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Confronting the empire

The present crisis has demonstrated the ambitions of the United States -- nothing short of bringing the entire planet under its military control, writes **Samir Amin**

From the 1980s on, and with the collapse of the Soviet system, the ruling class in the United States, whether Democrat or Republican, began drawing up a hegemonic programme. Carried away by its military power, and without any competitor able to temper its fantasies, the US chose to reinforce its domination by deploying a military strategy aiming at "planetary control". An early series of interventions -- in the Gulf, Yugoslavia, Central Asia, Palestine and Iraq -- began this plan for endless wars that would be "made in the USA" and that would be planned and decided unilaterally by Washington.

The political strategy that accompanied this programme set up the pretexts for it, whether these had to do with terrorism, with the fight against drug trafficking, or with accusations of producing weapons of mass destruction. These are obvious pretexts when one recalls the CIA's invention of convenient terrorist adversaries, whether the Taliban or Bin Laden. Accusations of producing dangerous weapons, made today against Iraq and North Korea, but tomorrow against any convenient state, pale besides the actual use of these weapons by the United States. The US used nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and chemical weapons in Vietnam, and it is threatening the further use of nuclear weapons in future conflicts. Such pretexts are only propaganda tools, in the sense that Goebbels gave that term: they are useful perhaps to convince slow-witted US opinion but less and less credible elsewhere.

The idea of "preventive war", now claimed as a "right" by Washington, does away with any notion of international law. The United Nations Charter forbids the recourse to war except in cases of legitimate self-defence, and it allows military intervention only under strict conditions, any response having to be measured and provisional. All specialists in international law know that the wars undertaken since 1990 have been completely illegitimate, and therefore those who bear the responsibility for them are also war criminals. Indeed, the United States, with the cooperation of other countries, is already treating the United Nations as the fascist states treated the League of Nations.

The abolition of the common rights of all peoples, already underway, has substituted the distinction between a "Master Race" (*Herrenvolk*) -- the people of the United States, and, behind them, those of Israel -- and other peoples for the previous principle of the equality of peoples. The existence of those peoples that do not belong to the US Master Race can only be tolerated if they do not constitute a "threat" to the ambitions of those calling themselves the "masters of the planet". This Master Race reserves the right to conquer whatever "living space" it judges necessary for itself and for those peoples it supports.

What are the "national interests" that the US ruling class considers as giving it this right?

This is a class that recognises only one objective -- that of making money. The North American state is openly at the service of satisfying the demands of the dominant segment of capital made up of US multinationals.

We, therefore, have all become "Red Skins", the contemptuous name reserved for the Native Americans, in the eyes of the Washington establishment -- that is to say, peoples who have the right to exist only in so far as they do not frustrate the expansion of US-based multinational capital. We have been promised that resistance to the US will be crushed using any and every means, even extermination if necessary. If it is a question of making an additional 15 million dollars in profit for the American multinationals at the expense of 300 million victims, then there will be no hesitation.

The "rogue state" par excellence, to borrow the language used by Presidents Bush Senior and Junior, as well as by Clinton, is none other than the United States itself.

The US programme is certainly imperialist in the most brutal sense of that word, but it is not "imperial" in the sense that Antonio Negri has given the term, since it does not aim to manage the societies of the planet in order better to integrate them into a coherent capitalist system. Instead, it aims only at looting their resources. All this is part and parcel of the reduction of social thought to the mantras of vulgar economics, the unilateral attention paid to maximising the financial profitability of dominant capital in the short term, supported by putting military means at the disposition of this capital, and the delinking of this capital from any system of human values. Such capital is behind the barbaric expansionism capitalism carries within itself, substituting an absolute demand of submission to the so-called laws of the market for human values.

