

After the Twin Towers: The European Union and America's war

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The attack on the United States by a terrorist organization of Islamic fundamentalist origin has shaken the planet: nowhere is safe any more, not even the USA. After all the other wildcat privatisations, states have now lost their monopoly control over the most destructive and pernicious weapons. We are witnessing a real political turning point: following the expression of an initial desire for vengeance, the Bush government has evolved rapidly towards the pragmatic implementation of a global strategy.

The US has rapidly succeeded in drawing the European Union (EU) into "their" war. Bypassing the UN in a cavalier fashion, they have used NATO as the framework of reference and legitimation to overcome European reticence. A very free interpretation of the North Atlantic Alliance treaty has not only served to give a legal cover to the more hesitant or politically less stable governments, but has also brought about the final transformation of NATO into the military arm of global capitalism. Once the EU had rallied to the war, in the name of "NATO solidarity", Bush took on the exclusive conduct of military operations, sidelining NATO.

However, while Bush seems to benefit from a seamless political consensus in his own country, he has faced enormous political difficulty outside of it. [[1](#)]

A comparison can be made with the US war against Vietnam (1965-1973); while the US was fully capable of bombing the whole of Indochina back to the stone age this was politically impossible because of the international context of the epoch.

In the attack on Bin Laden, his networks and the Afghan regime that protected him, the political factor has been just as decisive as before. In comparison with the coalition against Iraq, the difficulty of assembling a "coalition against terrorism" has been much greater, both inside the imperialist camp and in the rest of the world, in particular the Arab world. It reveals the limits of US supremacy today in contrast to the political context of the war against Iraq.

Then, the US certainly had to manoeuvre but the only real problem was the neutralization of the "socialist camp", the USSR first and foremost, with a whole series of non-aligned Third World countries behind it. In the imperialist camp, Europe followed without fail. In 1990-91 US supremacy was total as the EU struggled to control its internal antagonisms in the face of pan-European upheavals.

The distance between 1991 and 2001 is considerable. Ten years have passed. Millions of men and

women (and children) across the world have suffered the “New World Order” which supposedly meant “peace, stability and prosperity for all”. The new political structure of capitalism generates a new war (the third in ten years!). Never has social inequality been so widespread and brutal.

The endemic fragmentation and volatility of this new capitalism also weakens the mechanisms of social and state control. The social-humanist prestige of the US in the world has rarely been so low, to the point where the question raised by several establishment newspapers has been: “why do they hate us so much?” Never for 50 years has the climate between the US and the EU been so overshadowed by the multiplication of economic, political and diplomatic frictions.

The EU in search of autonomy

With all its limits and internal tensions, the EU’s development over the last five years constitutes a new element of the world situation. It leads objectively not to a contesting of US hegemony, but rather a certain repositioning in relation to the American superpower.

The involvement of the US government in a war impacts directly on Europe. Just as US imperialism, responsible for the stability of world capitalism, has to respond, the European dominant classes cannot shy away from commitment for an analogous reason: a war with an international character impels all the powers, small, medium and big, to flex their muscles.

However, in the higher spheres of the EU, this is not a welcome development. Their priorities - dealing with recession, the introduction of the euro (still held back by a “strong” dollar) and a difficult rationalization of community institutions - are not helped by this US initiative, which threatens to impact directly on all the complex and difficult mechanisms of its institutions and the contradictions between member states. Imperialist Europe only asks for one thing: political stability!

Yet it was rapidly drawn into the war under the open pressure of the USA. The EU has successfully attempted to adopt a common point of view between member countries, involving a certain political distancing in relation to the US. Even Blair, who developed the most enthusiastically warlike discourse of the whole imperialist camp, subscribed to this common EU political orientation: targeted attacks, limited in time with the objective of the elimination of Bin Laden and the Taliban government; a systematic humanitarian discourse; an “equitable” solution of the Palestinian question, which implies bringing Sharon to heel politically; a very visible diplomacy. In short: the EU’s profile is that of a “peaceful” imperialism, humanitarian and democratic.

