classes are seeking to reorganise the world in the interests of the demands and dictates of the profit system. The working

class must draw the lessons of the whole experience of the 20th century.

The latter decades of the 19th century, like the period through which we have passed, saw a tremendous expansion of the global reach of the capitalist order. It was the first phase of what is now termed globalisation. But the very expansion of capitalism at the end of the 19th century led inevitably to the eruption of World War I as the growth of the productive forces came into conflict with the constrictions of the profit system and the nation-state framework.

At the outbreak of that war Leon Trotsky explained: “The only way in which the proletariat can meet the imperialist perplexity of capitalism is by opposing to it as a practical program of the day the socialist organisation of world economy. War is the method by which capitalism, at the climax of its development, seeks to solve its insoluble contradictions. To this method the proletariat must oppose its *own* method, the method of the social revolution” [*War and the International*, Trotsky, p. x].

These words have lost none of their force or their relevance. What does the war against Afghanistan signify? What is the meaning of the continued sanctions against Iraq, the daily horrors in the Middle East? Three wars in the past 10 years? Who is the next to be hit? When will the struggle for resources, assets and spheres of influence bring the imperialist powers into conflict with each other as took place at the beginning of the last century?

The ruling classes plan to re-organise the world. But they have no viable perspective on which to do so. This is because their social system, based on the accumulation of private profit and the politics of rival national states, is historically anachronistic. It can only produce bloody chaos and anarchy, just as did the dying feudal regimes in an earlier period—only on a much vaster scale.

The working class must counterpose to the chaos, destruction and anarchy of the capitalist order its own independent perspective, based on two fundamental principles. In the first place it must be grounded on internationalism. This election has been characterised above all by the whipping up of nationalism—the attempt to cover over the widening class divisions within the country by pointing to the supposed common enemy outside.

The working class has to advance on a new perspective. Specifically it means developing the most active opposition to all forms of nationalism and discrimination. In opposition to the position of all parties in this election that restrictions must be placed on immigration and that refugees and so-called “illegals” should be locked up, and denied the most elementary democratic rights, it means recognition of the right of all people to move freely all over the globe without constrictions or discrimination.

The interests of the working class do not lie in the defence and protection of the national borders of the nation state. This form of rule has become a complete historical anachronism. The world must be reorganised in the interests of the working class—the overwhelming majority of the world’s population. The vast resources which have been created by the labour—intellectual and physical—of the world’s producers must be utilised to meet their needs.

The development of an independent movement of the working class involves nothing less than a complete break from the existing political apparatus and the construction of a new mass party. Here we must draw the most far-reaching historical lessons. The growth of the socialist workers’ movement took place in the latter part of the 19th and the first part of the 20th century. The politics of imperialism provided the basis for the education of millions of workers throughout the world.

The development of this movement saw the first breach in capitalist rule with the Russian Revolution of 1917. That revolution, however, remained isolated and the tremendous pressure of that isolation saw the growth of a malignant cancer in the form of Stalinism and ultimately the restoration of capitalism.

What are the lessons of that experience? That socialism failed, that there

is no alternative to capitalism? These arguments would perhaps have some validity were it not for the fact that it was the Marxist movement, in the form of the Left Opposition and then the Fourth International, which explained that Stalinism did not represent socialism or communism but was the first step in the restoration of capitalism.

The perspective of Marxism has stood the test of events. Now great challenges lie ahead. The task is the political re-education of the working class on the basis of socialist perspective. Only this can provide the way out of the chaos and barbarism into which capitalism is plunging mankind. It is to the achievement of this task that the ICFI and the SEP are dedicated. We urge you to give it your urgent consideration.



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