Throughout its history, North American capitalism has shown itself to be readier than European varieties to take such steps. Politically, the American state is designed to serve the economy and nothing else, abolishing the contradictory and dialectical relationship between economy and politics. The genocide carried out against the North American Indians, the enslavement of the blacks, the successive waves of immigration into the US leading to the substitution of confrontation between groups sharing the same communal identity, as manipulated by the ruling class, for the maturation of class consciousness, have produced the political management of US society by the single party of capital. Both segments of this party share the same strategic global vision, though addressing their rhetoric to different "constituencies", themselves drawn from the less than half of US society that believes sufficiently in the system to bother going out to vote.

Not benefiting from the tradition by which the social democratic workers parties and the communists marked the formation of modern European political culture, American society does not have the ideological instruments at its disposal to allow it to resist the dictatorship of capital. On the contrary, capital shapes every aspect of this society's way of thinking, and reproduces itself by reinforcing the kind of deep-seated racism that allows US society to see itself as constituting a Master Race. "Playboy Clinton, Cowboy Bush same policy": this slogan from India rightly emphasises the nature of the single party that manages the so-called American democracy.

For this reason, the North American programme is not the kind of simple attempt to attain hegemony familiar from other hegemonic attempts in ancient and modern history, involving a vision of problems having coherent answers, whether based on economic exploitation or political inequality. Instead, it is infinitely more brutal in its simple and extreme unilateral conception, and it is close to the Nazi programme, which was also based on the principle of a Master Race. The US programme has nothing whatsoever to do with the beliefs of certain American liberal academics, who see US hegemony as "benign" ("painless").

If it should continue, this programme can only lead to growing chaos, which will call for successively more and more brutal management, with no strategic long-term vision. Finally, Washington will not even attempt to support its real allies, something which always means knowing how to make concessions. Fake governments, like that of Karzai in Afghanistan, will manage things better as long as military power supports a belief in the "invincibility" of the US. Hitler did not think any differently.

An examination of the connections between the US's criminal programme and the realities of dominant capitalism made up of the countries of the Triad (the United States, Europe and Japan) will allow the strengths and weaknesses of it to be understood.

General opinion, as promoted by the unreflective media, has it that US military power only constitutes the tip of the iceberg, and that it is the extension of American superiority in all areas, notably economic, but even political and cultural. Therefore, such opinion believes, submission to the hegemony that America pretends to is inevitable.

However, an examination of economic realities undermines this view. The US production system is far from being "the most efficient in the world". On the contrary, almost none of its sectors would be certain of beating competitors in the truly free market dreamt of by liberal economists. The US trade deficit, which increases year by year, went from 100 billion dollars in 1989 to 450 billion in 2000. Moreover, this deficit involved practically all areas of production: even the surplus once enjoyed by the US in the area of high-technology goods, which stood at 35 billion in 1990, has now turned into a deficit.

Competition between Ariane rockets and those of NASA, as well as between Airbus and Boeing, testifies to the vulnerability of present American advantages. Faced by European and Japanese competition in high-technology products, and by Chinese, Korean and other Asian and Latin American industrialised countries in competition for manufactured products, as well as by Europe and the southern cone of Latin America in agriculture, the United States probably would not be able to win were it not for the recourse to "extra-economic" means, violating the principles of liberalism imposed on its competitors.



In fact, the US only benefits from comparative advantages in the armaments sector, precisely because this sector largely operates outside the rules of the market and benefits from state support. This probably brings certain benefits for the civil sphere in its wake, the Internet being the best-known example, but it also causes serious distortions that handicap many production sectors. The North American economy lives parasitically to the detriment of its partners in the world system: "the United States depends for 10 per cent of its industrial consumption on goods whose import costs are not covered by the exports of its own products" (Emmanuel Todd, *After Empire*).

The economic growth of the Clinton years, vaunted as the result of a "liberalism" that Europe was unfortunately resisting, was in fact largely fake, and it was, in any case, non-generalisable, depending on capital transfers that meant the stagnation of partner economies. For all sectors of the real production system, US growth during this period was not better than that of Europe. The "American miracle" was fed exclusively by a growth in expenditure produced by growing social inequalities (financial and personal services: the legions of lawyers and private police forces, etc). In this sense, Clinton's liberalism prepared the conditions for the reactionary wave, and later victory, of Bush Jr. Moreover, as Todd writes, "blown up by fraud, American GNP begins to resemble, in terms of statistical accuracy, that of the Soviet Union".

