Behind the news:2

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Nuclear Weapons, The Persian Gulf War, and The New World Order

Since the end of the Persian Gulf War it has become apparent to us that the war had much to do with nuclear weapons and little to do with evil dictators, oil supplies, or a global desire for justice and freedom for the Kuwaiti people. The almost total disregard of Saddam Hussein who, just a few months ago, was promoted by the Pentagon and mass media as another 'Hitler'—and the sustained search by United Nations inspectors for nuclear weapons and organisations responsible for supplying them to the Third World—reveal the underlying cause of the conflict. These activities also suggest what President Bush and his allies may have in mind when they use the term 'The New World Order'.

We argue that nuclear weapons were at the heart of the Persian Gulf War—not, as conventional wisdom holds, to remove them from Iraq and the hands of an 'evil dictator'—but for much larger economic and political purposes that reflect both a centuries-old global stratification system and fundamental changes in that system, signaled by the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Originally formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, 'world system theory' maintains that the various nations of the world today are part of a global economic and political hierarchy that originated in sixteenth-century colonialism and has remained relatively stable over the centuries (Wallerstein, 1988). Sitting atop the global stratification system are core nations, including the United States, Great Britain, France, Japan, and other industrial nations that have stable governments, are technologically advanced, and have nuclear weapons or access to them, as well as the industrial capacity to manufacture and deliver them anywhere in the world. Although these countries compete with each other economically, since World War II and the development of the 'bomb', they have excluded war as a means of resolving political disputes. As Kenneth Boulding put it, they form '... a great triangle of peace, stretching roughly from Australia to Japan, across North America, to Finland, with about eighteen countries which have no plans whatever to go to war with each other.' (Boulding, 1987)

Countries in the periphery are the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa that lack substantial capital and advanced technologies. These countries pose virtually no military and economic threat to the core. Countries in the semi-peripheral zone—Argentina, Brazil, India, Pakistan, the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries, and others that occupy a position between the core and the periphery—do, however, pose a threat. Economically, politically, and militarily they are stronger than the peripheral countries, and have reached a moderate degree of technological advancement, especially in military technologies and military organisation. Most importantly, in recent years they have developed the means to build nuclear weapons and thus demand a greater share of global power, wealth, and prestige.

Traditionally, the core has attempted to defuse threats from the semi-periphery by encouraging conflicts among semi-peripheral countries and sometimes between the semi-periphery and the periphery. It has done this by supplying arms and instigating internal rivalries through covert operations to prevent them from emerging as stable, autonomous and hegemonic powers. Recently, however, many semi-periphery nations have constructed their own weapons-manufacturing plants, and, in addition to producing small arms and ammunition (Rosh, 1990), have begun to manufacture biological, chemical, and, most importantly, nuclear weapons—as well as ballistic missile delivery systems that, at a minimum, are capable of striking regional targets (Carus, 1991).

It is our view that the ability to build and deliver nuclear weaponry has become such a vital ingredient in who wields power within the world system, that the core has decided it must be carefully controlled. This decision does not, of course, derive from a specific plan or conscious 'conspiracy' on the part of the core to maintain control of the world. Rather, it flows from a centuries-old political structure, and long-standing political assumptions and traditions that define contemporary geopolitics.

For decades core nations have enjoyed the unique status of being members of the 'nuclear club'. This includes the 'nuclear cartel', comprised of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the [former] Soviet Union, that produces both state-of-the-art nuclear weapons and inter-continental ballistic missiles. Members of a second group of core nations—primarily western industrial nations—do not directly manufacture bombs, but have direct access to them through the NATO alliance; in many cases, nuclear weapons are located in their territories. A third

group's members (such as Japan) also are full partners because they are protected under the NATO nuclear umbrella and can have nuclear weapons upon request. These countries, more importantly, have 'implicit rights', as well as the industrial capacity to produce these weapons.

The fourth member—and the only Third World nation ever granted full membership in the nuclear club—is China, which produced nuclear weapons in the 1960s during the most intense period of the Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. This context, in fact, may explain why there was little opposition to China having 'the bomb', for both sides saw advantages to China's entry in the struggle. It is noteworthy that once China developed both nuclear weapons and global delivery systems, it not only was accepted as a full partner in the nuclear club, but was granted privileges as a legitimate trading partner, as well as full political rights as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power. In effect, China was granted core status.

We maintain that nuclear weapons have altered the global political calculus in another important way. Because of nuclear weapons and the potential hazards and dubious benefits of nuclear war, large-scale armed conflicts among core nations have virtually disappeared from the international scene. While core nations continue to compete economically, these activities do not threaten a nation's core status—only its relative position within rank. In short, nuclear weapons have solidified the core, and have created a stronger sense of common identity and shared interest among core nations *vis-à-vis* non-core nations. This, in turn, has allowed core nations to direct their full attention to non-core nations, to unite in opposition to them, and to erect barriers that exclude them from gaining core status. Clearly, keeping nuclear weapons out of their hands is at the top of the core's geopolitical agenda.