This autonomy - more spiritual than real, but aided by the vengeful and religious-fundamentalist tone of Bush - reflects a consensus at the summit of the EU. The governments, and not the most insignificant ones (Germany for example) are under pressures from their societies. This attitude of autonomy also prepares openly for opposition by the EU to the extension of the war to Iraq and Syria that a sector of the US government had (and has still) in its sights. Suddenly, the dominant classes in Europe have allowed (at varying levels according to the countries) the expression of doubts in the mass media: televised documentaries, critical commentaries by news presenters, reporting of anti-war demonstrations. Public opinion in Europe was neither stifled nor heavily policed. An anti-American sub current could establish a permanent presence. US military strategy and its shortcomings on the ground have been debated by the political and journalistic specialists.

That raises another question: why have the dominant classes in Europe entered into the dynamic of the war? There is without doubt a series of reasons: first, because the US wanted it, but also and more substantially because from the moment when war becomes “inevitable” it is better to be “on side”. The European dominant classes, in rivalry with the US, are situated on the same terrain and

seek the same objectives: to affirm themselves in relation to the dominated countries of the periphery, to take their place inside the “triad” (USA, EU, Japan), to win diplomatic and geo-economic influence, to share the spoils (access to raw materials in particular).

The EU has committed all the more readily given the novelty of this war (compared to that against Iraq in 1991): the huge and complex difficulty faced by the US in creating a “political constellation” prior to the passage to military aggression in Afghanistan. The “coalition” was finally put in place, but never before had the US had to negotiate and bargain so much - including with their traditional vassals in the Arab world.

The divisions of the Union

The other noticeable political feature has been that of the divisions between EU countries. One by one, the European politicians rushed off to the US to solidarise with the American people and its government. Weeping with emotion, Blair witnessed Bush’s speech to the US Congress. The “private” meetings between the heads of government of the big EU states in support of the military effort were worse, shamelessly bypassing the EU institutions: Chirac met with Blair and Schröder one hour before the Ghent summit. Each had their own military ambitions: Blair set himself up as a veritable “war leader”, grandiloquent, arrogant, an activist on the terrain of the Middle East; Chirac, through prior arrangement the first to meet Bush, offered “his soldiers” to “fight and if necessary, die”; Berlusconi demanded that Italy could send its soldiers, and not medicines and nurses.

What does this apparent imbroglio mean for the state of the EU? First, that the EU governments now control the agenda and not the Commission. This is not the fault of government skulduggery, nor the incapacity of Prodi. It is because of the stage the EU is at: we have passed from the construction of the single market, where the Commission had the initiative, to the development of significant aspects of a “community” state apparatus (currency, army and so on). That directly concerns the relations of power between member states. The war currently underway will only underline and strengthen this tendency. From this starting point the “cacophony” becomes comprehensible.

Contrary to appearances, we are witnessing a homogenisation at the top of the EU and a strengthening of supra-nationality. However, as always in the EU, it is an uneven, contradictory, conflictual process and a source of potential crisis, because the national state apparatuses are confined within the constraining institutional framework that they have themselves set up to control disparities.

Imperialist Germany has taken a leap forward. Thanks to Social Democracy and the Greens, the dominant class is celebrating its victory: its army will finally be beyond its frontiers (and this time in a real war, because in Kosovo it was there for humanitarian tasks).

It will undoubtedly recuperate Afghanistan which was its zone of influence from the 1920s onwards, all this with the perspective of occupying a seat in the UN Security Council like a real Great Power!

Blair has astutely and audaciously played the master card of his country’s traditional ambiguous position between the EU and the USA. To such an extent that the world wonders whether Great Britain is the (US) Trojan horse in the EU or the future champion of a reformed EU. In practice, by projecting himself as a populist war chief (at Bush’s side) Blair hopes to use the capital of popularity thus built up to win British approval of membership of European monetary union (euro, ECB and so on). A cultural revolution in his country, if he pulls it off!

France, a secondary capitalism whose weight is maintained by a “universal” political-cultural

influence, is obliged to cling to the “Franco-German motor in the EU” to hold the initiative and its position at the head of the EU. Nonetheless, it will be increasingly caught between the simultaneous rise in British and German power. This is the objective basis for Chirac’s current frenzy (together with the French presidential campaign, of course).