The world produces, and the United States, which has practically no funds in reserve, consumes. The "advantage" of the US is that of a predator whose deficit is covered by loans from others, whether consenting or forced. The means put in place by Washington to compensate for deficiencies are of various kinds, including repeated unilateral violations of liberal principles, arms exports (60 per cent of the world market) largely imposed on subaltern allies, such as the Gulf countries that never use these weapons, search for greater profits from oil, which presupposes greater control over the producers -- the real reason for the wars in Central Asia and Iraq. Additionally, through the direct exclusive control of the US over major oil producing areas, Washington would succeed in its plan to subordinate Europe. Europeans start understanding that these wars are "anti-european".

The essential part of the American deficit is covered by contributions of capital from Europe, Japan and the South -- from oil-rich countries and comprador classes of every country of the Third World, the poorest included -- to which are added the additional sums brought in from servicing the debt that has been forced on practically all the countries on the periphery of the world system. The reasons behind the continuing capital movements that feed the parasitism of American economy and society,

and that allow this superpower to live from day to day, are certainly complex. But they have nothing to do with supposed "laws of the market" that are at once rational and unchangeable.

The solidarity between the dominant segments of transnational capital and the members of the Triad is real, and it explains their rallying to globalised neo-liberalism. The United States is seen as the defender, military if necessary, of "common interests", though Washington hardly intends to "share fairly" the profits of its leadership. On the contrary, it seeks to make its allies into vassals, and is only ready to make minor concessions to junior allies in the Triad. Will this conflict of interests within dominant capital lead to the break-up of the Atlantic alliance? Not impossible, but unlikely.

For the real conflict is situated on a different terrain, that of political culture. In Europe, a left alternative is still possible that would force a break with neo-liberalism, and with the vain hope of forcing the US to submit to its principles, thus allowing European capital to go into battle on terrain that has not been mined in advance. The capital surplus that Europe has until now been happy "to invest" in the US could then be used to finance economic and social take-off, which would be impossible without using at home this capital surplus. However, were Europe to give priority to its own economic and social growth in this way, the artificial health of the US economy would collapse, and the American ruling class would be confronted by its own social problems. That is what I mean by saying that "Europe will either be on the left or it will not be at all."

To get there, however, the illusion that the liberal card should, or could, be played "honestly" by all and then things would get better must be dispensed with. The US cannot give up the asymmetric practice of liberalism, since this is the only way that it can compensate for its deficiencies. American "prosperity" comes at the price of others' stagnation.

Why, therefore, do capital flows to the US's benefit continue? Probably because for many the US is "a country for the rich" and the safest refuge for them: this is the case for investments made by the comprador bourgeoisie of the Third World. But what explains European attitudes? The "liberal virus", together with a naïve belief that the US will end up accepting "market rules", has a certain power over public opinion. Yet, the principle of the "free circulation of capital", made sacred by the IMF, in fact simply enables the US to cover its deficit by pumping in financial surpluses generated elsewhere as a result of neo-liberal policies, to which the US itself only very selectively submits. However, for dominant capital the advantages of the system overcome its inconveniences: this is the price that it must pay to Washington in order to ensure the permanence of the system.

Countries described as "indebted poor countries" are forced to pay, but there is one "indebted powerful country" that will never pay its debts. The real price imposed by US political bargaining continues to be fragile for this reason. The militarist programme chosen by the US establishment should be seen in this perspective, being nothing other than an admission that the US has no other means at its disposal to impose its economic hegemony.

The causes of the weakening of the US production system are complex. They are certainly not conjunctural, and they cannot be corrected by the adoption of a correct rate of exchange, for example, or by putting in place a more favourable balance between salaries and productivity. On the contrary, they are structural. The poor quality of general education and training in the US, the product of a deep-rooted prejudice in favour of the "private" to the detriment of the public sector, is one of the main reasons for the profound crisis that US society is currently going through.

