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The World Imperialist Offensive and the Occupation of Iraq

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1) The offensive that US imperialism and its allies have been waging on a world scale since 11 September 2001 is consistent with the strategic choices that the world imperialist system has been implementing continuously since the collapse of the USSR.

These choices are in turn fully in keeping with the prevailing logic of this phase of the history of capitalism. Neoliberalism is at bottom an undertaking meant to dismantle the social protections granted by capitalism. Breaking the 'social consensus', which had been a source of reformism in the workers movement, inevitably goes together with the decline of reformism and a reinforcement of the repressive functions of the state.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/bogota2.jpg>]

The counterpart of this choice on a world scale is, on the one hand, a sharp reduction in development aid, which is itself part of the instrumentalization of the debt by the imperialist powers so as to impose neoliberal prescriptions on the rest of the world. On the other hand, the counterpart includes the decision to maintain the huge military apparatus inherited from the Cold War, despite the disappearance of the USSR. The budgetary choices made in the US speak volumes in this regard: while Washington's military spending, at over \$500 billion, amount to about 5 per cent of GDP, and on their own to more than half of world military spending, US public 'development' aid amounts to barely 0.15 per cent of GDP (by contrast to a scandalously low minimum goal of 0.7 per cent set by the UN!).

The 1991 Gulf War underscored the crucial importance of imperialist control over world oil resources, made more serious by the drying up of these resources predicted for the coming decades. By demonstrating the 'indispensable' role of the US in ensuring imperialist control of these resources, the war played a decisive role in inciting European and Japanese imperialism to confirm their military dependence - combined with complex relations of partnership and competition on the economic level - on Washington. This meant: maintaining NATO, redefining its tasks in the direction of interventions 'to maintain security', expanding the organization in Eastern Europe; and renewal and revaluing of the Japan-US Security Treaty.

US imperialism, after having confirmed the extent to which its military supremacy was a key trump card in its global hegemony (reinforcement of US military supremacy under Reagan had been the decisive factor in the US's recovery of hegemony after years of decline), seized the opportunity provided by the collapse of the USSR in order to complete its military network spanning the planet. The massive return of US troops to the Arab-Persian Gulf region from 1990 on was followed by NATO enlargement to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic (1999) and then to the three Baltic ex-Soviet republics as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (2004).

This enlargement was meant to continue, and is already accompanied by multiple ties to other countries in these regions, including Ukraine.

NATO intervention in the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia beginning in 1994, culminating in the 1999 Kosovo War, was a first opportunity to commit NATO to military intervention, followed by a role in controlling territory. It contributed to consecrating the new US hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe. This first intervention was followed by NATO intervention in Afghanistan. In Kosovo and Afghanistan the US delegated to NATO, as an auxiliary organization, missions of control that are not vital for its own interests, while reserving for itself unilateral direct control of missions that it does consider vital, as is the case with operations in the Gulf region.

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The attacks on 11 September 2001 furnished an opportunity and an ideological pretext - the 'war on terrorism' - for a major advance in extending the imperialist military network to strategic regions where it had previously been absent.

Military intervention in Afghanistan was not aimed only at overthrowing the Taliban regime and destroying the Al-Qaeda network. It aimed above all at re-establishing a direct, permanent US military presence, ranging from 'advisors' to bases and facilities, in the highly strategic region stretching from the Caucasus to the borders of China: in Afghanistan itself, but also in Georgia and Azerbaidzhan as well as several Central Asia ex-Soviet republics (notably Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan). The Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia are not only rich in hydrocarbons (gas and oil); they are also of considerable strategic interest, situated at the heart of the continental landmass that joins European Russia to China. Russia and China are viewed in Washington as the US's two main potential rivals for global hegemony.

Occupying Iraq was a major project for US imperialist expansion from 1990 on. Combined with the US guardianship over the Saudi kingdom and the other oil autocracies of the Gulf, it puts Washington in a position of directly controlling almost half of world oil reserves. This project had been postponed for political reasons, the same ones that had prevented Bush I from pushing onwards with the invasion of Iraq as far as Baghdad. The Bush II administration had to resort to lies, which today are publicly established, so as to justify its invasion politically in the name of the 'war on terrorism'.

