

The war in Afghanistan, world politics and the perspective for socialism

Part 1

By Nick Beams
22 May 2002

The following is the first part of a report delivered to a public meeting held in Sydney on May 12, 2002, organised by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia. Part 2 was published on Thursday May 23 and Part 3 on Friday May 24.

Eight months after the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, only the hopelessly naïve or wilfully ignorant could continue to seriously maintain that the military response of the United States administration has been aimed at wiping out terrorism. The “war on terrorism” has been revealed as the political banner under which United States imperialism is undertaking a military offensive to assert its interests on a global scale.

Every day the theatre of operations widens. First, Afghanistan was the target. Then plans were brought forward for a war against Iraq. Last January Bush targeted a so-called “axis of evil” in his State of the Union address. Now in the last week the axis has been widened to include Syria, Libya and Cuba.

In one of the first statements issued on the *World Socialist Web Site*, we made the following point in establishing the framework within which the war against Afghanistan had to be assessed. It has proved decisive in understanding all that has followed.

“Modern wars,” we wrote, “require a pretext, a *casus belli* that can be packaged to the public as a sufficient justification for the resort to arms. Every major war in which the United States has been involved since its emergence as an imperialist world power—from the Spanish-American War of 1898 to the Balkan War of 1999—has required a catalytic event that inflamed public opinion.

“But whatever the nature of such trigger events, they never proved, in the light of sober historical analysis, to be the real cause of the wars that followed. Rather, the actual decision to go to war—while facilitated by the change in public opinion produced by the *casus belli*—flowed in each instance from more essential considerations rooted in the strategic political and economic interests of the ruling elite.”

As the statement went on to explain, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon provided the opportunity for the implementation of the far-reaching political and military agenda for which the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite had been clamouring for years. That assessment, made just two days after the terror attacks, has been entirely vindicated.

As soon as the war in Afghanistan commenced, the wider agenda began to be revealed. The Bush administration has made clear it is working for a “regime change” in Iraq, to be carried out by military means. The latest planning, details of which were leaked to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* last month—a leak probably carried out by the Bush administration itself—involves a major air campaign and ground invasion, deploying up to 250,000 troops. According to the report, plans to effect a

“regime change” through a coup, involving sections of the military, have been shelved, largely because of the failure of previous attempts.

What will be the pretext in this case? Initially, it seems, US planners were counting on Iraq’s refusal to accept the re-introduction of weapons inspectors in order to launch a military offensive in the northern autumn. But the agenda seems to have been put back to early next year. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Colin Powell has indicated that the US wants “regime change” irrespective of whether Iraq accepts inspectors. The argument now is that it makes no difference, because the period since the last inspections has been so long that Iraq would have had time to conceal its construction of “weapons of mass destruction.”

Any claim that the war against Afghanistan was simply a response to the September 11 attacks was surely shattered after Bush’s State of the Union address on January 29, in which he denounced Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an “axis of evil.” This was one of the most belligerent and menacing militaristic speeches ever delivered by a US president.

The speech was aimed at establishing a new *casus belli* for the prosecution of wider US military objectives. Despite its best efforts, it was impossible for US intelligence to link Iraq to the attacks on September 11, much less Iran and North Korea. A new pretext had to be found. Accordingly, Bush declared that “by seeking weapons of mass destruction” states like these constituted an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”

Given the fact that the US is in possession of the greatest amount of weapons of mass destruction ever assembled in history, that the military budget of the US exceeds that of the next nine governments **combined** and that the \$48 billion **increase** in the Pentagon budget proposed by the Bush administration is larger than the total military budget of any other country, one could describe the language as Orwellian—where words have their opposite meaning. But a more accurate description, if one can coin the word, would be Hitlerian, because the speech recalled the rantings of Adolf Hitler, the head of one of the most heavily armed regimes in the world, against the dangers posed by Czechoslovakia and Poland before he invaded both countries.

If we step back, so to speak, and take a broad view, the logic of the axis of evil speech—at first sight so illogical in bracketing together regimes which do not have a great deal in common—becomes apparent. The US is pursuing a policy aimed at securing the resources of the Middle East and Central Asia, which between them have more than two thirds of the world’s oil and natural gas, and ensuring its domination of the region against potential rivals, including Japan and possibly China, in the future.

Since September 11, the US has established a network of military bases and access rights. US forces are present in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Pakistan and India. Ten years ago, the presence of US forces in Central Asia, on the territory of the former USSR and at the

backdoor of China, would have been unthinkable, except perhaps in the wild dreams of the military planners and top brass in the Pentagon. Furthermore, the US is pressing ahead in Southeast Asia. Recently, the Pentagon had to specifically deny reports that US troops stationed in the Philippines were not merely engaged in training, but part of a push for new bases. Discussion is now taking place with the Indonesian government and there are plans to resume the US military's close ties with Indonesia's armed forces.