One should, therefore, be surprised that the Europeans, far from drawing the conclusions that observation of the deficiencies of the US economy forces upon one, are actively going about imitating it. Here, too, the liberal virus does not explain everything, even if it fulfills some useful functions for the system in paralysing the left. Widespread privatisation and the dismantling of public services will only reduce the comparative advantages that "Old Europe" still benefits from. However, whatever damage these things will cause in the long term, such measures offer dominant capital, which lives in the short term, the chance of making additional profits.

The militarist programme adopted by the United States now threatens all peoples. It is the expression of the logic adopted by Adolf Hitler -- to change social and economic relations by military force in favour of the "Master Race" of the day. This programme, now filling the foreground, over-determines all political circumstances, since the pursuit of such a programme weakens advances obtainable through social and democratic struggle. Moreover this programme aims at making impossible -- through "preventive wars" -- any other power (China in particular) upgrading and becoming a "competitor", i.e. an equal partner. Halting the US militarist programme becomes, therefore, a major aim and responsibility for all.

Success in this struggle will depend on the capacity of people everywhere to rid themselves of liberal illusions, since there will never be an "authentically liberal" globalised economy. This is the case despite all the means used to make us believe in it: though World Bank discourse operates as a sort of Ministry of Propaganda for Washington concerning "democracy", "good governance" or the "reduction of poverty", it has no other function than that. Joseph Stiglitz, around whom considerable media noise was organised, discovering some elementary truths and asserting them with an air of authority, was nevertheless unable to draw the least conclusion calling the prejudices of vulgar economics into question.

The reconstruction of a Southern Front capable of giving the peoples of Asia and Africa, together with their solidarity across three continents, the capacity to make their voices heard will also come about by liberating ourselves from the illusions of a "non-asymmetric" globalised liberal system that will allow the nations of the Third World to make up their "backwardness". Is it not ridiculous to watch the countries of the South insist upon "putting liberal principles into practice without discrimination", thus gaining the applause of the World Bank? Since when was the World Bank concerned to defend the Third World against the United States?

The combat against US imperialist aggressive project has to develop on all grounds : diplomatic (forcing the respect of international law), military (reinforcing the military capacities of all countries in the world to resist eventual US aggression -- never forget that the USA did use the nuclear bomb when it enjoyed that monopoly and refrained only when they lost it), political and economic (putting an end to exporting capital to support the US deficit).

The combat against US imperialism and against the US militarist programme is a combat shared by all peoples, from its major victims in Asia, Africa and Latin America, to the peoples of Europe and the Japanese who are condemned to subordinate positions, and also to the people of North America themselves. We should salute the courage of all those "at the heart of the beast" who have refused to submit, as their predecessors refused to submit to the MacCarthyism of the 1950s. Like those who dared to resist Hitler, they have merited all the praise that history can heap upon them.

Will the dominant class in the United States be able to step back from the criminal programme behind which it has rallied? This is not an easy question to answer: little, or nothing, in the history of US society prepares it for it. The single party of capital, whose power in the US is not contested, has thus far not given up on military adventure, and therefore the responsibility of this class as a whole cannot be downplayed. The power of Bush Jr is not that of a "clique" made up of the armaments and oil producers. In the entire modern history of the United States the dominant power has always been that of a coalition of the sectoral interests of capital, falsely described as "lobbies". However, this coalition can only govern if other segments of capital accept it. Clearly, political, diplomatic and even military setbacks could encourage the minority in the US establishment ready to renounce the military adventures the country is engaged in to do so. To hope for more than this seems to me to be as naïve as to have hoped, at the height of the Nazi regime, Adolf Hitler being convinced that his plans were bound to fail.

If the Europeans had reacted in 1935 or 1937, they could have stopped the Hitler regime. By reacting only in September 1939, tens of millions lost their lives. Let us act together in the hope that a response to the challenges posed by the present Washington neo-Nazis will come earlier.