

World Socialist Party U.S. World Socialist Movement

The Oil Wars To Come

In a world divided up by private property where are the areas of conflict over apparently diminishing resources likely to be?

“...war, organized war, is not a human instinct. It is a highly planned and co-operative form of theft. And that form of theft began ten thousand years ago when the harvesters of wheat accumulated a surplus, and the nomads rose out of the desert to rob them of what they themselves could not provide.” (Jacob Bronowski: *The Ascent of Man*. (1976) page 88.)

“The decision on whether and when to use force is therefore dictated first and foremost by our national interests. In those specific areas where our vital or survival interests are at stake, our use of force will be decisive and, if necessary, unilateral.” A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (William J. Clinton, The White House, February 1996)

During the Cold War between the two main competing capitalist alliances their supposed differences were articulated via their respective ideologies. This period of heightened tension with the occasional outbreak of armed conflict sometimes carried out between proxies (as in the Third World wars of national liberation) centred mainly around geopolitical and strategic concerns. The end of this struggle between contesting versions of how best to organize and run capitalism has brought to the surface again the real underlying conflicts between states and their competing national concerns. The chief of these is access to and/or control over the raw materials necessary to the running of a modernized and industrialized economy, and of the military machine necessary to defend it.

Ever since it stepped onto the world stage as a major economic and military power the USA's foreign policy has swung between the two poles of intervention and isolation. Strong political voices in the latter half of the 19th century pushed for open access to world markets for North America's surplus agricultural produce. Other voices argued for a policy of isolation from world affairs and a reliance on the abundant resources of the North American continent as a base on which to build a fully developed capitalist economy. These isolationist voices predominated in the inter-war years.

After 1945 the isolationists were less able to formulate a US foreign policy, which was subsequently framed so as to project US power onto the world stage. Since 1986 each US president has to report to Congress the “National Security Strategy” his administration intends to pursue. Underlying each report is the recognition of a necessity—that US diplomacy has to have as a backing the threat of armed force. And what force! To assure its place in the world and if necessary impose its political will, the US carries the biggest big stick on the block. According to the US Center for Defence Information, at \$396 billion the US military budget for 2003 is more

than six times that of Russia, the second largest spender. It is more than twenty-six times as large as the combined spending of the seven countries usually identified by the Pentagon as their most likely adversaries, and thirty-nine times that of the so-called “rogue states”.

The reconstruction of a war-torn Europe along lines of economic and political co-operation (the Marshall Plan, European Economic Community, European Union etc.) was in large part an American design to ensure access to stable markets and investment outlets. As Bill Clinton put it in his 1996 National Security Strategy report Engagement and Enlargement “The United States seeks to build on vibrant and open-market economies.... To this end, we strongly support the process of European integration embodied in the European Union and seek to deepen our partnership with the EU in support of our economic goals” (emphasis added). The lessons of the Marshall Plan were not lost on Clinton's government. Make-a-buck businessmen were assured that their “tax dollars” were not being frittered away overseas. United States strategy to help the countries of Central Europe construct new political institutions and build strong economies would make it “much less likely that Americans might have to fight another war on the battlegrounds of Europe. By supporting democratic reform and the transition to free markets in the new independent states of the former Soviet Union and in Central Europe, our strategy promoted stability and prosperity in an area that will become a vast market for the United States...”

The United States had been able to fight both World Wars relying on oil from the American Southwest, Mexico and Venezuela. But analysts believed these supplies to be insufficient for the future. Thus was formed the long-standing US-Saudi arrangement of military protection (including internal “security” whereby a democracy propped up an autocracy) in exchange for access to oil. The undertaking culminated in President Jimmy Carter's “doctrine” regarding the Persian Gulf region outlined in his January 1980 State of the Union Address. This stated that any move by a hostile power to gain control there would be regarded “...as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America” which would be resisted “...by any means necessary, including military force.” (Walter LaFeber: *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy . . . since 1750* [1989] p.665.) Parity with the Soviet Union was abandoned. From then on the policy was to be that “the United States will remain the strongest of all nations.”