3

The Afghanistan and Iraq wars illustrate both the strength of US imperialism - and thus of the world imperialist system as a whole, of which it is by far the main armed force - and its limits.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, the Pentagon has reoriented its strategy towards wars of higher 'capital intensity', putting its chips on military technology, a domain in which the US enjoys crushing superiority, instead of human resources. Vietnam convinced Washington - due both to the demoralization of its troops (which consisted partly of conscripts), reflecting the growing strength of the US anti-war movement, and to the contribution of US troop casualties to the demoralization and the growth of the movement - to minimize its reliance on troops. The result was a professionalization of armies that spread to several imperialist countries.

No country in the world is capable of facing US firepower with so-called conventional weapons and means alone. The ease with which the US has attained its military objectives since 1991 fully demonstrates this. In addition, the gap between US military means and those of the rest of the world keeps on getting deeper, thanks to the unrivalled US military budget. Nonetheless the relatively limited numbers of US military personnel constitute a first major limit to US power.

The fact that the Pentagon is obliged to concentrate almost 150,000 soldiers in Iraq and to this end immobilize an even greater proportion of its personnel - in particular the increasingly recalcitrant Reservists - , on top of the troops already stationed abroad elsewhere, results in a situation in which Washington is dangerously close to 'overstretch', and its ability to dissuade other countries like Iran is considerably reduced. Beyond this human limit there is also an economic limit, due to the steadily increasing strain caused by a vertiginously rising federal deficit, even if Washington still has considerable manoeuvring room in this respect (particularly because the deficit is due in large part to tax cuts).

The second limit to US military power, a consequence of the high 'capital intensity' of its armed forces, can be seen in the two cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. Technological might, which can crush any other conventional army, is not enough to subjugate a people. For that troops are needed. Washington, although it has chosen to make its efforts in Iraq its top priority, is not managing to control even that country.

Afghanistan is at the mercy of out-of-control warlords and narco-traffickers, while Hamid Karzai's puppet regime has very limited real power beyond the perimeter of the capital Kabul and two or three other cities. The US is even less able today to control a hostile population in a medium-size country than it was during the Vietnam War.

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The US has been able partially to overcome the 'Vietnam syndrome', which prevented it from intervening militarily abroad in any really massive fashion for more than 15 years, due to a combination of ideological factors.

On the one hand, the collapse of the Stalinist system in Eastern Europe and the general adherence of the 'post-Communist' states to unbridled market economies, of which the US was and still is the champion, provided world capitalism and its hegemonic state with an enormous increase in ideological power and legitimacy in the early 1990s.

On the other hand, this same collapse of the Stalinist system contributed to the political and/or ideological debacle of entire, major sections of the world left. In several countries and regions of the globe it freed up oppositional space that reactionary political or religious forces were able to occupy. When forces of this kind take on the task of challenging imperialist hegemony, the challenge encounters much less sympathy among the peoples of the imperialist countries. By the same token this decreases the possibility of building powerful anti-war movements.

In addition Washington, which still has to take account of the partial persistence of the 'Vietnam syndrome', has since 1989 attacked targets that are odious in the eyes of Western public opinion, thus winning a measure of credibility for its 'humanitarian' or 'democratic' pretensions. From Noriega (Panama, 1989) to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (2001) by way of Saddam Hussein (1990-91), the Serb forces in Bosnia (1994-95) and Milosevic (1999), the targets chosen by the US and its allies have all belonged to this particular category.

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This situation changed with the war against and invasion of Iraq. Of all the imperialist wars of the past 15 years, this last one was undeniably the least legitimate in the eyes of world public opinion.

Saddam Hussein's regime had already been the target of an imperialist aggression in 1991, and Iraq had been subjected from that time on to repeated bombing and an embargo with genocidal consequences. Even though the regime targeted was once more an odious one, no new element enabled Washington to justify invading the country. Washington had to invent new elements and resort to lies as crude as 'weapons of mass destruction' supposedly in Iraq's possession (whereas Baghdad had agreed to give carte blanche to UN inspections) or the claimed links between Al-Qaida and the Ba'athist regime. These arguments were all the less convincing inasmuch as what was really at stake for Washington in occupying Iraq - oil - was glaringly obvious.