If Britain joins the euro, an unprecedented economic, political and military concentration would be created at the summit of the EU. That would be a sufficient condition to pass to a real supra-nationality, shared between the three big powers. Formalized or not, it would establish a more general and increasingly authoritarian hierarchy among the EU’s member countries, which would rationalize the state apparatus of this imperialist Europe. Not only would it impose a summit and political leadership on the EU, it would also assist the entry of a series of peripheral countries (“the enlargement of the EU towards the East”) in a subordinate position; because the current members of the EU (and in particular the big countries) do not imagine for a single instant that these latter can co-lead the new Europe. The rule, adopted at Nice, of “strengthened cooperation” (groups of member-countries can conclude accords between themselves on certain themes so as to accelerate the construction of the EU) is thus a godsend: the EU will consolidate itself as a pyramid made up of a series of increasingly narrow and increasingly dense circles, from the base to the summit.

This also sheds light on the twisted dynamic at work inside the EU. Any event or important action always impacts on three levels: the EU’s relations with the US; the relations between member-states; and the strictly “community” structure of the EU. The American war confirms it.

The internal war

Wars are a powerful factor in the development of states, especially the directly repressive apparatuses. This war in particular, being both interstate and internal, proves it.

In relation to the EU, it reveals big problems at the other levels beyond simple repression.

Thus, the management of monetary policy (the European Central Bank being charged with a single task, the control of inflation) has been shown to be totally inadequate in an agitated world, affected both by an international war and a recession which promises to be deep and long. Though you might not think so, the stability pact (with its monetarist rigor) is seriously in trouble from the point of view of the budget deficit. Interest rates are shifting and will continue to shift. All this without any safety net or institutional support. At a time when, in the US firstly, state economic intervention has resumed (although this is not to be confused with a policy of Keynesian reflation), the EU is totally powerless.

However, it is at the level of authority that the dominant classes of the EU have understood the enormous opportunity which has been presented to them.

First, on the European army, there is growing agreement between those countries participating in the war in Afghanistan to push forward on questions like military means and the establishment of a European military command. The problem remains increasing the budgets, harmonization of weaponry and the boosting of European industry (the European Aeronautical Defence and Space Company)

This question is a burning one, for yet another race has been entered into with the US - whereas the EU has for nearly five years been trying to facilitate the entry of the countries of eastern Europe into the EU, the US is accelerating steps to integrate them in NATO!

That raises several thorny problems, including that of the rapid intervention force to deal with crises at the periphery of the enlarged EU. There is also the question of links with Russia, on which, as always the three big powers of the EU have different positions.

But it is undoubtedly on the question of the “maintenance of internal order” that the ruling spheres are focused. The struggle against terrorism offers an excellent alibi. The obstacles which the EU meets relate to the autonomy jealously defended by the police and judiciary apparatuses of the national states: the intra-European extradition mandate, the extension of the rights and resources of Europol, the formation of a European public prosecutor’s department.

The EU’s “war against terrorism” is a “global and long term” war against the enemy within. That requires a definition of terrorism which goes beyond Bin Laden and co. so as to criminalize any action and organization which pursues a resolute (non-armed) struggle against a government and which seeks to change the fundamental bases of society, even through the activity of an overall majority. Bin Laden’s bombs are a heaven sent gift. The Wall Street Journal could not hide its joy in headlining “Bye bye Seattle”!

The movement against capitalist globalisation has not disappeared; it has successfully reoriented itself towards an anti-war struggle. But it is undeniable that the broader circles are much more difficult to mobilize, and the offensive spirit has been muted in this new context. And, above all, the priorities of the movements are unquestionably changing. The true test of the authoritarian offensive by the EU state governments and the EU itself is the attempt to reduce, indeed stifle the struggles of labour in the name of the “war situation”. Already layoffs have reached a ten-year record level. Which creates a great uncertainty. The recession, to the extent it deepens, could lead the bourgeoisies to inflict a new social defeat whose repercussions would also affect the beginning of the revival of the militant movements supported by the youth radicalisation, also in an initial stage.

The political balance has swung to the right at the institutional level in several countries. The common declaration made by Blair-Aznar as Spain took the reins of power in the EU for 6 months (to be followed by Denmark) will centralize this turn. The political polarisation will be reinforced. The key to resistance and progress lies in the social struggles.

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P.S.

* “The EU and America’s war”. From <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] It’s one thing to destroy a country along with its state and pulverize its society; it is another to re-establish, following such a military victory, the stability of conditions of exploitation for big international capital and the guaranteed domination of the other ruling classes of the planet. The use of military force comes up against political limits.