At the end of the decade the White House policy remained equally belligerent. A recently declassified document illustrates the line to be taken to protect American interests:

“Access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area are vital to U.S. national security. The United States remains committed to defend its vital interests in

the region, if necessary and appropriate through the use of U.S. military force, against the Soviet Union or any other regional power with interests inimical to our own” (National Security Directive 26 U.S. Policy Toward the Persian Gulf. - Dated October 2, 1989).

The exercise of American power always has as part of its ideology a stated concern for democracy. But it should not be thought that fine Presidential words demonstrate a principled commitment to liberal democracy at all times and everywhere. Such claims are always modified by other pressing considerations. To quote Clinton again:

“The core of our strategy is to help democracy and free-markets expand and survive in other places where we have the strongest security concerns and where we can make the greatest difference. This is not a democratic crusade; it is a pragmatic commitment to see freedom take hold where that will help us most.” (Emphasis added). Engagement and Enlargement [1996].

This is a position which has been pursued ever since by both Democratic and Republican administrations, involving the imposition of the interests of American capital on the world – for its own good. The Pentagon's February 1992 draft Defense Planning Guidance for fiscal years 1994-99 called for a concerted US effort to preserve its sole-superpower status into the foreseeable future. “Our first objective,” it said “is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union.” (Quoted by Michael Klare: ‘Endless Military Superiority’ *The Nation*, 15 July, 2002). American strategy, it said, should now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor. Even though “Communism” had been out-spent in the arms race and was decidedly beaten there was no time to sit back, relax, and spend the “peace dividend” on socially useful pursuits.

Openly relegated to the back seat, where in fact they had always been, America's NATO allies have had no option but to go along with the new pro-active “defensive attack” policy of George W. Bush. It should be noted that this shift, from a threat-based strategy to a capabilities-based approach, concentrates not on what actually was a threat. Instead it is one of preparing to meet what could ever conceivably be a threat to US vital interests. One respected academic and Cold War historian has called this

“...the most sweeping shift in U.S. grand strategy since the beginning of the Cold War. [one in which] Pre-emption in turn requires hegemony...When there's only one superpower, there's no point for anyone else to try to compete...International conflict shifts to trade rivalries...” (John Lewis Gaddis: *A Grand Strategy of Transformation, Foreign Policy, November/December 2002*).

Eager to go along playing second fiddle

with this approach is Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. He told a recent conference for British diplomats what he considered to be the leadership role the UK should be offering in the world. He highlighted the "growth in support for militant groups promoting a form of Islam" but assured the gathering that "when it comes to the common rights of all peoples there is no 'clash of civilizations'." But terrorist groups and authoritarian states "are not about to resign themselves to the superiority of liberal democracy" and Britain and her allies were still in need of armed force to meet the post-Cold War challenges his Department had identified. These included uncontrolled migration and extremism in the Islamic world. Among the priorities identified were the need to "promote UK economic interests in...the world economy" and "to bolster the security of British and global energy supplies." (Speech: Strategic Priorities for British Foreign Policy. Press release at <http://www.fc.gov.uk> 6 January, 2003).

During the long post-war boom years the American economy expanded at an unprecedented rate of 3 to 4 per cent per year (representing a doubling every twenty years). As a result levels of economically exploitable raw materials appeared to be in danger of falling behind perceived requirements. Concern was expressed at the rate at which raw materials were being consumed and of the adequacy of the resource base within the US to support continued expansion. Thirty-five years ago a member of the independent Carnegie Institute reported that:

"The aggregate use of domestic resources is well above even the accelerated exploitation during the Second World War [and that] growth in the value of the national consumption of resources...has outpaced the growth in value of domestic resource output for many years. As a result, the United States has been moving toward an increasingly marked net import position with respect to many resources, particularly mineral resources" (Donald J. Patton: *The United States and World Resources* [1968] p.121 Emphasis in the original).

These necessary raw materials often lie in contested areas of the globe or in areas which are politically unstable. Ensuring continuity of access to and the economic supply of these raw materials present politicians and policy makers with endless problems. Whereas in the Cold War era divisions were created and alliances formed along ideological lines it is economic competition which now openly drives international relations and competition over access to vital eco will have severe economic consequences and importing countries consider the protection of this flow to be a significant national concern.

The most crucial of these raw materials is oil.