In our statement on Bush's speech, we noted the comments of the British daily, the *Guardian* published on January 30. "Every twist in the war on terrorism," it commented, "seems to leave a new Pentagon outpost in the Asia-Pacific region, from the former USSR to the Philippines. One of the lasting consequences of the war could be what amounts to a military encirclement of China." The report went on to cite a recent Pentagon document, which warned of the danger that "a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region" and called for a policy that "places a premium on securing additional access and infrastructure agreements."

Barely six weeks after the "axis of evil" speech, the leaking of the Nuclear Posture Review, detailing Pentagon plans for the expanded use of nuclear weapons in future wars, showed the extent to which military planning is being developed. The Pentagon will draw up plans for nuclear attacks on some seven countries, including Russia and China, Iraq, Iran and North Korea, Libya and Syria. According to the review, the Pentagon should be prepared to use nuclear weapons in a war between China and Taiwan, an attack by North Korea on South Korea, or by Iraq on Israel or another country. Given that the US is planning to attack Iraq, it is easy to see how such a situation could arise.

Significantly, the document demonstrates, for the first time, that the US would use nuclear weapons in a conflict where the other side either failed to use its nuclear weapons or did not have any at all. It called for nuclear weapons to be developed that could destroy heavily fortified bunkers. The review states: "Nuclear attack options that vary in scale, scope and purpose will complement other military capabilities." In other words, rather than weapons of "last resort," nuclear bombs can be used at will. They become simply another tool for fighting a war.

The report denounced the arms controls treaties between the US and the Soviet Union that regulated nuclear weapons in the Cold War. "That old process is incompatible with the flexibility US planning and forces now require," it declared. Clearly, it was only the USSR's possession of nuclear weapons that prevented the US from using its own during the past half century. Now, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes has opened up new regions of the world to penetration by the US and removed the old constraints.

At the very outset of the war against Afghanistan, we drew attention to pointed comments by former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book *The Grand Chessboard*. Published in 1997, the book argues that the US must maintain its supremacy on the Eurasian landmass if it is to retain global dominance. The value of Brzezinski's work is that he does not mince words about democracy and the maintenance of global peace against terror etc., but gets straight to the point. The goal of US policy, he insists, must be "unapologetically" to "perpetuate America's own dominant position for at least a generation and preferably longer still".

Brzezinski makes the point that in a democracy it is difficult to undertake military action and the pursuit of power "except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of domestic well-being" and that "democracy is inimical to imperial mobilisation."

I refer to these remarks, because they direct our attention to a number of important features of the present political situation. In the first place, the September 11 terror attack was a political godsend to sections of the American ruling elite demanding a more aggressive US foreign policy.

In 1997, a group of right-wing political figures and academics came together to form the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). It included, among others, Dick Cheney, now vice president, Donald Rumsfeld, now secretary of defence, Jeb Bush, the president's brother and governor of Florida and Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defence. Also included were members of a number of right-wing think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, where, not coincidentally, Under-Secretary of State John Bolton this week extended Bush's "axis of evil."

In its statement of principles, the group declared that conservatives had failed to advance a "strategic vision for America's role in the world" or set forth guiding principles for US foreign policy. They intended to remedy the situation. "A Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the US is to build on the successes of this past century and ensure our security and greatness in the next."

The Bush administration drew heavily on the PNAC and also, significantly, on those involved in the Iran/Contra crimes during the Reagan administration. But it had difficulty in advancing a foreign policy program. Consider the situation prior to September 11: the administration was considered illegitimate by wide sections of the population, the great stock market boom had collapsed and recession was developing. It would have been impossible for the Bush administration to launch a war.

The terror attacks provided a convenient trigger mechanism. I don't propose to detail here all the unanswered questions about the events of September 11. But the least plausible explanation of all is the official one: that the authorities knew nothing and were completely taken by surprise. Moreover, the official explanation is belied by one salient fact: some eight months after the greatest single failure of American security in history, no official inquiry has been launched. One is reminded of the Sherlock Holmes mystery in which the solution turns on the dog that *didn't* bark.

Without the terror bombings it would not only have been impossible to launch the current global offensive. It would have been unthinkable to initiate the type of attacks on democratic rights now being unleashed in the US.

A secret government, a department of homeland security and military tribunals have been established. An attorney involved in the defence of a man charged with terrorism offences is herself being prosecuted.

