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# Militarism and imperialism in the 21st century

7 March 2003, by **Claude Serfati**

### Militarism, capital and technology

Rosa Luxemburg noted that "militarism has a specific function in the history of capital. It accompanies every historic phase of accumulation". [1] Her analyses bring out what one might nowadays call the 'historicity' of the relationship of militarism to capital and they retain their pertinence today. She defines "the imperialist phase of accumulation [as] phase of the global competition of capital [which] has the entire world as theatre. Here the methods employed are colonial policy, the system of international borrowing, the policy of spheres of interest, war. Violence, cheating, pillage are openly employed, without any mask". This is contrary to the "bourgeois liberal theory [which] separates the economic domain of capital from the other aspect, that of the blows of force, considered as more or less fortuitous, of foreign policy".



The opposition: Ann Arbor

Luxemburg stressed in a very contemporary manner that "political violence is also the instrument and vehicle of the economic process; the

duality of the aspects of accumulation conceals the same organic phenomenon, originating in the conditions of capitalist reproduction" [stress by this author]

In his polemic against Dühring, Engels analyses the relationship between militarism and the technological development of capitalism. History shows that the conduct of wars rests on the production of weapons, which itself depends on the state of the economy, more precisely on industrial and technological development, because "industry remains industry, whether it is applied to the production or the destruction of things". [2] Engels notes the radical changes that took place after capitalism came to dominate the world. "The modern warship is not only a product, but at the same time a specimen of modern large-scale industry, a floating factory". For him, "militarism dominates and is swallowing Europe" and this formula would find a tragic confirmation in the war that broke out between the European imperialisms in 1914.

Weapons production is not only 'a specimen of modern large-scale industry'; since the Second World War, it has been at the heart of technological trajectories essential to the mode of production (aeronautics and space, electronics, the nuclear

industry). The military expenditure of the United States, but also that of the other imperialist countries, reached extraordinarily high levels in the subsequent five decades, supposedly to meet the threat represented by the USSR. In the latter country, the gigantic sums devoted to defence consolidated the ruling caste and its parasitic existence, while also contributing to the bleeding of productive and financial resources.

The outstanding fact since the Second World War is a deep implantation of the military-industrial system in the economy and society of the US, which has in no way been weakened by the disappearance of the USSR; on the contrary it is now entering a new stage of consolidation. This strengthening of the military-industrial system rests on a conjuncture of factors: an industrial concentration and an ever closer liaison of the weapons companies with financial capital, an increase in the military budget embarked on by Clinton in 1999 and considerably amplified by Bush, and a strengthened presence in information and communication technologies (ICT). These technologies benefited from Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative ('star wars') and play a determinant role in 'information domination' and 'network centric warfare' [3] which

were the favoured themes of Pentagon strategists in the 1990s.

Military supremacy has allowed US weapons companies to conquer a central position in the development of ICT, dominated in the 1990s by the civil companies (the so-called 'new economy' and its associated start-ups).

The weapons companies must also develop new weapons systems for ground forces. The preparation of 'urban wars' (the expression employed by the Pentagon experts) waged by soldiers equipped armed with hyper-sophisticated weapons, occupies an important place in the military budgets. The aim is to wage war against the populations of the immense agglomerations in the countries of the South (those of South America obsess US strategists), and eventually against the 'dangerous classes' of the cities of the North. One can then envisage that the major influence the weapons groups have acquired inside the federal and state institutions since the second world war, together with the broadening of the 'national security agenda' to non-military objectives [4] which increasingly concern aspects of social and private life, will accelerate the formation of a 'military-security

system'. This latter will, in the coming years, play a much more important role than that of the 'military-industrial complex' during the Cold War.

The formation of this military-security system gives the US state a considerable power.

## **Imperialism in the 21st century**

We are far from the decline of the 'state form' of the domination of capital, which, according to Hardt and Negri, would give way to an 'Empire' inside of which capital and labour would confront each other without mediation. [5] To maintain its domination, capital cannot do without a political apparatus, institutions (judiciary, military and so on) which have been constituted, strengthened and streamlined for two centuries in the framework of the states of the dominant capitalist countries. 'world capitalism', in the sense spoken of by these authors, does not exist. Capital, as a social relationship, certainly has a propensity to transcend national frontiers and other barriers (forms of socio-political organization for example). The 'world market is

contained in the very notion of capital' as Marx said, but it is a process marked by contradictions which are expressed in inter-capitalist and inter-imperialist rivalries as well as in crises. That is why the global extension of capital has always taken and will continue to take on a physiognomy inextricably linked to the inter-state relationship of forces and its associated violence.

The domination of the US over the other imperialist countries is obvious. That is one reason why the breakout of inter-imperialist wars like those that took place in the 20th century is improbable. The integration of transatlantic capital, between the US and a part of the European Union, continues, and has constituted one of the distinctive features of 'globalization' in the late 20th century. The dominant classes of the US and the EU are, to a certain extent, in the situation that Marx described in relation to the competition between capitalists: "while there is little love lost between them in competition among themselves", they "form a veritable freemason society vis-À-vis the whole working-class" and, need we add, vis-À-vis the peoples of the countries subjected to their domination. [