Dissensions among the imperialist powers themselves made the weakness of these pretexts still worse. (Russian and Chinese opposition alone would not have carried much weight from the point of view of ideological legitimation,

given Moscow and Beijing's low credibility in this respect, as the precedent of the Kosovo War had shown.) French and German opposition to the invasion of Iraq contributed to undermining the legitimacy of the war.

For Paris, the partner and privileged supplier of Saddam Hussein's regime (like Moscow, by the way), the prospect of a US hold on Iraq constituted a substantial loss for the interests of French capital and the French state. For the Schröder-Fischer government in Berlin, it was electoral interests that won out: Chancellor Schröder's rejection of the invasion of Iraq, which was particularly unpopular in Germany, contributed to his re-election, after his defeat had been widely foreseen because of the unpopularity of his social-liberal policies. Yet both France and Germany facilitated the aggression against Iraq - Germany by permitting unrestricted use of US infrastructure on its territory, France by opening its airspace - and wished it well.

These facts show the present limits to the military autonomy of subaltern imperialist powers in relation to US imperialism, at a moment when the European constitutional treaty is completing the European Union's anchorage in NATO. The challenge to US hegemony from allied imperialisms does not go further than a request that more account be taken of their particular interests in the military-political management of the imperialist world system, above all in face of the Bush Administration, whose arrogance and unilateralism have gone very far. There is no suggestion of any questioning of the partnership with Washington or of Washington's role as the main armed force of world capitalism, which no other state could claim to replace.

6

The ideological and political handicaps of Washington, London and their allies made it possible for an anti-war movement to develop on a very large scale. At its apogee, on 15 February 2003, the movement reached a level of mobilization on a world scale that was historically unprecedented. But it was not strong enough to prevent the invasion of Iraq, nor to compel the occupation forces to withdraw from it.

In the US itself, the anti-war movement managed a breakthrough, which was very difficult in face of the ideological climate created by 11 September 2001 and the quasi-unanimity of the US ruling class. In this context, the size of the demonstrations in New York and other US cities on 15 February 2003 was very impressive. But even though the movement was and still is much more important than what existed in the first phase of the Vietnam War, it is still not strong enough to compel Washington to move back.

On the other hand, the world anti-war movement, mobilized correctly around the goal of trying to prevent the aggression (which was very difficult given the limited time available), did not place itself clearly enough in the perspective of building opposition in the long term to a prolonged occupation, which was quite clearly Washington's objective.

After having culminated on 15 February 2003, the mobilizations continued on national levels or around international dates or campaigns. But the movement remained far below the level reached before the invasion. This weakening was further aggravated in the US by electoralist illusions, although in fact nothing justified these illusions given the fundamental agreement on the issue of the occupation of Iraq between the two main candidates still in the race. This overall situation greatly facilitated the re-election of George W. Bush, a victory that Bush interpreted as evidence of approval for his aggressive imperialist policy, giving him more elbowroom to pursue it or even intensify it, as the reshuffling of his executive team indicates.

Feeling that it has even greater room for maneuver, the Bush administration has stepped up its aggressive policy and its threats, not only in the Middle East but also in Latin America - where Cuba and Venezuela are in the firing line, in

addition to the military intervention in Colombia - or in Eastern Asia, in particular against North Korea.

7

A major cause of the weakening of the anti-war movement was Washington and London's success in regaining some degree of ideological credibility during the first phase of the occupation.

The lack of Iraqi popular hostility towards the occupiers in the initial period after the overthrow of the Ba'athist dictatorship - even if the Iraqi popular reaction was very far from the enthusiastic welcome predicted by Washington and London - did not fail to ideologically disarm the anti-war movement. In addition, the occupation forces were still able to make people believe that they were hot on the trail of 'weapons of mass destruction'.

This advantage began to dissipate with the irresistible rise of hostility to the occupiers, considerably exacerbated by their behaviour and by the major errors that the Bush Administration and its proconsul committed in running the country, while the pretext of 'weapons of mass destruction' turned out in the light of day to be a tissue of lies. Nonetheless, the Bush Administration was then able to exploit the hateful character of a part of the 'resistance' to the occupation - the most spectacular part, and the part deliberately given the most media attention - thus once again bringing into play a major reason for the anti-war movement's weakness in face of earlier interventions.