Other governments have followed suit, with the British, Indian and Australian governments among the most prominent. The Howard government's proposed anti-terror legislation makes political protest an act of terror. The new Australian Security Intelligence Organisation laws, giving the spy agency the powers of a secret police, allow for the holding of people for an indefinite period without access to legal representation and without charges being laid.

The "war on terrorism" is the form taken by a global eruption of imperialism—militarism abroad, attacks on fundamental democratic rights at home. One of the most significant features of the present situation is how openly the doctrine of imperialism is being discussed within ruling circles.

In a publication for the British Foreign Policy Centre entitled *Reordering the world: the long-term implications of September 11*, Robert Cooper, foreign policy adviser to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, sets out the need for what he calls a "new kind of imperialism."

According to Cooper, the countries of the European Union inhabit a "post-modern" world. This is a world of interdependence, in which nation-states are subordinated to transnational authorities. In the post-modern world, states do not invade each other. Security is achieved through transparency and transparency arises from interdependence. But outside the post-modern world of the EU it is a different story. There we have the "modern" world of nation states seeking to defend their interests and the "pre-modern" world, where the nation-state has failed or collapsed.

Members of the post-modern world do not represent a danger to one another, but both the modern and pre-modern worlds do.

“The challenge to the post-modern world,” Cooper writes, “is to get used to the idea of double standards. Among ourselves, we operate on the basis of laws and cooperative security. But when dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of states outside the post-modern continent of Europe, we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era—force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the nineteenth century world of every state for itself. Among ourselves, we keep the law, but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle. In the prolonged period of peace in Europe, there has been a temptation to neglect our defences, both physical and psychological. This represents one of the great dangers of the post-modern state.”

Back in the late 19th century, the great powers justified their colonisation of vast areas of the world with the claim that they were carrying out a “civilising mission.” This was the “white man’s burden.” Cooper argues that the most logical way of dealing with the present situation would be colonisation. But it is not possible today.

“What is needed then is a new kind of imperialism, one acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values. We can already discern its outline: an imperialism which, like all imperialism, aims to bring order and organisation but which rests today on the voluntary principle.” How voluntary is this “voluntary principle” Cooper goes on to clarify.

There are two models for this “post-modern” imperialism. First, the “voluntary imperialism of the global economy”, which is “operated by an international consortium through international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank.” Then there is the kind of imperialism that we see in operation in the Balkans—Cooper calls it the imperialism of neighbours—where a UN protectorate is established, as in Bosnia.

Another, no less forthright, comment has been published in the April edition of the leading US foreign policy journal *Foreign Affairs*. Entitled *The Reluctant Imperialist: Failed States, and the Case for American Empire*, it is authored by Sebastian Mallaby, an editorial writer and columnist for the *Washington Post*.

According to Mallaby, the great danger to the world comes from “failed states.” They are the source of terrorism and illegal drugs.

US foreign policy must respond to changed circumstances. “The logic of neo-imperialism is too compelling for the Bush administration to resist. The chaos in the world is too threatening to ignore, and existing methods for dealing with that chaos have been tried and found wanting.”

“[A] new imperial moment has arrived, and by virtue of its power America is bound to play the leading role. The question is not whether the United States will seek to fill the void created by the demise of European empires but whether it will acknowledge that this is what it is doing. Only if Washington acknowledges this task will its response be coherent.”

Mallaby argues against a purely unilateralist approach by the US.

“Unilateralists need to accept that chaotic countries are more inclined to accept foreign nation builders if they have international legitimacy. And US opinion surveys suggest that international legitimacy matters domestically as well. The American public’s support for the Persian Gulf War and the Afghan conflict reflected the perception that each operation was led by the United States but backed by the court of world opinion.

“The best hope of grappling with failed states lies in institutionalising this mix of US leadership and international legitimacy. Fortunately, one does not have to look far to see how this could be accomplished. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) already embody the same hybrid formula: both institutions reflect American thinking and priorities yet are simultaneously multinational.”

“A new international body with the same governing structure could be set up to deal with nation building. It would be subject neither to the frustrations of the UN Security Council, with its Chinese and Russian

veto, nor those of the UN General Assembly, with its gridlocked one-country-one-vote system.”

The new body, he continues, “could be deployed wherever its American-led board decides, thus replacing the ad hoc begging and arm-twisting characteristic of current peace-keeping efforts. Its creation would not amount to an imperial revival. But it would fill the security void that empires left—much as the system of mandates did after World War I ended the Ottoman Empire.”

To be continued

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>