

The historic decline of US imperialism and the prospects for socialism

Part Two

Nick Beams
2 February 2005

On the weekend of January 29-30, the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held a meeting of its national membership in Sydney. Published below is part two of the opening report delivered by Nick Beams, SEP national secretary and a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board. Part One was published on February 1, and the remaining two parts will be published on February 3 and February 4.

Clearly, broad questions of perspective arise. Will it be possible for the US, at least for the foreseeable future, to establish a new equilibrium, a *Pax Americana*, or will the attempt to do so set off a series of political and even military conflicts in which the necessity and possibility for a socialist outcome will emerge? Alternatively, will other forces emerge from within the American bourgeoisie to effect a change of course and re-establish a political and economic equilibrium in collaboration with the other major capitalist powers?

In order to examine these questions let me turn to a significant discussion that took place earlier this year. On January 6, an organisation called the New America Foundation held a meeting on the subject of “Charting a US foreign policy road map for 2005 and beyond.” The two guest speakers were Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor both to President George Bush senior and Gerald Ford, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to President Carter.

Scowcroft began by referring to the “fundamental” changes that had taken place with the end of the Cold War. The US was in the position of having more power than any nation since the Roman Empire. However, it faced the danger of being ganged up against by the rest of the world.

The second major change was globalisation, taken in its most fundamental sense, that had altered the way the world operates. “It is a fundamental erosion of national boundaries, and therefore the role of the nation-state. There are so many forces; economic forces, technological forces, environmental forces and political forces, terrorism being one of these as well, that are flowing back and forth across borders and defying the nation-state’s ability to do what the nation-state has always done, which is to provide for the security and welfare of its citizens.

“I would liken what is happening today with globalisation to an earlier period, the age of industrialisation—where corporations and big economic enterprises started to come together and empower themselves, and produced strains and conflicts with labour, with the environment, and this, that, and the other. The nation-state took it upon itself to set regulations; labour regulations, trade

regulations—labour unions emerged, capitalism developed but so did its competition with thought by Karl Marx, socialism, and the like.

“A whole way of life, good stuff and bad, emerged in the industrial age—and we just got rid of the last vestiges of a lot of the bad when Soviet communism collapsed.”

But it seems that this only ushered in a new set of problems. As Scowcroft continued: “The nation-state managed the industrial age as the basic unit for dealing with these forces. I think that what is fundamentally different is that the nation-state can’t deal with many of the problems of globalisation. Today’s problems require massive cooperation because they are intrinsically cross-border and therefore pose risks to states even as powerful as the United States.”

Consider what is being said here. According to Scowcroft, who has been a by-no-means insignificant figure in the most powerful state apparatus in the world over the past four decades, the basic unit of bourgeois rule, the nation-state, is no longer capable of dealing with the very complex problems created by the global development of the capitalist mode of production. What is his answer? Not very much, apart from a recognition that the US is “out of step” with what is going on and “out of focus,” marked by a tendency to be “unilateral,” regarded as arrogance in some parts of the world, and that what is needed to deal with the problems of globalisation is “new responses from states in collaboration.”

Brzezinski began his contribution with an indictment of the war on Iraq. It was, he said, “a war of choice” [and therefore by definition a war crime, though Brzezinski did not make this point] and a serious moral setback to the US in terms of how it started, how it was justified and the way it has proceeded. It was also a political and military setback.

The US was now a divided nation that had lost international legitimacy. “The recovery of international unity is an obligation that imposes itself on all of us but especially on those who are in charge of shaping international laws.” The US, however, would have to “labour hard” to restore international credibility. No one would believe it if the administration declared that Iran was harbouring nuclear weapons.

Addressing the longer-term strategic tasks, he continued: “Related to the broader issues I think we ought to pursue, is the regeneration of a genuine grand alliance to deal with global issues. And that means a closer relationship with an expanding and gradually more strategically engaged Europe and a more internationally active Japan. ... [T]he relationship with Europe and Japan is the point of departure for an effective global involvement in creating a more stable world. No one else is ready or willing to participate. Their support is necessary, and

that is a strategic fact of life which cannot be disregarded.”

The US, he insisted, had to stop uniting its enemies and dividing its friends. At the conclusion of his remarks, Brzezinski made very clear what was at stake in this perspective. It was necessary to “strive, with our principal allies, on the basis of a grand alliance with Europe and Japan, to include in the world system the newly awakened global masses.