The continual growth of armed operations against the occupying forces, a few months after the start of the occupation, was the result of two tendencies that it is important to distinguish. On the one hand, actions against the occupation troops, most of them local and in many cases even individual, have in some cases been a response to the occupiers' arrogance and brutality, which reached their apogee with the two waves of aggression against the martyred city of Falluja in 2004.

On the other hand, some actions have been the work of organized networks, among which two kinds of networks have the most resources: the remains of the Ba'athist secret services, reorganized after the regime's collapse, which have substantial financial and military means at their disposal; and Sunni fundamentalist networks of the most fanatical kind, after the fashion of Al-Qaeda, a part of which originate outside Iraq and existed before the fall of the Ba'athist regime.

While armed actions against the occupiers are entirely legitimate acts of national resistance, it is equally true that the two kinds of networks we have mentioned mix legitimate acts directed against the occupiers with acts of a profoundly reactionary nature directed against other segments of the Iraqi population on a quasi-racist basis - sectarian attacks against Shiites, ethnic attacks against Kurds - or a xenophobic basis: the revolting slaughter of foreigners who do not bear the slightest responsibility for the occupation, including immigrant workers.

Distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate actions, and clearly condemning actions of the second type, is an indispensable condition for relaunching the anti-war movement on a mass scale. The movement explained clearly its condemnation of Saddam Hussein in 1991 and again in 2003, of Milosevic in 1999, and of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden in 2001, while explaining that the odious nature of these forces in no way justified the imperialist interventions, which were themselves much more murderous. It is just as indispensable in Iraq to take a clear distance from reactionary acts, while explaining that the barbarism of the reactionary forces is a small matter compared with the major barbarism of US imperialism, tragically illustrated by Guantánamo, Abu-Ghraib and Falluja.

At the same time, the position of radical anti-imperialists in defence of the Iraqi people's right to resist the occupation

by all legitimate means, including armed struggle, must be distinguished from the platform around which the broadest possible anti-war movement must be organized in the imperialist countries. This broad platform must focus on the withdrawal of US and allied troops from Iraq, and should not include support to the Iraqi resistance, even with the necessary distinctions, since such support could only limit the potential for mobilization. A broad platform can however include, as circumstances allow in each country and each stage of the mobilization, opposition to the Israeli occupation in Palestine, given how much the two occupations belong on the same political terrain. Opposition to the Israeli occupation in Palestine has in fact until now been an important lever in mobilizing people against the occupation of Iraq.

8

Armed actions are only one of the paths chosen by the Iraqi people in its resistance to the occupation of Iraq. The political struggle is another path, and the majority choice.

Armed resistance to the occupation has been waged above all by members of the Sunni Arab minority, part of which considered itself privileged under the Saddam Hussein regime. Nevertheless, even within the Sunni Arab community, the majority - represented by groups like the Association of Muslim Ulemas - makes a clear distinction between legitimate actions and what it calls 'terrorism'.

The support by a large majority for legitimate armed resistance goes together with a choice, made by an equally big majority, for a political struggle against the occupation, with the two forms of struggle being seen as complementary. For obvious reasons, the other large minority in the country - the Kurds (most of them Sunni), who historically were oppressed by successive Iraqi governments before they achieved de facto autonomy under US protection from 1991 on - did not join the struggle against the occupation.

Among the Shiite Arab majority of the country, the predominant choice is for political struggle against the occupation. This choice is even shared by the fringe of the religious Shiite Muslim movement which is most radically opposed to the occupation, the fundamentalist current led by Muqtada al-Sadr, which has limited itself to a combination of political struggle and armed self-defence, without resorting to attacks.

The majority current among Iraqi Shiites, led by Ayatollah Sistani - a traditionalist religious chief, representing the majority current of the Iraqi Shiite clergy wanting to exercise control over the political leadership without directly taking power in their hands -, has privileged political struggle since the start of the occupation as the road towards establishment of majority rule in Iraq - and accordingly Shiite acquisition, for the first time in their history, of a decisive say in deciding the country's future - as a step towards withdrawal of foreign troops.

The first phase of this political struggle was played out as a clash between the ayatollah and US proconsul Paul Bremer on the issue of constitutional procedure. This confrontation, in which Bremer sought to impose a procedure based on appointment of constitution-writers by the occupying power, while the ayatollah demanded that they be democratically elected, constitutes the best refutation of Washington's hypocritical pretensions to be on a mission to 'democratize' the region.

The confrontation ended with the ayatollah's victory and, after UN mediation, the setting of 30 January 2005 as the date for general elections. Faced with the escalating terrorist threat against participation in the elections in Sunni areas and the prospect of a very low turnout in these areas as a result, the chief political forces of the Sunni community called a boycott of the elections, so as not to give a stamp of approval to the inevitable Sunni under-representation.

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Almost 60 per cent of Iraqis with the right to vote (the rolls used were based on lists for rationing under the embargo, therefore including the whole of the population) went to the voting booths in extremely difficult conditions in the Arab parts of Iraq. The list of the puppet Allawi, strongly supported by Washington, suffered a crushing defeat, not even winning 15 per cent of the votes cast.

The majority of seats in the Constituent Assembly went to the electoral coalition of which Ayatollah Sistani was the godfather and in which the main organized forces are fundamentalist currents linked to Iran. Nevertheless, governing the country requires a two-thirds majority in the Assembly, which necessitates compromises among different groups. In addition, the groups elected agree unanimously on the need to involve leaders of the Sunni community, which is substantially under-represented.

The very great majority of Arab lists for the elections, including the majority coalition, included the demand for withdrawal of the occupying troops in their programs. But the dominant currents are counting on a withdrawal in the middle term, giving them time to build and consolidate a state apparatus under their control, so as to avoid chaos after the occupiers withdraw. This calculation is very short-sighted, if sincere (which is not always the case: when the list of puppet Prime Minister Allawi speaks of troop withdrawal, for example, the hypocrisy is obvious).

The history of the occupation since spring 2003 shows that its presence in fact fosters the chaos in the country and the rise at the margins of the most fanatical terrorist groups. In addition, the occupation is already carrying out today, and may carry out even more tomorrow, a strategy of increasing tensions, targeted particularly at religious and ethnic divisions, in order to 'divide and rule'.

Besides, an increasing number of statements have issued from Washington since the start of the occupation expressing Washington's refusal to stand by and let an 'Iranian-style' regime be established in Iraq - statements whose arrogance is classically colonial. They should be seen in relation to Washington's escalating threats of war against Tehran and against the regional 'axis of evil', that supposedly runs from Hizbollah in Lebanon to Iran by way of the Syrian regime.

The arrival in power of an Iraqi government allied to Iran would be in this respect a veritable catastrophe for Washington, which will do everything it can to block this scenario: first of all breaking up the majority coalition, then preventing access to the "sensitive" ministries (Interior, Defense, Oil) by currents linked to Iran, and finally sharpening sectarian and ethnic tensions.

These considerations mean, whatever attitude the Iraqi government that emerges from the elections adopts, that the anti-war movement must continue to demand, more energetically than ever, the immediate withdrawal of the occupying troops from Iraq. The argument that the alternative to occupation is chaos is even weaker today than it used to be, given the emergence of an elected Assembly in the country. Rebuilding an Iraqi state will be all the easier if it is fully sovereign.

The slogans to put forward about Iraq within the anti-war movement should be:

• Immediate, total and unconditional withdrawal of the occupying troops;
• The right of the Iraqi people to decide its political future in full freedom and sovereignty;
• The right of the Kurdish people to self-determination.

The objective perspectives for the anti-war movement are constantly improving as is illustrated by the fragmenting of the "coalition of the willing" occupying Iraq, of which more and more countries are withdrawing their troops, and the continued rise of support for withdrawal in opinion polls, including in the US itself.

The sections of the Fourth International will involve themselves resolutely in mobilizing for the international day of

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demonstrations against the occupation of Iraq on 19 March 2005. They will advocate the establishment of a calendar of anti-war mobilizations on a world scale, to give the anti-war movement a long-term perspective.