The United States depends on oil for more than 40 percent of its primary energy needs. Roughly half of those oil needs are met by imports, a large share of which come from the Persian Gulf area. Over the longer term, the

United States' dependence on access to foreign oil sources will be increasingly important as indigenous resources are depleted. The US economy has grown roughly 75 percent since the first oil shock in 1973 yet during that time US oil production has declined. Michael Klare, Professor of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College Amherst, Boston, quotes the U.S. National Security Council in their 1999 report to the White House thus:

"The US will continue to have a vital interest in ensuring access to foreign oil supplies . . . We must continue to be mindful of the need for regional stability and security in key producing areas to ensure our access to, and the free flow of, these resources." (The New Geography of Conflict, Foreign Affairs. June, 2001)

He also points out that Russia is placing greater foreign policy emphasis on the emerging energy producing areas of Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the Caucasus, areas in which other industrially advanced states have shown an interest. The Chinese military have shifted its emphasis from the northern border with the former Soviet Union to Xinjiang province in the west which is a potential source of oil but has a majority Turkic population some of whom have pretensions to independence from Beijing. China has also moved the East and South China Seas, an area in which Japan has recently beefed up its defences.

World demand for oil is increasing rapidly and newly industrializing counties such as Brazil, Malaysia, Thailand and Turkey are expected to double or triple their energy consumption over the next twenty years. They join a world still in a state of multi-polar flux contesting for resources. Pressure on oil resources is likely to prove "especially severe". US Department of Energy estimates show a rise in global oil consumption from the current 77 million barrels per day to 110 million bpd in 2020, an increase of 40 percent. The world will consume approximately 670 billion barrels of oil between now and 2020. This is the equivalent to two-thirds of known reserves.

Future foreign policy decisions regarding oil supplies will undoubtedly be informed by the views of the oil industry itself. Predictions made at an international conference on world oil depletion forecasts held at Uppsala university in May last year should have peak and although at present far from exhausted oil production would in the future go into decline. Europe's indigenous North Sea supply for example is set to decline by six per cent a year and will be halved in ten years. All the major frontier regions for conventional oil and gas, apart from the poles, have been explored, and the super-giant and giant fields are dying off. Non-conventional oil resources (e.g. tar sands) are vastly more costly to develop, which makes the remaining relatively easier to develop Iraq fields so much more attractive. Contributing to the proceedings A. M. Samsam Bakhtiari declared that "one can envision a global oil crunch

at the horizon—most probably within the present decade...technical evidence gives a clear picture of depletion" (Abstracts at www.hubbertpeak.com accessed on 6 October, 2002).

In a world divided up by private property where are the areas of conflict over apparently diminishing resources likely to be? As far as oil and gas are concerned Klare identifies them as being the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea basin, the South China Sea, Indonesia, Nigeria and Venezuela. He also includes tanker and pipeline routes passing through or near to areas of political/military instability such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. With the largest economy supporting the largest military the United States is clearly prepared to meet any contestants for access to the resources its economy requires.

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The World Socialist Party

is part of a global socialist movement that believes capitalism cannot meet the needs of the majority of the people in the world, however "progressive" it might become.

To meet these needs, capitalism must be replaced by socialism.

The only way to achieve socialism is for the working class to recognize this and consciously and politically work to replace capitalism with socialism. The World Socialist Party of the United States does not support the idea of reforming capitalism and therefore does not work for reforms. There are plenty of other organizations that do and yet the problems remain. By relegating socialism to the future, it is relegated to never. Only a party dedicated only to socialism can promote socialism in any real, honest manner.

Among all the political parties in the U.S., only the World Socialist Party is dedicated to socialism as an immediate goal. It is this objective that makes the World Socialist Party revolutionary - our dedication to peaceful, democratic and immediate change.

The World Socialist Party rejects the theory of permanent leadership and vanguards.

The World Socialist Party is, therefore, engaged in a war of ideas against all other parties. Those other parties, no matter what they claim, are supporting the capitalist system and opposing the immediate establishment of socialism.

Only the conscious support of the working class will create socialism, and to this end the World Socialist Party seeks to increase understanding of, and mobilize support for, socialism.

The World Socialist Party calls upon every worker to support these efforts in any way that they can.

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