The war against Iraq is of unique significance for the future of the world system for several reasons. First, it was only the second major war in which the United Nations—unopposed by any core country—functioned as a legitimating body of the core's interests (Russet and Sutterlin, 1991). Departing from its stated mission and the reason for its very existence—preventing wars between countries by providing a forum to resolve interstate conflicts through peaceful means—it *authorised* a war. Second, under pressure from core nations, the UN *explicitly excluded* diplomatic solutions, and functioned as a legitimating body for the core to defeat a relatively small and technologically unsophisticated nation in the semi-periphery. While it was possible for the United States or another major member of the core to defeat Iraq single-handedly, the core acted in tandem in order to symbolise its unity and, at the same time, to establish a precedent and a model for dealing with challenges from the periphery in the future.

By defeating Iraq, not only did the core prevent that nation from emerging as a regional hegemonic power, it also issued a stern warning to other semi-periphery countries that might entertain similar ambitions. Moreover, through the war and current efforts to seek out and destroy Iraq's nuclear capabilities, the core is currently engaged in executing a much larger agenda of carefully documenting and monitoring the nuclear weapons programmes of others in the semi-periphery, including North Korea, India, Pakistan, and Brazil. They have been sufficiently warned that the core will again act in unison to destroy their nuclear programmes if the core's traditional prerogatives are threatened.

One might ask, if the core is so concerned about the issue of the semi-periphery acquiring nuclear weapons, why, in addition to China, did it ever allow the Third World nations of India, Pakistan, and others to have them in the first place, and why did it not attack these countries years ago—during the early stages of their nuclear development? We believe that the core's tacit consent, or even the positive assistance it rendered some semi-periphery countries in the development of their nuclear programmes, can be best explained by the core's age-old tactic of encouraging rivalries to diffuse threats to itself, and at the same time, the semi-periphery's countertactic of exploiting the polarisation within the core—especially the Cold War—during which time some received nuclear materials and technology from both sides. The end of the Cold War, however, greatly simplified the political calculus for the core, and minimised the core's fear of triggering a 'Third World War'.

Further, there is a growing awareness among core leaders that, being much more potent than first-generation nuclear devices, today's nuclear weapons have the capacity to inflict unthinkable damage to the population as well as to the global environment. For instance, a single bomb dropped on a nation such as Israel, which core nations have promised to protect, might raise serious questions about the core's ability to protect those under its treaty umbrella—or worse, delegitimise the larger political system. The core uses this awareness to add legitimacy to its 'non-proliferation' campaign by raising the spectre of 'nuclear terrorism' by non-core nations. The proliferation of ballistic missiles also has significantly altered the old nuclear equation, and has demanded actions by the core that in the early years of the nuclear era were deemed unnecessary.

The definition of the the semi-periphery as the 'new enemy' is increasingly becoming clear from statements emanating from the Bush Administration. In a recent (29/9/91) policy address to the nation concerning the future direction of US defence, President Bush indicated that the military would dramatically shift its four-decades-old focus from the Warsaw Pact to 'regional threats', a former colonial expression that means the non-core. Serving as the President's interpreter, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney said 'the nation's military must be ready to fight a regional conflict anywhere in the world …' (*Wichita Eagle,* 1991) and Operation Desert storm would serve as the model for such wars.

Finally, the Persian Gulf war was the only war after World War II waged by the US and its allies in which communism and democracy were not issues. The objective of the war against Iraq was neither to promote democracy in the Gulf region nor contain communist aggression. Yet, a powerful ideology was at work. The Bush Administration portrayed the Gulf War as a 'line drawn not only in the sand but also in time' and the beginning of the establishment of a 'New World Order'. The 'New World Order' is, in fact, centuries-old world order, but one in which core nations have added safeguards and new institutions designed to strengthen their influence, and, ultimately, their place at the top of the global hierarchy.

In sum, the war against Iraq was more than a war against Iraq. It was an act of consolidating and intensifying the core's influence and power, as well as a warning to pretenders in the semi-periphery that the core would no longer tolerate challenges to its world hegemony. However unwittingly, when Saddam Hussein coined the phrase, 'the mother of all wars,' he properly named the core's new agenda: wars in the foreseeable future will

be instigated and utilised by the core—not under the guise of ideology, as they have been for the past forty-five years—but openly, and clearly, as the preferred means of enforcing the global stratification system.

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