

The war on Libya: a new eruption of imperialist rivalry

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Not since the 1930s, in the lead-up to World War II, have the conflicting economic and strategic interests of the rival imperialist powers been so openly pursued as they are in the war on Libya.

All of them proclaim their “humanitarian concern” for the lives of Libyan civilians and the so-called “responsibility to protect”. But no humanitarian veil can conceal their bared fangs.

The United States, which, it has now been revealed, had CIA operatives active in Libya well before the passage of UN resolution 1973, took the initiative in launching the attack in order to pre-empt France and Britain. They, for their part, no doubt viewed America’s economic weakness as providing an opportunity to reverse the strategic setback they suffered over Suez in 1956.

And the US has another rival on its mind. It is out to demonstrate to Beijing that no matter how rapid the growth of China’s economic ties with Africa—trade between the two increased more than 40 percent in 2010—and no matter what political influence Chinese money and investment bring, American militarism is still capable of asserting its interests through military intervention and “regime change”.

There are divisions among the European powers as well. The conflict over who would take control of the operation after the initial US strikes was motivated in part by Italy’s concerns that, unless NATO were in charge, Britain and France would muscle it out of access to the “new” Libya’s valuable oil resources.

Britain, which together with France, had carved up the African continent by the beginning of the 20th century, is looking well beyond Libya. As foreign secretary William Hague told a recent conference in London: “Britain has an ambitious foreign policy which seeks to build up our standing and influence in

the world, and to support our economy” adding that “the nations of Africa” were a strategic area of British interest. Their significance was indicated by Hague’s remark that recent events in North Africa and the Middle East were “already set to overtake the 2008 financial crisis and 9/11” as the most important developments of the early 21st century.

The eruption of outright imperialist gangsterism and the emergence of open conflicts and rivalries is not just the outcome of immediate considerations. In the final analysis, it is the political expression of vast shifts in the tectonic plates of the world economy that are disrupting the political relations established between the major powers since the end of World War II.

The extent of the economic transformation that has occurred was indicated in recent figures on world manufacturing. These showed that in 2010, China eclipsed the United States as the world’s leading manufacturing country, with 19.8 percent of global output compared to 19.4 percent for the US. The US took the top manufacturing position in 1895, following three decades of dynamic economic development in the aftermath of the American Civil War, and maintained it through all the economic turmoils of the ensuing 100 years, even rising to close to 50 percent of the world’s total at the conclusion of the war.

The rapid rise of China, especially over the past decade, has already been met with growing hostility on the part of the US.

But the change in the US-China relationship is not the only significant shift. In 2000, the major countries of the industrialized world—Western Europe, the US and Japan—accounted for 72 percent of manufacturing. While this was down from 80 percent in 1990, this was not yet a qualitative shift. That was to develop in the next decade.

In 2010, these countries accounted for little more than half the world's manufacturing output. The shift in production was towards the so-called BRICs—Brazil, Russia, India and China. In 2000, they were responsible for 11 percent of global manufacturing output. Last year their share had more than doubled to 27 percent.

These figures point to the source of the divisions in the vote on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, authorizing the military intervention against Libya. The resolution was carried 10 to zero, with five abstentions—Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRICs) plus Germany.

Post-war politics in Europe has been premised on the collaboration of France and Germany. Now, the antagonists in two world wars have disagreed, as the rising BRIC powers diverge from the older capitalist powers. Of course, this division does not preclude agreement on other matters in the future, but it does indicate mounting geo-political tensions, which, as the history of the 20th century demonstrates, inevitably lead to inter-imperialist war.

The profound shifts in the foundations of the global economy and the geo-political tensions they have produced highlight, once again, the prescience of Lenin's analysis in his work, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

Published in 1916, in the depths of World War I, *Imperialism* explained that socialism was a historic necessity as the only means of ending the threat to civilization posed by imperialist war. Lenin was writing in direct opposition to the theories of the German social democratic leader Karl Kautsky. Kautsky, who provided the theoretical rationale for the German social democracy to support its "own" government in the war, maintained that war did not arise organically out of capitalism. Consequently, the imperialist powers would be able to so regulate their affairs as to avoid it.

Such a state of "ultra-imperialism" could never be permanent, Lenin explained, because any agreement between the imperialist powers at one point would inevitably be disrupted at another, because of capitalism's uneven historical development. And this disruption of the previous economic equilibrium would set in motion a new political and military struggle for colonies, spheres of influence, resources and markets—and a new world war.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the outbreak

of World War I, in the midst of one of the most profound global economic shifts in the history of world capitalism, Lenin's analysis is more relevant than ever. The military onslaught against Libya, and the imperialist appetites that have motivated it, point to the fact that imperialist war is very much back on the historical agenda. The working class can meet this terrible threat only to the extent that it is politically re-armed with the political and strategic lessons of the immense experiences of the 20th century, and takes up the fight for the program of world socialist revolution.

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