“That is a very important new reality historically. We live for the first time in a world in which the masses of the world are alert politically. It has never existed before. And of course in the forefront of these masses, there are two spearhead states that embrace the largest numbers and have surprisingly, so far, been effective. And that is China and India. They, together, involve close to 3 billion people. How they are integrated into the international system is going to define the kind of system we have in the future. Namely, will it be a comprehensive global system? Or will the newly awakened political masses be the basis for violence—ethnic, religious, nationalist—including terrorism?”

Of course, not too far in the background, lies the great unstated fear that these newly awakened masses, like their counterparts in previous periods, begin to strive for a socialist perspective.

The discussion within US foreign policy circles brings to mind the conflict between Lenin and Karl Kautsky on the historical significance of World War I. Lenin insisted that the eruption of the war signified the historic breakdown of the world capitalist system and the objective necessity for the socialist revolution. The war was not a policy choice by the imperialist powers, but the beginning of a struggle for the division and redivision of the world. It flowed from the basic characteristics of the capitalist mode of production, and the development of imperialism. The struggle for markets and profits at a certain point became a military one. Hence the only way to end war—and the barbarism which had been unleashed on the battlefields of Europe—was the overthrow of capitalism by means of the socialist revolution.

Kautsky opposed this analysis and above all the perspective that it implied: that the socialist revolution was no longer consigned to a distant point in the future, for which the party was preparing, but had to become the basis of the party’s program. He maintained it was quite possible that during the war capitalism would enter another phase—that of ultra imperialism, formed through a holy alliance of the imperialists, in which they reached agreements to peacefully divide up the world. The result of the world war between the imperialist powers “may be a federation of the strongest, who renounce their arms race.”

Lenin opposed Kautsky, insisting that any peace among the capitalist powers could only be temporary. A *modus vivendi*, achieved at one period of time and representing a certain balance of forces, would inevitably be disrupted because of the uneven development of capitalism itself, thereby creating the conditions for a new conflict.

It is instructive to examine the arguments of Messrs. Scowcroft and Brzezinski in light of this dispute. Like other critics of the foreign policy of the Bush administration, they do not dispute the necessity for the US to exercise global hegemony. The disagreement centres on the methods to be employed. Their argument is that the very development and complexity of global capitalism means that this hegemony cannot be achieved on a unilateralist program. That only runs the risk of setting the other major powers against the US or, even more dangerous, setting in motion the newly politically awakened masses. Unilateralism must be replaced by a grand alliance of the major powers—a program of ultra imperialism for the twenty-first century.

However, this only raises another question: why did the old alliances and set of relationships, which had formed the basis of international politics for the past 50 years, breakdown? Or, to put it another way: is the period of what could be called Kautskyan ultra imperialism of the past 50 years going to continue indefinitely into the future, or are we about to see the re-emergence of inter-imperialist conflict, including war, which Lenin insisted was endemic to capitalism in this historical epoch.

There is a growing sense in US ruling circles that the present foreign policy is fraught with danger. A recent book critical of the Bush administration and the so-called neo-conservatives puts the issue as follows: “Our critique arises from the ‘center-right’ and asserts the virtues of the interest-driven, consensus-seeking, risk-conscious policies adopted by American administrations with great success since World War II. They are policies in which alliances and the international process are vital assets permitting the United States additional platforms and contexts to advance its interests. ... We believe that the neo-conservatives propose an untenable model for our nation’s future. Their recent writings indicate that, as Tallyrand observed about the Bourbons, they remember everything but have learned nothing from the nation’s experiences in 2003 in Afghanistan and Iraq. We embrace an alternative based on the interest-focused centrist policies that have guided both Republican and Democratic administrations from 1945 to 2000. At stake is the continuing capacity of the United States to advance democratic ideals and the principles of liberal government on which the United States was founded **without unleashing a backlash that will render any short-term gains null and void**” (Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone*, pp.7-8, emphasis added).

But why did the old system come to an abrupt end in 2000? It cannot be simply the outcome of the Republican victory in the presidential election. This is the bad Bush theory of history. The turn in American foreign policy cannot be put down to Bush any more than the domination of the “free market” and the end of national economic regulation can be put down to the election of Reagan and Thatcher.

There is no question that there has been a qualitative shift in the conduct of American foreign policy. But its sources are to be found not in the psyche of the Bush administration, or in the rise of the neo-con cabal. Rather, they lie in the historical development of US imperialism and its complex relationship to world capitalism as a whole. An examination of this relationship will make this clear and raises fundamental issues of perspective for our own movement.

To be continued



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact