

Australia and Imperialism in the 21st Century



ISBN 978-0-6481690-0-0



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Preface

The present paper is a welcome contribution to discussion of whether, despite its formal independence, Australia is under the control of US imperialism, or whether it is an imperialist power in its own right. Depending on the point of view taken in this discussion, certain conclusions follow about the nature and content of our revolutionary struggle for socialism.

The paper has been submitted by a reader who has gone to considerable time and effort to examine differing views of Australia's status in relation to global imperialism. We are printing it without change out of respect for the integrity of the author's original analysis, as agreed in discussion with him. We do, however, have our own views on certain matters raised by the author.

We reject the view that Lenin's publication of 1916 was flawed, especially in relation to the five distinguishing features of imperialism that he proposed at that time. Yes, it was written under conditions of Czarist censorship; yes, it was just a popular outline; and yes, its focus was on the economic basis of modern imperialism. However, those five well-known and widely quoted features were without flaw.

Can it be said that changes in imperialism post-1916 have rendered Lenin's analysis inadequate? Of course, if one were to mechanically apply an analysis of 1916 to contemporary imperialism, to imperialism of 2017, then there would be problems. It would deny that imperialism is subject to change and development. It would fail to account for at least two major developments in the past century.

The first of these was the wave of decolonisation that swept the world after the victory of the War Against Fascism. The division of the world between the great powers lost its strictly territorial form and was replaced by neo-colonialism and a more open slather domination of former colonies by competing imperialisms. While the latter had their own economic and political spheres of influence, they lost the right to say that they "owned" this or that colony as an exclusive territorial prerogative.

The second was the phenomenal growth, particularly evident after the early 1970s, in the power of finance capital such that it no longer merely dominated industrial capital but separated significant parts of itself from the production process to pursue profits through speculation. This was not new to capitalism as such, but the scale of it was qualitatively different as was its political power and influence. A dazzling array of new financial instruments (derivatives, CDOs, CDSs, structured investment vehicles, special purpose vehicles and the like) combined with technologies that opened the way to speculate in massive amounts of money in nano-seconds anywhere in the world. Out of this came demands to remove all barriers to the free flow of capital, to remove any and all regulations impeding financial speculation, to allow market forces unfettered access to any area of social investment where a profit could be made. Collectively, these demands constituted neo-liberalism as the political expression of the ascendancy of finance capital.

To say that Lenin, writing in 1917, would have had to extend his defining features of imperialism to include new phenomena such as these is not to say that his 1916 analysis has flaws or problems; rather it is to confirm the validity of the approach taken by Lenin and to encourage creative further analysis on the basis of that approach.

To return to the central focus of the current publication, the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) sees little evidence for the view that our ruling class constitutes an imperialist entity, the overthrow of which will constitute the transition to a fully-fledged socialism.

The evidence, as our contributor convincingly argues, rather points to Australia as a country “which, officially, (is) politically independent, but in fact, (is) enmeshed in the net of financial and diplomatic dependence”¹. That dependence was initially on Britain as a colonial power (and subsequently as an imperialist power) and, particularly after WW2, on US imperialism. The difference between “colonial” and “imperialist” lies in the differences between pre-monopoly and post-monopoly capitalism and in the respective strengths of industrial and finance capital. “Finance capital,” said Lenin, “is such a great, it may be said, such a decisive force in all economic and in all international relations, that it is capable of subjecting, and actually does subject to itself even states enjoying the fullest political independence”².

We are pleased to present here the facts on Australia’s subordinate status to US imperialism. Our country is a sub-imperialist country, a country under imperialist control, generally following the dictates of US imperialism, but with some limited ability to influence events in its immediate region. Even that influence is largely in accord with the interests of the dominant US imperialism.

The present booklet concludes with an outline of what we believe needs to be done by way of winning anti-imperialist (i.e. genuine) independence and socialism.

As an appendix to the paper, we reprint the Program of the CPA (M-L).

Central Committee
Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist)

¹ V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1965, p. 101

² *Ibid*, p. 97

Australia and Imperialism in the Twenty-first Century

Is Australia an imperialist nation?

Alex M.

For many on the Marxist left in Australia this has been and still is a complex question. The complexity is in part due to European settlement in Australia having its origins as a colonial and penal outpost of Great Britain. Such beginnings and the subsequent deference of the Australian ruling-class (and by extension, the Australian state) to British and US imperialisms make it difficult to sort out whether Australia is an imperialist nation in its own right or if it is merely the victim and/or by-product of imperialism. The answer to the question has important implications for revolutionary theory and practice in this country. This essay will address itself to the question by critically analysing some of the literature on imperialism written by Australian Marxists and others on the left. In particular, writing that engages with the subject of Australian imperialism by Tom Bramble, Tom O'Lincoln and Sam Pietsch will be examined. This is not to point score against these writers: much of their work has been and is very interesting, merits close attention and has much to say about Australia and its position in the world from a Marxist perspective. The point of critically examining their work is to sharpen understanding of what imperialism is in the current conjuncture and to situate Australia in the hierarchy of imperialist powers.

Before starting with a critical examination of some of the contributions of Bramble, O'Lincoln, Pietsch and a few others, a definition of imperialism which covers contemporary global capitalist conditions and geopolitics (also known as international relations) will be outlined. It is necessary to do this because often writers use the term imperialism without giving it a precise meaning. Imperialism then becomes a catch-all term which does duty as a synonym for capitalism or monopoly capitalism or inter-state bullying among other things. Having established a definition of imperialism that takes into consideration the current state of global political economy and geopolitics, the crucial constitutive elements of contemporary imperialism will be outlined. The third section of the essay establishes the predominant role of US imperialism in the hierarchy of imperialist states by making a comparison of military expenditures between the US and its closest rivals, among other criteria. In the fourth section attention will turn to selected works

written by Bramble, O'Lincoln, Pietsch and others on the question of Australian imperialism. The critical engagement with this literature will be followed in the fifth section of the essay where it will be shown *contra* Bramble, O'Lincoln and Pietsch that Australia is not an imperialist nation in its own right, even though it does sometimes commit imperialist acts. In the sixth section, it will be argued that Australia is best regarded as a sub-imperialist power, drawing on the work of Ruy Mauro Marini, Melanie Samson, Patrick Bond and Tobias ten Brink to support the argument. The implications this claim has for Australian revolutionary theory and practice will be delineated in the seventh and concluding section.

I. Imperialism in the twenty-first century – what is it?

Lenin's understanding of imperialism

It is usual for Marxists and even many non-Marxists to immediately think of Lenin's pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* when the word imperialism is mentioned. The 'Popular Outline' has assumed the status of a canonical text in Marxist circles since its publication in 1917. It was the product of a particular era. Lenin drew on the work of John Hobson the liberal critic of British imperialism, Rudolf Hilferding, the Austrian Marxist and the work of Nikolai Bukharin his Bolshevik comrade, as well as drawing on bourgeois sources. The primary reasons why Lenin wrote *Imperialism* were: to explain why the war had broken out; why many national Social Democratic parties affiliated to the Second International which had professed to oppose the war had capitulated and supported their 'own' ruling classes (Lenin especially targeted the German Social Democratic party and its renegade leader Karl Kautsky here) and to connect these developments up with changes that had occurred in capitalism from the late nineteenth century. According to Lenin, the war that was then raging across Europe was a war between two groups of imperialist powers over the carving up of the world's resources and markets.

On the basis of his research Lenin defined imperialism:

If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism. Such a definition would include what is most important, for,

on the one hand, finance capital is the bank capital of a few very big monopolist banks, merged with the capital of the monopolist associations of industrialists; and, on the other hand, the division of the world is the transition from a colonial policy which has extended without hindrance to territories unseized by any capitalist power, to a colonial policy of monopolist possession of the territory of the world, which has been completely divided up.

But very brief definitions, although convenient, for they sum up the main points, are nevertheless inadequate, since we have to deduce from them some especially important features of the phenomenon that has to be defined. And so, without forgetting the conditional and relative value of all definitions in general, which can never embrace all the concatenations of a phenomenon in its full development, we must give a definition of imperialism that will include the following five of its basic features:

(1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; (2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this “finance capital”, of a financial oligarchy; (3) the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance; (4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves, and (5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development in which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.³

Many of the defining features of imperialism that Lenin

listed are still evident now. Monopolies, often in the form of multinational corporations do play decisive roles in domestic and global capitalist economies and multinationals are perhaps integral elements of the ‘international monopolist capitalist associations’ referred to by Lenin in feature (4). The financial oligarchy that Lenin referred to is clearly still around⁴ and the powerful influence that finance capital continues to exert is evident. For example, finance capital played a pivotal role in the events known as the ‘Global Financial Crisis’ and managed to engineer a spectacular ‘triumph’ in forcing the US government to expend billions in taxpayer funds to prop up the US and by extension the global financial system. This is a prime example of how much political and economic power finance capital currently possesses. Also, the fallout from the so-called financial crisis provides an object lesson in how under capitalism there is the drive to not only maximise profits but, where possible, to socialise the costs. It is also not too much of a stretch to claim that the export of capital (usually taking place between the advanced capitalist countries) continues to be an important feature of contemporary global capitalism.

Changes in geopolitics and great power rivalry since 1917

Some fundamental changes have occurred since Lenin’s book was published, however. For a start, when Lenin wrote his book, the European great powers such as Great Britain, France, Germany and others, still possessed colonies. Direct political control of vast swathes of land and people by a distant metropolitan country was a fact. Independence struggles in the colonies and the consequent drive to decolonise by the colonial powers after World War Two and up until the late 1970s finally put paid to the last remnants of old-style colonialism.⁵

Moreover, the great power rivalry that was a central feature of imperialism when Lenin and others such as Bukharin wrote has changed over the intervening years of the twentieth century. That is, the geopolitical landscape has altered considerably especially since the end of the Second World War. Great power rivalry gave way after the

³ V.I. Lenin *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch07.htm> accessed 2 August 2014.

⁴ For instance, here in Australia large corporations such as the multinational car manufacturers through their retail arms often promoted their own brand of financing to potential customers. These arrangements highlight the interconnectedness between industrial and finance capital, a process which has spread from the industrial sector into the retail sector with Coles offering their customers the opportunity to sign up for a Coles credit card.

⁵ Lenin, however, was astute in his observation that capitalism in its monopoly stage did not require old-style colonial relations between countries, that politically independent countries can be enmeshed in webs of dependence. Spheres of influence could replace colonies without weakening, indeed, strengthening the grip of modern imperial power. See Lenin, FLP, 1965, pp. 101, 102.

Second World War to the dynamics of the Cold War. The Soviet Union and the Eastern European satellite states, amongst others, which made up the ‘socialist camp’, were opposed by the United States and the capitalist countries of the ‘free West’. Direct conflict between the two Superpowers was avoided; rather conflicts were often channelled into backing proxies in sometimes vicious and bloody armed struggles in the Third World and (former) colonies. With the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Cold War ended leaving the United States as the sole Superpower or as it is sometimes called, a Hyperpower.⁶

These geopolitical changes are important to note as they have a bearing on the theorising and defining of imperialism. Although many of Lenin’s essential features that he identified as being hallmarks of imperialism are still evident, the end of direct colonialism and the changes in geopolitics in the 100 years since the publication of his book throw into relief limitations in Lenin’s definition of imperialism. A few contemporary Marxist writers have duly noted these problems with Lenin’s work on the subject. The same holds for the other works that make up what are called the classical Marxist theories of imperialism which include works by Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg and Hilferding, with critics suggesting that the theoretical insights contributed by this group are not without flaws.⁷

The best elements of the classical Marxist theories of imperialism can be found in the astute unravelling of the changes in global capitalism of the era (compared to the capitalism that Marx and Engels had examined and written about in the nineteenth century) and the highlighting of the influences those changes had on the

political and geopolitical conditions in Europe and the wider world. Importantly, the inter-state rivalry giving rise to the militarism and war aspect of imperialism as adduced by the classical Marxist theorists was a correct summary of the international relations of that *particular* time. As Bob Sutcliffe succinctly puts it:

The distinctive feature of the Marxist or historical-materialist method of analysing imperialism consists in a special kind of dual vision which tries to integrate coherently two separate aspects of the world. One consists of the *hierarchies*, conflicts and *alliances* [emphasis added] – political, military and economic – between countries; the other concerns the working of the productive system and the hierarchy of classes which it generates.⁸

Contemporary contributions to imperialism theory

Other Marxist writers such as Giovanni Arrighi and David Harvey have finessed Sutcliffe’s dual vision. Harvey drew on Arrighi’s insights on the nature of late twentieth century international relations and global political economy which produced the concept of territorial and capitalist logics of power.⁹ Incorporating these logics of power into his own work on the subject, Harvey formulates a definition of imperialism which while more abstract than those of Lenin and the classical Marxist theorists, nonetheless clarifies the dialectical process that lies at the heart of imperialism.

According to Harvey (borrowing from Arrighi as mentioned above) on one side of imperialism’s dialectical process is the territorial logic of power. It is in this arena that political processes are played out. Here states’ interests are of paramount importance. On the other

⁶ Of course, everything is subject to growth and decay. Contradictions within the essence of things create change. In its pursuit of absolute hegemony (“full spectrum domination”) US imperialism has to contend with the contradictions between itself and the European imperialist powers (singly or as the European Union), and Russia and China (singly, in partnership or in the BRICS bloc). None of these currently has the ability to directly challenge US imperialism for overall global supremacy.

⁷ See for example Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, ‘Global Capitalism and American Empire’, in L. Panitch and C. Ley (eds.) *The New Imperial Challenge Socialist Register 2004*, The Merlin Press, London, 2004, pp. 1- 42, where they sharply criticise Lenin’s theory of imperialism for its ‘stagist’ approach. That is, Lenin’s claim that capitalism had reached its highest stage, a proposition they argue is not borne out by analysis. Whether or not Lenin meant ‘highest stage’ to preclude further development is certainly debatable: in *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* he refers to the rise of monopolies as “the general and fundamental law of the present stage of development of capitalism” (my italics, p. 18, FLP edition). In addition, Panitch and Gindin are critical of what they see as the poor level of state theory evident in Lenin’s and Bukharin’s books on imperialism. They extend this criticism to encompass the classical Marxist theories of imperialism.

⁸ Bob Sutcliffe ‘Imperialism Old and New: A Comment on David Harvey’s *The New Imperialism* and Ellen Meiksins Wood’s *Empire of Capital*’ in *Historical Materialism* Vol 14, 4, 2006, p. 60. As will be shown below the concept of hierarchy is important for an understanding of contemporary imperialism. Similarly, the alliance between the US and Australia and how it shapes Australian ruling class foreign policy is key to a proper understanding of Australia’s place in the pantheon of imperialist powers.

⁹ Giovanni Arrighi *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of our Times*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 33-4, cited in David Harvey *The New Imperialism* Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, p. 27

side is the capitalist logic of power where the capitalist accumulation process is the dominant factor. The correct analysis of the often complex issues associated with modern day imperialism requires the ability ‘to keep the two sides of this dialectic simultaneously in motion and not to lapse into either a solely political or predominantly economic mode of argumentation.’¹⁰ Harvey claims that it is too readily accepted by writers that there is/was a fundamental unity between the territorial and capitalist logics of power, with the capitalist logic always the dominant factor. That is, the dictates of capital are always behind the decisions of a state at both the domestic and geopolitical levels. Not so: ‘In practice the two logics frequently tug against each other, sometimes to the point of outright antagonism.’¹¹

Importantly for Harvey the territorial and capitalist logics of power are distinct yet interdependent, combining with and influencing each other in complex and contradictory ways. It has been a problem, Harvey argues, that those involved in critically examining what he and Lenin call capitalist imperialism (to distinguish it from previous forms of imperialism such as the imperialism associated with the Roman Empire for example) have often assumed ‘that political-economic processes are guided by the strategies of state and empire and that states and empires always operate out of capitalistic motivations.’¹² It would be hard to argue that the US got involved in Vietnam and invaded Iraq in 2003 *solely* for the purposes of capital accumulation, asserts Harvey. Whilst corporate interests did benefit from US military involvement in Vietnam and Iraq, *realpolitik* was the driving force behind those decisions to invade and go to war.

A definition of imperialism for contemporary times

What to take from all this? Rather than the list of features and the brief definition of imperialism being the highest stage of capitalism, an era when ‘free’ competition between capitals had been supplanted by monopolies and where interstate rivalry led automatically to war, as Lenin propounded, we have a more abstract offering from Harvey. The advantage of this abstract concept is that it gets to the essence of imperialism, which is the dialectical relationship between the territorial and capitalist logics of power. Consequently, the definition of imperialism

offered up by Harvey has enough flexibility to cover current developments in global capitalism and geopolitics and thus will be the one used in this essay.

Lenin’s understanding of imperialism fits in with or rather can be incorporated in Harvey’s because ultimately too Lenin was concerned with analysing the dual vision that Sutcliffe mentions above. That is, Lenin’s theorising of imperialism was his attempt to integrate ‘the hierarchies, conflicts and alliances – political, military and economic – between countries’ with ‘the working of the productive system and the hierarchy of classes which it generates.’¹³ Two caveats should be added here: Lenin’s analysis of imperialism is much more empirical than Harvey’s a factor which makes the former’s work historically specific. Secondly, Lenin’s analysis of the role of the state and the system of states in imperialism is under-elaborated. He, like the classical Marxist theorists of imperialism, tended to stress the centrality of ‘capitalist motivations’ in imperialism.

II. Crucial constitutive elements of contemporary imperialism

The foregoing discussion of Lenin’s work combined with the overview of Harvey’s contribution leading to a settled definition puts us in a position to be able to outline the crucial constitutive elements of contemporary imperialism. Certain key features of imperialism which were revealed by the analyses of Lenin, Bukharin, Luxemburg and Hilferding among others, in particular, the changes to capitalism that had occurred in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century were important examples of transformations which had occurred within the capitalist accumulation process (the basis of the capitalist logic of power). We can be guided by some of these insights but also be mindful of their historical specificity. In addition, and this is an important point, contemporary writers have rightfully pointed out the limitations in state theorisation and geopolitical analysis in the classical Marxist theories of imperialism. Questions about the role of states and the system of states in imperialism fall within the ambit of the territorial logic of power.

Since Lenin wrote about imperialism some of the most dramatic changes have been in geopolitics. The great

¹⁰ Harvey *The New Imperialism*, 2005, p. 30

¹¹ Harvey, p. 29

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sutcliffe, ‘Imperialism Old and New’, 2006, p. 60

powers are no more. The Cold War superpower stand-off has also changed leaving in place a single hegemonic power, the US. There are rival states to the US such as China and Russia but they are not in a position to challenge head-on the military power of the former. There is a hierarchy of states in the states system,¹⁴ with the United States at the apex of that system. This is an important consideration, one that has a significant bearing on the contemporary understanding of imperialism. Hierarchy is not only a crucial constitutive element of the state system but also of contemporary imperialism.

III. The hierarchy of imperialism: the US as leading imperialist power

Although there have been claims made that the United States is in decline economically - especially since the latest meltdown of capitalism which started in 2006 and erupted in the Global Financial Crisis - it still has a very large economy and continues to outspend its nearest rivals on all things military. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in a recent yearbook (2013) published the military expenditures of the world's nations. Despite cutbacks due to budgetary austerity measures, US 'spending in 2012—\$685.3 billion—was still 69 per cent higher in real terms than in 2001, which marked the beginning of the wars on “terrorism” in Afghanistan and, from 2003, in Iraq.’¹⁵ US military spending in 2013 declined somewhat from the 2012 figure to \$659 billion. The decline in spending was due to the ongoing influence of the withdrawal of forces from Iraq in 2011 and the abovementioned budgetary constraints associated with the Budget Control Act of 2011.¹⁶

Compare these figures with the spending by Russia and China, the two states that have the next biggest military budgets. According to SIPRI's figures published in 2012, China was the second biggest spender having outlaid an estimated \$166 billion in 2011 and Russia, the third biggest

spender estimated to have spent \$90.7 billion in the same year.¹⁷ In 2012 China spent \$188 billion and Russian spending declined to \$88.7 billion.¹⁸ Even with the recent decline in US military expenditure, last year's figures show that it continues to outspend its rivals, accounting for 34% of total world military expenditure, with China having 12% and Russia 4.8%. In comparison, Australia in 2014 accounted for 1.4% of said expenditure.¹⁹

Spending on the military by the rich and powerful states does not necessarily mean that their military forces will or can be used aggressively; at the least, however, it can send a message to other states. In the international system of states, competition between states for power and status creates conditions such that states within the system may feel threatened by other states' military outlays. Those that feel threatened will tend to direct revenues to defence spending. In turn, this reactive defence spending may be interpreted as aggressive posturing, heightening tensions between states, possibly leading to arms races and even to conflict. This cascade is called the security dilemma. The use of military forces in an aggressive fashion, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the 2015 bombings in Syria by the US and Russia are qualitative 'leaps' as it were, showing real imperialist intent.

Returning to the military spending figures, not only does the US rank at the top of the global military expenditure list, it is also top of the list for the number of military bases it has across the globe. In Chalmers Johnson's masterful trilogy of books about the blowback [resistance] to US hegemony, Johnson a former 'cold warrior' and consultant to the CIA, highlighted the number of US bases that are now garrisoning the world. However, there is a problem: it is difficult to give a precise number. As Nick Turse notes, Johnson himself did not know definitively how many bases the US had across the globe.²⁰ Turse, citing figures from a 2010 US Department of Defence Base Structure

¹⁴ John M. Hobson and J.C. Sharman, 'The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social Logics of Hierarchy and Political Change', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 11, 1, 2005, pp. 63-98. They argue that hierarchies have been evident in various forms prior to and since the advent of the modern state system. Hierarchies can be said to form sub-systems within the system of states. The British Empire is one of the examples they furnish of a sub-system.

¹⁵ SIPRI Yearbook 2013 US Military Expenditure, p. 135 available at <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2013/files/sipri-yearbook-2013-chapter-3-section-2> accessed February 2015. Military expenditure is defined by SIPRI as military spending that includes pay and support for troops, not just arms expenditure.

¹⁶ SIPRI Yearbook 2014 available at <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2014/04> accessed February 2015

¹⁷ <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/Top%2015%20table%202012.pdf> Figures in US dollars. Accessed February 2015

¹⁸ These figures retrieved from a useful Google map provided by SIPRI: http://www.sipri.org/googlemaps/milex_top_15_2013_exp_map.html accessed February 2015

¹⁹ <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex-graphs-for-data-launch-2015/The%20share%20of%20world%20military%20expenditure%20of%20the%2015%20states%20with%20the%20highest%20expenditure%20in%202014.png> accessed May 2015

²⁰ See Turse's blog piece at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175338/> accessed May 2015.

Report which gave a figure of 662 sites maintained in 38 countries, claims that this underestimates the number of US military bases. Turse's estimate puts the figure at over a thousand. The problem of ascertaining the number of sites or bases is that, for various reasons, accurate figures are not kept. Be that as it may, what is apparent is that no other nation comes close to matching the scope or scale of the US military global 'footprint', hence Johnson's apt characterisation of US imperialism as being largely an 'Empire of Bases'.²¹ Johnson claims that there can be no mistaking what the bases are for: 'The purposes of all these bases is "force projection," or the maintenance of American military hegemony over the rest of the world. They facilitate [US] "policing" of the globe and are meant to ensure that no other nation, friendly or hostile, can ever challenge [the US] militarily.'²²

The bases range in size and have various purposes, from sprawling military establishments in Iraq and Afghanistan to others such as intelligence gathering facilities like Pine Gap in Australia and the US Naval Base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, where it is alleged that the CIA have secretly sent detainees captured during the 'War on Terror' which started after 9/11.²³ Reflecting the changing approach to warfare that seemingly is a characteristic of the military thinking of the Obama administration, bases are now being used as centres for drone warfare. Turse through his investigative work has unearthed information which suggests that there are approximately sixty drone bases, many of which are unmanned. These bases are secretive. Turse was able to reach his estimate of the number of drone bases by accessing military documents, press accounts and 'open source information'. He contends that there may be more of these military and CIA bases, however, there is no way to confirm the numbers:

Run by the military, the Central Intelligence Agency, and their proxies, these bases – some little more than desolate airstrips, others sophisticated command and

control centers filled with computer screens and high-tech electronic equipment – are the backbone of a new American robotic way of war. They are also the latest development in a long-evolving saga of American power projection abroad; in this case, remote-controlled strikes anywhere on the planet with a minimal foreign "footprint" and little accountability.²⁴

Serfati's analysis of French imperialism: the basis for a brief comparison

To give some perspective, it is important to compare the US with other powerful nations. In an insightful journal article the French Marxist Claude Serfati critically analyses the case of France and its position in the contemporary state system. France continues to have military involvement in parts of Africa, typically in its former colonies. Commensurate with France's possession of nuclear weapons and its being one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, France, since the 1990s has 'maintain[ed] a major geopolitical or military position in the hierarchy of states' despite having declined as an economic and industrial power.²⁵ Serfati argues that France is definitely an imperialist power; one that has recently projected force and whose military spending and arms exports put it in the top rank of spenders and arms exporters for 2011.²⁶ In addition, France has been able to operate with some autonomy both geopolitically and militarily. To cite one example of French autonomy, France chose not to participate in the US led 'Coalition of the Willing' that invaded Iraq in 2003.

While declining to get involved in the invasion of Iraq, France has shown more willingness to intervene militarily in Africa. Between 1960 and 2009 there were fifty interventions undertaken by French military forces in African states. In 2011 and 2013 France carried out unilateral military operations in the Ivory Coast and Mali respectively.²⁷ However, many of the interventions have been conducted as part of defence cooperation agreements

²¹ The trilogy of books that Chalmers Johnson wrote on the nature of the US empire are: *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* first published in 2001; *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* first published in 2004; *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* first published in 2006. It is in *The Sorrows of Empire* that Johnson describes the 'baseworld' or 'Empire of Bases' that lies at the heart of the US imperial project.

²² Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2007, p. 6.

²³ Johnson, *Nemesis*, 2007, p. 124.

²⁴ Nick Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire Special Ops, Drones, Spies, Proxy Fighters, Secret Bases and Cyberwarfare*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2012, pp. 21-2.

²⁵ Claude Serfati, 'Imperialism in Context The Case of France' in *Historical Materialism* Vol 23, 2, 2015, p. 73.

²⁶ Serfati, 'Imperialism in Context', 2015, pp. 52-3.

²⁷ Serfati, p.78.

between France and its African state counterparts.²⁸ Notwithstanding these defence agreements, not only does France project military power in Africa, it continues to extract economic benefits from the continent and in particular from its former colonies.

The former African colonies have allowed France to maintain a trade surplus which helps to offset France's global trade deficit. French TNCs have also amassed sizeable incomes courtesy of their direct and portfolio investments in the old colonies. Aside from these things, France has 'access to strategic and critical and raw materials' as well as the benefits of a monetary zone encompassing France and fifteen African countries. The monetary zone uses two versions of the *Franc CFA* (both of which are guaranteed by the French Treasury and are convertible to Euros at fixed rates) that since 1948 has enabled France 'to virtually control the monetary policies of its former colonies.'²⁹

Returning to France's military 'footprint' in Africa, in 2011 there were 7,500 French military personnel on the continent – down from 15,000 in 1980 and 30,000 in 1960. France has bilateral defence agreements with several African countries such as Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Senegal and others. It has 'five permanent military bases in the Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal and on Reunion Island...'³⁰ and five others making a total of ten bases officially acknowledged. France has also established a military presence in the Middle East signing defence agreements with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Kuwait and opening bases in the UAE and in Abu Dhabi.³²

Serfati situates France in what he calls the 'geo-economic configuration of capitalism'. This configuration is the state system that buttresses and advances the exploitation of labour and resources globally and which since the Second World War has been predicated on the economic and military strength of the US.³³ The US is not as impervious to global political and economic turbulence

as it once was, with the challenges it faces from rising powers like China and the fall-out from the recent global capitalist crisis that started in 2008, curtailing its ability to 'promote stability and growth in the world economy.'³⁴ Notwithstanding these constraints, which set some limits on US power, Serfati places the US at the top of the pecking order of imperialist powers with France as one of a number of European nations which make up a bloc:

... the actual configuration of the world capitalist system is one dominated by a hierarchical, transatlantic bloc in which key European states play an independent, yet secondary role to US imperialism. The relations between the US and other Western countries are based on a mix of cooperation and competition, somewhat similar to the competition between capitalists described by Marx.³⁵

It is important to emphasise Serfati's argument about the hierarchical nature of the contemporary world capitalist system and also the hierarchical nature of imperialist states. Important because, as we shall see when critically analysing the contributions of Bramble, O'Lincoln and Pietsch to the discussion on whether Australia is an imperialist nation, that hierarchy is downplayed or elided from their offerings. Consequently, each writer's understanding of where Australia fits in the system of imperialist states is either simplistic or flawed. Also, they tend to minimise the long established tradition within Australian ruling-class circles of subservience or deference to 'great and powerful friends'. These failings have ramifications for how they theorise imperialism and how they posit Australia within the state system, dominated as it is by the major imperialist powers. As we will see below, such flaws in their understanding have implications for revolutionary theory and practice in Australia.

To summarise, Serfati's analysis of France shows that it is an imperialist power that continues to extract economic benefits from its former African colonies. It does so

²⁸ Serfati, p. 74.

²⁹ Serfati, p. 72.

³⁰ Serfati, p. 74.

³¹ See <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/forces-prepositionnees> for the list. Accessed October 2015.

³² Serfati, p. 74.

³³ Serfati, p. 82. Serfati's characterisation of the state system as a geo-economic configuration rather than part of the geopolitical realm is questionable but need not detain us.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Serfati, pp. 82-3.

by, among other means, using the *CFA Franc* zone that includes fourteen African states to effectively control their monetary policies, to French advantage. Moreover French TNCs have substantial direct and portfolio investments in the former African colonies and France has a trade surplus with those countries. In addition to the economic benefit that accrues to France and French corporations from their engagement in Africa, France's political and military posture in Africa and other parts of the world also highlight its imperialist credentials. That is, France despite its declining economic and industrial power continues to project force via unilateral military interventions in troubled African states (as well as in the Pacific) and establishes and maintains military bases abroad and exports arms and materiel. Serfati's critical examination of contemporary France reveals the capitalist and territorial logics of power at play which compel the French ruling class to act as imperialists. He correctly identifies France as an imperialist power.³⁶

Compared with the US though, France is definitely not in the same league. A quick comparison of the extent of military bases gives an indication of the disparity in military capability between the two countries. The US has hundreds of bases whereas France has ten. While France does project power outside its immediate region, notably, Africa and parts of the Middle East, the US projects power globally. In 2014 the US military budget was \$581 billion (US dollars) placing it at the top of the fifteen largest defence budgets of the developed countries of the world, while France came in sixth with a defence budget of \$53.1 billion (US dollars).³⁷ The US remains the leading imperialist power, with a number of less powerful imperialist nations acting either in cooperation or in competition (short of direct conflict) with it. The relative strengths of states determine where they sit in the hierarchy of imperialist powers.

Where does Australia sit in the pantheon of imperialist powers? Is it an imperialist country? For Bramble, O'Lincoln and Pietsch, Australia is an imperialist country,

albeit a mid-level one, a position which throws up a number of problems. These problems will be addressed in the following consideration of some of their writings on the subject.

IV. Bramble, O'Lincoln and Pietsch: Australia is an imperialist country

According to these three writers there is no doubt that Australia is imperialist. Bramble acknowledges that Australia is often perceived as not fitting the 'traditional image of an imperialist power' but he argues in a recent article that 'Australia is a mid-level imperialist.'³⁸ For O'Lincoln, the history of Australia, post-European settlement, shows a distinct pattern namely: 'Our rulers' intention has always been to advance Australia's own imperialist interests.'³⁹ Pietsch too places Australia in the middle order, so to speak, by claiming that the 1999 intervention in East Timor has to be 'seen in the context of Australia's position as a middle-ranking power within the system of world imperialism.'⁴⁰ To support their claims that Australia is indeed an imperialist power (mid-level or mid-rank) all three authors define imperialism. It is here that their problems start.

Starting with O'Lincoln, he employs a 'simple definition':

The capitalist state's most important task is securing the best conditions for capital accumulation: stability, pro-business legal frameworks and policies, and quiescent labour movements... Since business crosses borders, states intervene internationally by economic, diplomatic or military means. Because of the uneven development of the world economy, a small number of great powers can do this on a world scale. There is often close collaboration between big capitals and states, which can give rise to international confrontation and wars.⁴¹

Regarding Australia, O'Lincoln states that while it lacks a global reach, the Australian state projects power by leveraging its big-power connections to try and influence

³⁶ As will be discussed below, it is instructive to compare France with Australia so as to help clarify Australia's position on the spectrum of imperialist states.

³⁷ *The Military Balance 2015*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2015, p. 21. More will be made of the comparative defence statistics in this publication below.

³⁸ Tom Bramble, 'Australia: A Mid-level Imperialist in the Asia-Pacific' in *Historical Materialism*, Vol 23, 3, 2015, p. 65.

³⁹ Tom O'Lincoln, 'The neighbour from hell: Australian imperialism' in Rick Kuhn (ed.) *Class and Struggle in Australia*, Pearson Education Australia, Sydney, 2005, p. 178. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁰ Sam Pietsch, 'Australian imperialism and East Timor' in *Marxist Interventions*, 2, 2010, p. 11.

⁴¹ O'Lincoln, 'The neighbour from hell', 2010, p. 178.

the global situation. In addition, having a stake in the predominance of a great power, firstly the U.K. and then the US, has provided the wherewithal for Australia to seek to impose its will on the local region.⁴²

What we see with O'Lincoln's definition of imperialism is a rather sketchy description of basic elements of the role of a capitalist state and how certain powers can intervene across borders using economic, diplomatic or military means on a world scale. Capital and state collaboration can lead to confrontation and wars. This is not sophisticated theorising. Australia qualifies as imperialist by dint of power projection piggybacked on its connections with powerful states. It tries to influence global politics to some extent, whereas in the local region 'it seeks to impose its will.'

Such loose definitional work makes it easier for O'Lincoln to advance his argument that Australia is definitely an imperialist nation. However, with such a simple definition of imperialism, it is possible to argue that New Zealand is imperialist and so is Indonesia. What is more, the relationship that Australia has had and continues to have with the two major imperialist powers, Great Britain and the US, is seen by O'Lincoln as merely an opportunity for the Australian ruling class to further its own imperialist agenda. A rather curious view of what is essentially a relationship based on the deference of the Australian ruling-class to what they perceive(d) to be the geopolitical and global economic aims of their more powerful 'protectors'. Fitting in with the imperialist agendas of 'great and powerful friends' and seeking advantage or influence does not necessarily make an imperialist country; it does make for an opportunist one. Having established that Australia is imperialist on the basis of this 'simple definition', O'Lincoln turns to the historical record to support his claim. Here his work is much stronger, but here too his selective use of history throws up some issues of interpretation. Further discussion of O'Lincoln's use of the historical record continues on pages 14, 15 and 16 and in footnote 90 below. Now our attention turns to Bramble's definition of imperialism.

Imperialism for Bramble 'may be understood as the system of military and economic competition between advanced capitalist states in which each seeks to project

its interests on the world stage.'⁴³ The three characteristics of Australian imperialism are outlined:

- (i) [Australia is] a substantial base for capital accumulation. With a GDP of US\$ 1.6 trillion, it is the twelfth-largest economy in the world. While it has been and remains reliant on foreign capital, it is also a wealthy independent centre of capital accumulation with its own national interests and with an increasing financial footprint overseas;
- (ii) [Australia has] a military presence in its immediate region and beyond. The Australian military is the most powerful in South East Asia and the South Pacific and is fourth only to China, Japan and South Korea in the broader region;
- (iii) [Australia has] a relationship with US imperialism that extends its capacity to project power and which therefore the Australian ruling class does its best to cultivate.⁴⁴

As we saw with O'Lincoln, the definition of imperialism that Bramble offers up is also simplistic; imperialism being the economic and military competition that occurs among advanced capitalist states as they seek to project their interests. The connection between imperialism and the use of military force, actual conflict – to explain why the First World War broke out was the primary motivation for Lenin's writing of *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* – is missing in this definition. Rather there is the less sharply focussed term military competition. The question of which of the advanced capitalist states is more able to project their interests and why that would be so (the relative economic, political and military strengths of particular states) is avoided. That is, the hierarchy of the state system and of imperialism is passed over.

Bramble's characterising of Australian imperialism is a bit more sophisticated than O'Lincoln's. There is the accurate identification of Australia as a developed capitalist nation with a relatively large economy, albeit one which has been and remains dependent on foreign capital. Bramble is correct in claiming that Australia does have a military presence in the region. How much of a presence is open to debate and some further comparison of defence budgets will put Australia's military presence in better perspective. It is worth noting that Australia generally does not project

⁴³ Bramble, 'Australia: A Mid-level Imperialist', 2015, pp. 65-6.

⁴⁴ Bramble, p. 66.

force in the region or for that matter beyond the region *without* the express backing of its major alliance partner, the US (or the United Nations). Which leads us to the third characteristic of Australian imperialism identified by Bramble, which is similar to O'Lincoln's claim, namely that the relationship with US imperialism enables Australia to project power and therefore the local ruling class cultivates this advantageous relationship. The criticism directed at O'Lincoln holds here as well. That is, the dependent or junior partner status - identified by Gavan McCormack as Client State status⁴⁵ - of Australia vis-à-vis its more powerful imperialist patron is portrayed solely in terms of the economic, political and military gains the Australian ruling-class is able to conjure as a result of the relationship. The negative effects of this unequal relationship on Australian politics (both domestically and in its foreign relations) and its economy and the classes within the country are not explored.

Pietsch's view of imperialism: more sophisticated but still problematic

Passing to Pietsch now, he defines imperialism in his PhD thesis on the Australian military intervention into East Timor in 1999, in a much more sophisticated fashion to O'Lincoln and Bramble. Consequently closer attention needs to be paid to what he has to say on the subject.

To support his argument that the 1999 Australian military intervention in East Timor was not driven by humanitarian impulses but was rather an imperialist action undertaken by the Australian state, Pietsch subjects various interpretations of the events of the time to critical scrutiny. In the first chapter of his thesis he surveys the strengths and weaknesses of the realist and liberal discourses on Australia's foreign relations before setting up his preferred theoretical viewpoint for examining the Australian state's engagement with the wider world. Pietsch argues that the Marxist concept of imperialism provides the best framework for analysing and explaining not only the Australian intervention in East Timor but also how the country fits in what he calls the global system of imperialism.⁴⁶ A summary of the essential elements of

Marxist imperialism theory as expounded by Hilferding, Luxemburg, Bukharin and Lenin culminating with more recent insights offered by Harvey, Alex Callinicos and Justin Rosenberg conclude in Pietsch offering the following from Harvey as the basis for a definition of imperialism:

[it is] a contradictory fusion of the 'politics of state and empire' (imperialism as a distinctively political project on the part of actors whose power is based in command of a territory and a capacity to mobilize its human and natural resources towards political, economic, and military ends) and the 'molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time' (imperialism as a diffuse political-economic process in space and time in which command over and use of capital takes primacy).⁴⁷

Not the same quote which underpins the definition of imperialism used in this essay but nonetheless it covers the same terrain. Pietsch then adds a flourish or two of his own:

... imperialism is a generalised system of international competition in which the state assumes a high degree of political autonomy. Military and diplomatic power become, if not entirely ends in themselves, then certainly detached from any specific economic goals. Global competition is seen by each nation state as a zero sum game in which any gain by a competitor, actual or potential, is seen as a loss to the home nation.⁴⁸

The zero-sum game of global competition accounts for why the US for instance involves itself directly in the internal affairs of countries such as Afghanistan. It is a question of maintaining prestige, influence and dominance in the face of competitor states. Such a competitive imperialist system, which to those bound up in it, seems unavoidable and beyond control is only the 'inescapable logic of international relations under developed capitalism.'⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See <http://apjff.org/2013/11/25/Gavan-McCormack/3961/article.html> and the section titled 'Australia – Pacific Deputy Sheriff' for more on subservience to US hegemonic power. Accessed October 2015.

⁴⁶ Sam Pietsch, 'Australia's military intervention in East Timor, 1999', PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 2009, p. 11. Available at: <https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/49347/2/02whole.pdf>. Accessed April 2015. See also: <https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/49347/3/01front.pdf> for the front matter, Abstract and Table of Contents.

⁴⁷ Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, 2003, p. 26 cited in Pietsch, 'Australia's military intervention', 2009, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Pietsch, 2009, p. 20.

⁴⁹ Pietsch, pp. 20-1.

The defining of imperialism by Pietsch is much more deftly handled compared with what we have seen with O'Lincoln and Bramble. However, one of the problems with Pietsch's theory comes with his positioning of Australia within the global imperialist system.

According to him, Australia is a middle-ranking imperialist power which, while not being in a position to attempt to dominate on a global scale like the great imperialist powers, nevertheless contra the left nationalists, Australia 'is in no way oppressed by the international system.'⁵⁰ In addition, the economy has developed such that despite its humble colonial origins and the continuing importance to it of foreign investment, capitalism in Australia cannot be said to be 'subordinate to its overseas rivals.' Australian capitalists have exported capital and commodities, to various overseas markets willingly. Capitalist ties have not been foisted on Australian capitalists; they have actively sought integration into global capitalism as part of their capital accumulation strategies.⁵¹

The primary destination for Australian capital and commodity exports are the developed or rapidly developing industrial countries, remote from this country. It is through diplomatic means that Australia has been able to secure these markets, not through the 'combination of diplomatic, economic, political and military intervention which is characteristic of imperialism.'⁵² In Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific the Australian state acts more robustly in pursuit of its economic and strategic interests; its economic and military strengths are pressed into service in the immediate region, behaviour typical of an imperial power.⁵³

Pietsch suggests that in the region there is only a modest level of Australian investments and commercial activities but the leading concern for Australian imperialism is security in the region. Any incursion into the region by

a major power is registered as a potential threat to the nation's territorial security, 'or to trade routes vital to Australia's economy.'⁵⁴ Left unsaid here is any mention of any incursion into the region by the now dominant imperialist power, the US and the former dominant power, Great Britain. Incursions into the region by these great powers were and are most welcome and have always been encouraged by the Australian ruling class. This points to an awkward problem for Pietsch's argument, namely how to account for Australia's attachment to 'great and powerful friends'.

Like O'Lincoln and Bramble, Pietsch acknowledges said attachment but the attachment to first Great Britain and then the US did not come about 'from a lack of national independence, but rather from a desire to further Australia's own interests.'⁵⁵ There is a bit of back-peddalling with Pietsch having to skirt around the colonial relationship between Australia and Great Britain by claiming that the leaderships of the settlements had 'developed a sense of shared interests' well in advance of national unification and 'decades before the Commonwealth ... took over responsibility for foreign affairs ... in 1942.'⁵⁶ Despite this difficulty, Pietsch is able to cap this section off with the contention that Australia was not only a victim of foreign dominance but also was 'an active participant in Britain's wider imperial project, becoming a colonial power in its own right.'⁵⁷

In support of this contention, the attempts made by various colonial State governments to force the hand of the Mother country in annexing places like Fiji during the 19th century are detailed. Here Pietsch draws on the work of O'Lincoln discussed above. There is no doubt that the enthusiasm of various colonial State governments for annexations of Pacific islands in the 19th and early 20th centuries indicate a colonialist predisposition. The profit-seeking ventures of various Australian based corporations such as Burns-Philp with their investments in the South

⁵⁰ Pietsch, pp. 21-2. Left nationalism is a particular bugbear for all three writers under review here. For example, any argument that highlights Australian dependence on British capital and how it arguably distorted Australian development and the deleterious impact on Australia of its relationship with the US is deemed to be left nationalist. According to Bramble arguments from the left nationalist perspective cannot account for Australia's current level of wealth and its influence in the world, if it indeed had been subject to imperialist depredation for two centuries. Bramble attributes the rise of left nationalist viewpoints in the 1960s through to the 1980s to the influence of the CPA and the 'Maoists' whose impact was felt most in radical student circles and certain trade unions in the 1970s. See Bramble, pp. 67-8.

⁵¹ Pietsch, p. 22.

⁵² Pietsch, p. 23.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Pietsch, p. 26.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Pacific and the Melbourne headquartered Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) meant they were keen to have the political backing and stability that came in the wake of *British* possession. The exploitative practice of the importing of Islanders to work in agriculture in Queensland and the attempted annexation of Southeast New Guinea in 1883 by the Queensland government are tendered as further evidence of colonialism. It is also true that Australia was the colonial overlord of PNG after World War One until the granting of formal independence in 1975.⁵⁸ There is thus some truth in what Pietsch and also O'Lincoln contend about Australia being an active participant in Britain's wider imperial project and becoming a colonial power too.

What tends to undercut Pietsch's and O'Lincoln's contention about the history of Australian imperialism and colonialism in the region is that colonial State governments and later the Australian state, in the main, wanted the British to do the annexing. The attempt by Queensland in 1883 to annexe Southeast New Guinea was squashed by the British, with New Guinea eventually being annexed fully in 1888 by the U.K. Australian-based agitation over the possession of Fiji, while seen as a nuisance by the British, did not ultimately deter them as Fiji was annexed by Britain in 1874.⁵⁹ Clearly particular Australian class interests sought to gain advantage from the colonial expansion in the Southwest Pacific (it would be odd if they did not), but it was 'Britain's wider imperial project' rather than Australia's.

It is noteworthy that while British interests in the region did not entirely coincide with the colonists' interests, there was no attempt at a wholehearted adoption by the Australian colonists of their own imperialist agenda. Instead, as O'Lincoln points out, additional leverage was sought to influence affairs within the Empire: 'One strategy was to join British military forays in other parts of the globe, in the hope that this would be reciprocated with support in the Asia-Pacific.'⁶⁰ Rather than becoming a fully-fledged imperialist power in its own right the Australian ruling class sought to curry favour with the more powerful state. This type of 'insurance policy' approach crops up again in the 1950s with the signing of

the ANZUS Treaty.

The argument that Australia is caught in a relationship of dependency which dates back to its inception as a British colony and continues to the present is disputed by Pietsch. He also mounts an argument against those seeking a more independent foreign policy. However, in doing so, he gets himself in some difficulty. In discussing the relationship between Australia and the US, he acknowledges the disparity in economic, diplomatic and military resources that the two countries possess. As a consequence, Australia sometimes 'accepts a subordinate position' in the alliance.⁶¹

This is the situation, for example, in the Middle East, where Australian policy is almost total support for the US position, where Australia has little capacity and makes little effort to influence that policy, and where Australian support tends to be largely symbolic, consisting of diplomatic backing and minor contributions to US military undertakings. Likewise, Australia's role within the United States' strategic nuclear weapons and intelligence systems could be said to be 'subordinate'. Australia accepts the benefits and risks of being a part of the network of US strategic intelligence and communications bases, but has little control over how these systems are developed or used.⁶²

As Pietsch points out, the subordination evident here poses a serious challenge to his counter-arguments concerning Australian dependency and the lack of an independent foreign policy. It also challenges his, Bramble's and O'Lincoln's arguments that Australia is an independent imperialist country pursuing its own imperialist interests. How does he deal with the unequal relationship between Australia and the US, which is the 'world's pre-eminent imperial power' which pursues and defends its own interests?⁶³ Pietsch:

Two points can be made. First, while at times Australian foreign policy has certainly been constrained by the need to maintain the alliance, with Australia's exact freedom of maneuver differing from issue to issue.

⁵⁸ O'Lincoln, p. 179 and Pietsch, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ O'Lincoln, p. 179.

⁶¹ Pietsch, p. 27.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Pietsch, p. 28.

But such constraints have been willing [sic] accepted, rather than arising from United States pressure. ... This situation can be contrasted to countries which have been given no choice whether or not they are drawn into the US imperial orbit, as with most Latin American nations, or in the case of South Korea after World War Two.

Second, there are moments of the alliance in which Australia plays an equal or even leading role. This occurs in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific where Australia has direct strategic and economic interests and far greater ability to defend them, and would need to do so regardless of the existence of the US alliance. From time to time Australia pursues a policy at odds to the United States in these regions. [Interestingly, there are no examples furnished to back this claim] Most of the time, however, Australian and US interests in these regions broadly coincide, in that both want to maintain the status quo of regional power relations and prevent penetration by rival powers. In the South Pacific the US frequently looks to Australia to play the lead role in defending this joint interest. This however is a question of mutual convenience, not subordination.⁶⁴

There are a number of concerns with these two points but the most obvious can be laid out briefly. The first proposition that because the Australian ruling class is not coerced into maintaining the alliance, subordination is therefore ruled out or somehow mitigated is flawed. Subordination does not have to be coerced but can be accepted more or less willingly, which is what less powerful states often do in the face of the power possessed by hegemonic states like the US.⁶⁵ The second proposition about Australian and US joint interests in the region giving rise to Australia sometimes playing an equal or leading role plays up the mutual convenience aspect while minimising Australian ruling class subordination.

Also, the *status quo* of regional power relations is a *status quo* predicated on American political, economic and military might primarily, not Australian. Pietsch would have done well to ask the question: who benefits the most out of the current geopolitical and geo-economic situation? What Pietsch has done here, and what Bramble and O'Lincoln also do, is overemphasise the agency that the Australian state has in the states system and in the relationship that it has with the US. The hierarchy of the system with the US at the apex is elided or downplayed so that the Australian state can be elevated to the level of a middle-ranking imperialist power.

The Australian intervention in East Timor as case study of imperialism

Pietsch's argument that Australia is a middle-ranking power in the world imperialist system is supported in his PhD thesis, largely, by his analysis of the Howard Government's decision to send Australian troops in to East Timor in the wake of the independence referendum of August 1999. The characterisation of the insertion of Australian troops under the banner of INTERFET (the International Force for East Timor, led by the Australian military and backed by UN resolutions) into the chaos of post referendum East Timor as imperialism hinges on Pietsch's curious and selective reading of events. Central to Pietsch's view of these events is that Howard's government opportunistically took advantage of the situation to secure Australian interests in the region by dint of armed intervention. It will be seen however that Pietsch's position on the 1999 East Timor intervention is questionable.

In particular, Pietsch disputes the claim made by Clinton Fernandes that the Howard Government was pressured into sending Australian military personnel into East Timor in large part by the popular support for the intervention that rapidly materialised in September 1999. Fernandes

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ One only has to think about the employer – employee relationship, a relationship, which is fundamental in capitalist social relations, to understand that coercion is not a prerequisite of subordination. People are not compelled by figures in authority to enter into the employer – employee relationship; yet it is clear who has the most power in the relationship and who has the subordinate status.

⁶⁶ Clinton Fernandes, *Reluctant Saviour Australia, Indonesia, and the Independence of East Timor*, Scribe Publications, Carlton North, 2004, p. 3. Fernandes argues that the government under Howard was very keen for East Timor to remain a part of Indonesia, as an autonomous province perhaps. However, the violence in the lead up to the independence referendum and after caused such a 'tidal wave' of Australian popular outrage that the government reversed its hindering of the push for independence and became proponents for independence and intervention, due to worries about electoral backlash. See Fernandes, p. 94. Pietsch suggests that rather than a sudden switch forced by humanitarian concerns and/or public pressure, the decision to get involved was prompted by the opportunity presented by Indonesian disengagement in East Timor. Australia could now directly influence the political and economic landscape of the fledgling country, without having to rely on Indonesia. According to Pietsch, the pursuit of securing strategic interests in the region has long been a part of Australian imperialism. See Pietsch, p. 262.

also claims that the decision to send in the intervention forces was a dramatic switch in Australian policy towards East Timor and can only be ascribed to the rise in popular pressure for intervention. Pietsch argues that it was not a dramatic switch but rather fits into the pattern of Australian imperialism.⁶⁶

Pietsch suggests that, by September 1999, President Habibie's Indonesian government could no longer guarantee stability in East Timor, heightening Australia's concern for security and stability in the region. Of interest in Pietsch's analysis of the unfolding of the events in East Timor is his claim that the world system of imperialism is a 'system of generalised interstate conflict' which 'produces a logic of strategic competition', not reducible to 'immediate economic interests.'⁶⁷ Australia is imperialist because strategic concerns have 'always dominated Australian policy' not only in relation to the Indonesian archipelago, but also the wider region. There is the fear in ruling class circles that instability could be used by major powers to infiltrate themselves into the region threatening Australia's security by 'cut[ting] off vital lines of trade and communication.'⁶⁸ Australia's decision to intervene in East Timor, to 'secure Australia's longstanding strategic interests in the territory' was therefore an imperialist act, one of many that has occurred over the years since European settlement.⁶⁹

Of note here is Pietsch's blurring of his definition of imperialism. This fudging is evident in his claim that one of the key features of Australian imperialism is its focus on regional security. Compare this with his sophisticated definitional work shown above. Moreover, if Australia is seen as an imperialist power due to its strategic interests in the region, then the same could be said about Indonesia. It too has intervened militarily in its immediate neighbourhood to devastating effect in East Timor, Aceh and West Papua (Irian Jaya) to shore up its strategic interests and its security. By these lights (strategic interests/regional security) Indonesia is an imperialist nation too and it could be argued much more

the 'neighbour from hell' than Australia.

In fairness to Pietsch, there was an armed intervention by Australian forces into a neighbouring territory, often one of the hallmarks of imperialism. It is apposite to return to the developments in East Timor that led to the military intervention to show why Pietsch's construing of the intervention as imperialism is an over-reach.

Popular protests in Indonesia that ultimately led to the demise of Suharto's regime in May 1998 had dramatic flow on effects in East Timor. Vice-President Habibie was elevated to the Presidency in the same month and people in East Timor and their supporters across the globe sensed that the time was ripe for change. Habibie, despite ruling out a referendum on the status of East Timor in his first interview as President, quickly came under pressure to resolve the situation. He was persuaded to do something about East Timor because of the ongoing unrest there allied with the heightened international interest in post-Suharto Indonesia. It was also an opportunity for him to firmly establish his own democratic credentials.⁷⁰

Compounding problems for the new Indonesian government was the collapse of the economy brought about by the Asian Financial crisis. The crisis, which started in 1997, had its greatest impact in Indonesia during 1998. The combination of economic, political and social factors contributed to Habibie and other members of his government re-thinking East Timor's position within Indonesia. In mid-January of 1999, Habibie had sent to his policy adviser a note asking why should Indonesia 'remain a captive of East Timor' and 'why don't we just let them go if they no longer want to stay with us?'⁷¹ The decision to disengage from East Timor was made quickly, catching the Australian government by surprise and annoying elements of the Indonesian military. Howard and Downer over the course of 1998 and into 1999 had sought ways to shore up Indonesian involvement in East Timor, in the process, playing down Indonesian-backed militia violence.⁷²

⁶⁷ Pietsch, p. 262.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Fernandes, p. 34. The following synopsis of the events leading up to the INTERFET intervention in East Timor is based on Fernandes's *Reluctant Saviour*. The focus on particular prominent political figures does not detract from the other actors and factors (the role of collectives such as various East Timor activist groups, Trade Unions and bodies such as the U.N. for example) that contributed to the ultimate victory of the East Timorese people in their struggle for independence. Space does not permit a more detailed overview, hence the focus on certain key players and governments.

⁷¹ Fernandes, p. 41.

⁷² Fernandes, pp. 35, 47-85.

Caught out by Habibie's decision to allow a referendum on independence and aware of the TNI's backing of ongoing violence in East Timor, the Australian government at first tried to manage the situation diplomatically. Fernandes details the lengths that Howard, Downer and certain Australian officials went to to support the Indonesian government and to gloss over mass killings in the months before the August referendum.⁷³ The reluctance of the Australian government to confront the Indonesian government about the TNI-backed violence and its hampering of efforts to implement an international peacekeeping force is highlighted in the 22 February 1999 meeting between Ashton Calvert, the secretary of DFAT and Stanley Roth the US assistant-secretary of state in Washington. At this meeting between high-ranking officials, Roth expressed the opinion that 'a full-scale peacekeeping operation would be an unavoidable aspect of the transition [to East Timor's independence]. Without it, East Timor was likely to collapse...'⁷⁴ Calvert demurred, insisting on the Australian government's position that the East Timorese 'factions' had to sort out their problems without relying on UN peacekeepers. Roth thought the position taken by the Australians was 'defeatist' and he

stressed the importance of building an international coalition to persuade the UN and the US Congress that peacekeeping simply had to be done. His efforts were rebuffed by Calvert, who was clearly determined to prevent an international peacekeeping force. When the transcript of the Calvert-Roth meeting was leaked to the media some months later, the [Australian] government realised it had been caught red-handed.⁷⁵

Bear in mind that the meeting between Calvert and Roth was six months or so before the referendum and US officials were aware of the chaotic state of East Timor largely brought about by the violence being perpetrated by TNI-backed militia.

Fernandes makes a compelling argument about the reluctance of the Australian government first to press Habibie's government to rein in the military terror campaign, and secondly to back U.N. peacekeeping efforts.⁷⁶ Presumably Pietsch chose not to challenge this aspect of Fernandes argument, because it tends to detract from his proposition that Australia is an imperialist power in its own right. If Australia is a mid-level imperialist power as asserted by Pietsch (and Bramble), then the reluctance demonstrated here by the Australian government to confront Indonesia and its direct role in the atrocities in East Timor should cause some second thoughts as to the validity of their claim. One might think that a mid-level imperialist country would have indulged in some diplomatic pressure or some sabre-rattling at the least, in an effort to 'impose its will on the region'.

Events in East Timor forced the hands of Howard, Downer and their officials. Despite their best efforts to avoid getting involved in the protection of the East Timorese people and confronting the perpetrators of the violence, the Australian government felt obliged to act not only due to the killing and maiming but also to Indonesian chicanery. Once the results of the 30 August plebiscite became known (78.5% of the registered East Timorese voters opted for independence from Indonesia) Indonesian authorities implemented contingency plans to nullify the result. Among other efforts, 'many other people [aside that is from pro-integrationist Timorese, Indonesian residents in East Timor and certain officials, who also left East Timor in the wake of the referendum] were driven from their homes across the central and western parts of East Timor, and put on land and sea transport to West Timor and other parts of Indonesia.'⁷⁷ In effect the Indonesian authorities tried to show that the East Timorese were voting with their feet; the ballot had been rigged and people were fleeing as a result. In conjunction with this forced evacuation, the campaign of violence

⁷³ Fernandes, pp. 50-8. TNI stands for Tentara Nasional Indonesia or Indonesian Armed Services.

⁷⁴ Fernandes, p. 58.

⁷⁵ Fernandes, p. 59.

⁷⁶ Fernandes cites another example of ongoing US concern about East Timor with US military officials approaching high-level Australian Defence personnel in an effort to establish a peacekeeping force. In June 1999, the Hawaii-based US Pacific Command broached the possibility of attaching Australian officers to a potential US-led peacekeeping force. An approach was made to Air Vice Marshal Treloar, who referred the request to senior levels in the Australian government. The request was turned down. Fernandes, p. 67 However, as Joseph Nevins in his *A Not-So-Distant Horror Mass Violence in East Timor* points out, Jakarta was getting mixed messages from Washington about controlling TNI violence in East Timor. The US too was reluctant to apply high-level pressure on the Indonesians to stop the violence until compelled by events to do so in early September. See J. Nevins, *A Not-So-Distant Horror Mass Violence in East Timor*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2005, pp. 122-3.

⁷⁷ Fernandes, p. 74.

and intimidation continued. In the first few days after the referendum 'pro-Indonesian forces had killed at least four local U.N. staff members and three civilians, in addition to burning houses throughout the territory, attacking the UNAMET compound, driving most journalists out of the country, and forcing international observers to evacuate from a majority of the areas outside Dili.'⁷⁸

Clear to all was the scale of the violence dished out by the TNI-supported militias in the months before the referendum and its escalation after the results became known. In addition, the invasion and occupation of East Timor in 1975 by Indonesia was contrary to international law, denying the East Timorese their right to self-determination. Over the course of that occupation, a number of atrocities had been committed.⁷⁹ Consequently, international public support for the East Timorese independence struggle had grown because of the just nature of East Timorese resistance to the brutality of the Indonesian occupation. The intransigence of the Indonesian authorities in the face of the overwhelming vote for independence - the violence and the attempt to create a no-go zone in East Timor (forced evacuations; the targeting of U.N. officials; the driving out of journalists) despite U.N. resolutions and a commitment given by the Indonesian government that they would maintain peace and security in East Timor in the run-up to the referendum⁸⁰ - outraged people in Australia, the US and Portugal among other countries.

The outrage sparked protests which quickly grew in size, with demonstrations occurring in Australia, the US and elsewhere. By early September 1999 it had become politically untenable in both Washington and Canberra to maintain the charade that it was just rogue elements in the TNI that were behind the violence in East Timor.

The decision was finally made at the highest levels of the US state that the Indonesian government had to stop the violence and allow for a U.N. peacekeeping force to enter East Timor. The decision was conveyed to Jakarta through various channels. On September 8th, the commander-in-chief of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Dennis Blair met with General Wiranto (commander of the TNI) and conveyed the blunt message that the US would suspend its military ties with Indonesia if the violence did not stop.⁸¹ The message was sent directly to the Indonesian military and was followed up with other ultimatums in the ensuing days. In the U.N. Security Council, during the course of an emergency debate on 12 September on the situation in East Timor, US envoy Richard Holbrooke made it clear that Indonesia faced the point of no return 'if it did not accept an international peacekeeping force.'⁸² The message was heard in Indonesia; that same day President Habibie and General Wiranto appeared together before international media with Habibie announcing that the Indonesian government had agreed to the presence of peacekeeping forces in East Timor.⁸³

What is evident from the above is that the situation was complex and volatile, involving a number of states and the U.N. The intervention by the US was decisive in getting the Indonesian government to allow a U.N. peacekeeping force into East Timor. What is also obvious from Fernandes's and Nevins's accounts is the genuine reluctance of the Australian and the US governments to take active steps to intervene into what they considered was a matter of Indonesian internal affairs. Pointed messages from high-level US officials to Indonesian counterparts eventuated only when it was politically unsustainable to continue the 'hands-off' approach.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Nevins, *A Not-So-Distant Horror*, 2005, p. 123. UNAMET being the United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor which was set up as a result of a UN Security Council resolution. It was to undertake the task of conducting a plebiscite on whether East Timor was to become a special autonomous region in the Republic of Indonesia or opt for independence and exit from the Republic. UNAMET started in June 1999 and was wound up on 30 September 1999.

⁷⁹ One of the atrocities attracted worldwide attention due to footage shot by a Western journalist. The Santa Cruz massacre occurred on 12 November 1991, when Indonesian troops fired on a procession/demonstration in the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, killing over 250 people. See Nevins, pp. 32-3. It has been estimated that over 200,000 East Timorese lost their lives as a result of the invasion and the 24-year Indonesian occupation. See Nevins, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁰ Nevins, pp. 86-7. The 5 May Agreement was signed at the U.N. headquarters in New York. The Indonesian government agreed to maintain peace and security so that that the 'popular consultation' could be carried out in a fair and peaceful way free from intimidation and violence.

⁸¹ Fernandes, p. 101.

⁸² Fernandes, p. 103.

⁸³ Fernandes, pp. 103-4.

⁸⁴ The 'political' in this instance was not just the domestic political situations in Australia and the US, but also the political conditions in Indonesia, East Timor and Portugal (as former colonial ruler of East Timor) as well as the U.N. Taken as a whole, domestic and international political conditions forced the key players' hands; something had to be done to stop the violence and uphold East Timor's sovereignty.

With the Indonesian government bowing to US pressure to allow a peacekeeping force into East Timor, a scramble occurred within Howard's government. On the back foot due to the swiftly unfolding chain of events, the government still clung to the belief that it was up to the US to make the running on the peacekeeping mission. Howard called on the Clinton administration to do more and for the US to increase its troop commitments to the peacekeeping force, while also maintaining their (US) military ties with Indonesia.⁸⁵ Howard's public pitch for more US troops and for more support in general from US official circles for the peacekeeping effort was rebuffed by President Clinton. The two met at the APEC conference in Auckland and Clinton made it clear to Howard that the US was already committed in Kosovo and the Australians would have to make the running in East Timor. A duly chastised Howard made the statement that what limited support the US government had offered was sufficient and gratefully accepted.⁸⁶

Australian Defence Force (ADF) troops were deployed to East Timor with a mandate from the U.N. Security Council courtesy of a UNSC resolution dated 15 September 1999 (Resolution 1264) which established INTERFET. Although the intervention was under the auspices of the U.N., the majority of the peacekeeping force came from the ADF. The intervention was not a considered, calculated undertaking by the Australian government; Fernandes outlines the rushed planning to feed, deploy and provide materiel for the peacekeeping force.⁸⁷ Also noteworthy were the steps taken to avoid any military confrontation between the INTERFET peacekeeping forces and Indonesian troops.⁸⁸

From the foregoing overview of the events leading up to the U.N.-backed intervention it is possible draw some conclusions. Apparent is not only the reluctance of the

US and Australian governments to get involved in East Timor, but also, when decisions were made to intervene, it was the say-so of the US which was decisive. Australian ruling-class concern for security and stability in the region did inform the decisions taken by the Howard Government initially to approach President Clinton in the hope that the US would lead an intervention with their troops on the ground. When this was rebuffed, Howard hurriedly took up the running to secure order in East Timor. However, context is important here. The intervention was authorised under a Security Council resolution and was thus 'legal' from an international law viewpoint. Thus, concerns for security and stability in East Timor were not just Australian concerns; they were shared by a number of states in the 'international community'. Contrast this with the alarms about Saddam Hussein and WMD four or so years later. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not have the backing of a U.N. Security Council resolution. There was no consensus among the 'international community' that Saddam's regime posed such a threat to global security that it necessitated the employment of armed force. The invasion of Iraq was an act of imperialism, one that Australia participated in as part of the so-called 'coalition of the willing'.

Importantly, the intervention into *Timor Leste* was not authorised as a permanent state of affairs; it was to help the East Timorese end the chaos and violence that had been visited upon them by the Indonesian military and militia forces. Moreover, *the intervention supported the right of the East Timorese people to self-determination*. Pietsch tends to downplay these contextual aspects in order to make an argument that the Australian intervention was an imperialist act due to the Australian ruling-class imposing security on a near neighbour at the point of a bayonet, so to speak. By characterising the INTERFET operation as an act of imperialism Pietsch stretches things too far

⁸⁵ Fernandes, p. 102.

⁸⁶ Fernandes, p. 103. Howard met Clinton in Auckland at the APEC Leader's summit on 12 September 1999. Howard was taken aback by the rebuff from Clinton. Howard felt that Australia's commitment to American military adventures in the past merited more than what Clinton and his government were offering. The ANZUS alliance was used by Howard and Downer as leverage to try and get more commitment from the US to limited effect. For more on this see L. Cox and B. O'Connor, 'Australia, the US, and the Vietnam and Iraq Wars: "Hound Dog, not Lapdog"' in *Australian Journal of Political Science* Vol 47, 2, 2012, p. 181. Cox and O'Connor argue that the difficulty Howard and Downer had with the Clinton administration over East Timor partially explains their compulsion to forge closer ties with the next US president and his administration. Closer ties were forged between Howard and Bush especially after September 11, 2001. Alison Broinowski argues that Howard's continued eagerness to show his support for the alliance with the US was a central element in Australia's involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003; see A. Broinowski, *Howard's War*, Scribe Publications, Carlton North, 2003, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Fernandes, pp. 104-111. Fernandes gives a brief description of the problems associated with organizing the food for the peacekeeping force and other issues, brought about by the mad scramble to actually muster the troops for a peacekeeping mission.

⁸⁸ Pietsch, p. 279 and Fernandes, p. 114 where he suggests that the Indonesian military avoided conflict because international isolation would have ensued.

undermining the meaning of the term. The Australian intervention in East Timor is not a good case study of Australian imperialism. Rather it is another example of the Australian ruling-class being ever mindful of its junior status in the imperialist pecking order, looking to its powerful friend the United States to take the initiative in the maintenance of 'order and stability' in the region and globally. Australia played the role of "deputy-Sheriff" in this instance.

V. Too simplistic: Bramble, O'Lincoln and Pietsch on Australia as an imperialist country in its own right

Bramble's, O'Lincoln's and Pietsch's arguments about Australia being a mid-level or middle ranking imperialist power rely on a number of claims and interpretations which have been shown to be contestable and selective. What has also been demonstrated for all three writers is that the definitions of imperialism that they rely on are either too broad or simplistic or else they lose sight of key constitutive elements of contemporary imperialism. Two of the key constitutive elements passed over by the three, namely *hierarchy* and *alliances* form part of what Harvey calls the territorial logic of power. The *hierarchy* of imperialist states with the US at the top of the hierarchy and Australia's *alliance* with the US whilst acknowledged by all three do not get the critical attention that these constitutive elements of imperialism deserve (for hierarchy and alliances see the quote from Sutcliffe on p. 7 above). They pass over the importance of the ANZUS Treaty and other arrangements such as the intelligence sharing agreement called UK-USA (also known as 'Five Eyes' so called because of the five countries involved in the agreement viz, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the US) that fundamentally shape Australian foreign policy and foreign relations. While acknowledging the relationship that the Australian ruling

class has with the sole Superpower, Bramble, O'Lincoln and Pietsch sidestep any critical analysis of that relationship preferring to assert that Australia is not adversely affected but rather benefits from the relationship. For them there is no downside; Australia benefits by being able to project power in the region and beyond by riding on the coat tails of US power. According to our three authors Australia gets this benefit at no cost. Such a one-sided and simplistic view of an unequal relationship enables the authors to skirt thorny issues such as Pine Gap and other US facilities in Australia and the deeper integration of Australia in the Obama Government's 'Pivot to Asia' among other things. The clear intention of the 'Pivot to Asia' being the containment of China, with Australia and Japan acting as junior partners in US military strategy.⁸⁹

In justice to all three writers, the historical record does show a certain willingness for the Australian ruling class to involve itself in the affairs of less powerful nations in the region.⁹⁰ However, they overstate the Australian ruling class's propensity to actively intervene in the region and also they overstate the capacity of the Australian state to do so. As Roger Bell noted in relation to the Howard Government's closer ties to the US in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, in East and South East Asia 'US leadership or identification with American policy was widely understood as undermining Australia's pursuit of its separate regional interests.'⁹¹ Riding on the coat tails of the US does not necessarily mean that Australia gets a free pass to do what it likes in the region.

Regarding the claim that Australia is a mid-level imperialist, Bramble bases this assertion in part on a very selective choice of figures related to Australian military spending. Citing figures from SIPRI (with, interestingly, no date), Bramble alleges that Australia spends more than \$1,000 per head, 'which is higher than most other

⁸⁹ Vince Scappatura, 'The US "Pivot to Asia", The China Spectre and the Australian – American Alliance' *The Asia Pacific Journal Japan Focus*, Vol 12, Issue 36, No. 3, Sept. 6, 2014, available online at <http://apjif.org/2014/12/36/Vince-Scappatura/4178/article.html> accessed October 2016.

⁹⁰ As mentioned above, O'Lincoln does provide an overview of the history of Australian intervention in the region (particularly the South West Pacific) from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. For both O'Lincoln and Pietsch, the 1999 East Timor intervention emboldened the Howard Government such that there was direct intervention in the Solomons in 2003, involvement in the internal affairs of PNG in 2003/4, Nauru in 2004, Vanuatu in 2004, Tonga in 2006 and East Timor again in 2006 with the despatch of various military, police and civilian administrative personnel according to the perceived requirements of each situation. See O'Lincoln pp. 187-190, where, in the course of discussing these interventions he notes the US's explicit recognition of Australia's role in the region as the 'local police'. See also Pietsch, pp. 301-342. Pietsch inadvertently points out the limits of the willingness and capacity of the Australian state to intervene in the region by noting that Fiji, which had experienced two coups, had a relatively strong army, which completely deterred any Australian military intervention (p.312). That the Howard administration did take a more active interventionist role in the region during the 2000s is not in dispute. What can be disputed is whether these interventions establish Australia as a mid-level imperialist power or even as Pietsch terms it, a regional hegemon.

⁹¹ Roger Bell, 'Extreme Allies: Australia and the USA' in James Cotton & John Ravenhill (eds.) *Trading on Alliance Security Australia in World Affairs 2001-2005*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2007, p. 24.

comparable countries, including Britain and France.⁹² Comparing Australia with an actual imperialist power such as France helps to put things in perspective. As seen above, (p.12) France in 2014 spent 53.1 billion \$US making it the sixth highest military spender. The U.K. was the fifth highest spender with an outlay of \$US 61.8 billion. Australia ranked 14th spending \$US 22.5 billion.⁹³ It is disingenuous of Bramble to come up with a per capita expenditure figure in order to make out that Australia stands comparison to the military expenditures of the imperialist powers France and Britain.

In the latter half of the twentieth century and up to the present, the Australian ruling-class has preferred and prefers to act within the international political, economic and security parameters set by the US. Its alliance and other ties with the major imperialist power necessarily deeply involves Australia, politically, economically and militarily in the ongoing US quest to maintain its position at the top of the imperialist pecking order; this has led to Australia being involved in acts of imperialist aggression (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria). Such ties always come at a cost and this should not be blithely dismissed, passed over or downplayed in order to make the claim that Australia is a mid level imperialist nation in its own right. Rather than being a mid-level or middle ranking imperialist nation it will be argued in the next section that Australia is a *sub-imperialist* nation.

VI. The hierarchy of imperialist powers: Australia as a sub-imperialist power

Having established that the proposition that Australia is an imperialist power is problematic due to selective and unsophisticated analysis, it remains to work out how best to situate Australia in the hierarchy of imperialist states. The work of Ruy Mauro Marini is pertinent here. His analysis of Brazil's economic and political standing in the

world in the 1960s and 1970s, led him to posit a distinct category in the hierarchy of imperialist powers, namely sub-imperialism. According to Marini, Brazil could be identified as a sub-imperialist power because during the mid-1960s when Brazil was under military dictatorship, the dictators chose to position the country as:

the center from which imperialist expansion will radiate ... It is not a question of passively accepting North American power (although the actual correlation of forces often leads to that result), but rather of collaborating actively with imperialist expansion, assuming in this expansion the position of a key nation.⁹⁴

Melanie Samson succinctly summarises a crucial element of Marini's thinking: for Marini Brazil did not 'automatically pursue the interests of American imperialism. Rather than being a simple "proxy" for the US, the Brazilian state carved out its own role on the continent based on class struggles and class compromises within Brazil (which ... [was] imbricated with US imperialism) ...'⁹⁵ Furthermore,

a sub-imperial state is neither simply a 'conduit'... nor a 'proxy' ... for American imperialism. The significance of Marini's contribution thus lies in his focus on the dynamic interplay between the influence of American foreign policy, the role of American multinationals within the Brazilian social formation, class struggle within Brazil, the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, and a state rooted in capitalist social relations which retains some autonomy.⁹⁶

The concept of sub-imperialism, which was closely associated with Dependency Theory,⁹⁷ was influential for a time. Interest in it has revived. The South African based

⁹² Bramble, pp. 74-5. In the next sentence Bramble undermines the point he was making about how Australian military spending and hence its power is quite substantial by suggesting that Australia 'does not have to pay for armed forces of a scale that would be required to support its ambitions if it were forced to fend for itself.' (p.75) There are a number of contortions in Bramble's essay as well as some curious examples used (such as the figures from SIPRI) to support his argument. So intent on discrediting left nationalism and counterposing it with what he calls left internationalism, Bramble cannot settle on whether Australia is a junior partner of US imperialist control of the Asia-Pacific region (p.73) or an imperialist power in its own right (pp. 71-6) or perhaps both.

⁹³ *The Military Balance* 2015, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2015, p.21.

⁹⁴ Ruy Mauro Marini, 'Brazilian "interdependence" and imperialist integration', *Monthly Review*, 17 (7), 1965, pp. 21-2, cited in Melanie Samson, '(Sub)imperial South Africa? Reframing the Debate', *Review of African Political Economy*, 36 (119), 2009, p. 98. Samson's article is a critical analysis of the debate between two South African scholars about whether South Africa is an imperialist country (Ishmael Lesufi) or is a sub-imperialist one (Patrick Bond). She points out the deficiencies in the arguments of both Lesufi and Bond, advocating a modified version of the sub-imperialist hypothesis.

⁹⁵ Samson, 2009, p. 98.

⁹⁶ Samson, pp. 98-9

⁹⁷ For an overview of Dependency Theory see: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/depend.htm>

Marxist scholar Patrick Bond has found it useful in his theorising of the role of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in contemporary imperialism. In particular he argues that South Africa is a prime example of a sub-imperialist country. He acknowledges Marini's pioneering work on the subject, though preferring in a recent chapter Fred Halliday's definition of sub-imperialism which is '(a) a continuing if partial strategic subordination to US imperialism on the one hand, and (b) an autonomous regional role on the other.'⁹⁸ He mentions that Australia and Canada have slightly different relationships with imperialism (presumably he means US imperialism) which he considers places them in a 'secondary imperialist role' a term drawn from the work of Canadian writers Greg Albo and Jerome Klassen on Canadian involvement in Afghanistan. However, as Bond suggests, sub-imperialism has also had other euphemisms such as semi-periphery and 'the semantic differences are not important.'⁹⁹ Whilst there are important differences between South Africa and Australia, the similarities in their relationships with US imperialism and their roles in their respective regions are such that the category of sub-imperialist fits them both.

Returning to the hierarchical nature of imperialist states, Tobias ten Brink proposes that in order to understand the varying capacities of capitalist states it is useful to

distinguish between different types using the strong states as examples: first, globally predominant or even hegemonic states; second, states in leading positions at the macro-regional level that have a global impact as well; third, leading states at the macro-regional level with less impact internationally; and fourth, strong states with a limited influence. Insofar as these latter states pursue imperialist policies, they can be designated as sub-imperialist powers.¹⁰⁰

This more nuanced approach to the differing capacities that capitalist states have in the international system of states (or what is the same thing the imperialist state system) does two things. First, it not only further helps to position Australia in the imperialist hierarchy as a sub-imperialist

power but second it points up the deficiencies of the simplistic claim that Australia is a mid-level imperialist power. On the basis of ten Brink's typology of strong capitalist states and the analysis of various imperialist states such as the US, Britain France and Russia and others conducted above, it is possible to provisionally place some of the states in the four levels. At the first level sits the US as the global hegemon. At the second level nations such as France, the U.K. and other EU states such as Germany as well as China and Russia could be situated here, or, arguably, some of these could be placed at the third level. The fourth level of strong states with limited influence that may pursue imperialist policies – the sub-imperialist states – quite clearly would include Australia, South Africa and Brazil for example. An exercise such as this, though merely provisional and sketchy, helps our understanding of contemporary imperialism. It enables us to understand that its hierarchical nature is more complex than a simple bifurcation into imperialist or non-imperialist states, or high, mid or low-level imperialist states would ever allow.

What the determining of Australia's sub-imperialist status means for revolutionary theory and practice will be outlined in the following concluding section.

VII. Conclusion. Australia as sub-imperialist: what is to be done?

We know from the foregoing what contemporary imperialism is and what Australia's position is in the hierarchy of imperialist nations; it is a sub-imperialist power, intimately tied in with the imperial project of the US. It joins other states, such as the U.K. and France for example (which are imperialist powers in their own right, exercising some degree of autonomy) in the US-led bloc of imperialist states and institutions (NATO being an example of the latter). Australia has nowhere near the capability of the U.K. or France to project power. In our region, Australia is arguably the largest and most advanced capitalist state, having a strong economy and making substantial outlays on defence. However, notwithstanding the surge in interventions in the affairs of some of our near neighbours during the Howard years

⁹⁸ Patrick Bond, 'BRICS and the sub-imperial location' in Ana Garcia & Patrick Bond (eds.) *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique*, Pluto Press, London, 2015, p. 16. Curiously, O'Lincoln in a 1997 essay entitled 'Robbers and Spoilers Australia and Britain in the 19th Century Pacific' was quite content to describe Australia as sub-imperialist. See <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/empire.htm> for this essay. Accessed October 2016.

⁹⁹ Bond, 2015, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Tobias ten Brink, *Global Political Economy and the Modern State System*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2015, p. 109.

from 1999 to 2006, the attitude of the Australian state towards the region can best be described as one of benign neglect. Having said that, security issues in the Asia-Pacific region are important for the Australian ruling-class as is fostering and extending Australian business interests.

As we have seen, Bramble, O’Lincoln and Pietsch overstate the nature and extent of Australian influence and involvement in the Asia-Pacific region and they also overstate the Australian state’s capacity for power projection. They do so to make the argument that Australia is a mid-level imperialist power. Integration of Australia into the global designs of the pre-eminent imperialist nation, they claim, has no downside; it merely enables the Australian ruling-class to pursue its own imperialist agenda. Such analysis is one-sided (undialectical), ignoring and/or downplaying the costs of the unequal relationship between Australia and the US. Critical analysis of the ANZUS treaty and other arrangements with the US and what this means for Australian sovereignty is not undertaken by Bramble, O’Lincoln and Pietsch, because to do so presumably is left nationalist.

A consequence of such theorising is that an erroneous picture of Australia’s place in the imperialist hierarchy emerges, in the process hiding from the Australian working-class and its allies what are presently some of the main stumbling blocks to the building of an independent, socialist country. Two of the primary stumbling blocks are Australia’s sub-imperialist status and its dependent relationship with US imperialism. As a necessary first step on the path to attaining an independent, socialist Australia, the casting off of the subservient foreign policy currently in place would be in order. In addition, the US bases in Australia should also be removed. These are some minimum, perhaps more immediate objectives. The ultimate goal being not only to rid Australia of its sub-imperialist status and its connections with US imperialism, but also to supplant capitalist imperialism entirely. Freed from imperialism, the working-classes and their allies can really set about building socialism here and globally, in the process finding their rightful place in the region and the world.

* * *

The struggle to throw off Australia’s sub-imperialist status and its domination by US imperialism is referred to by the CPA (ML) as a process of revolution by stages. This is how the matter was dealt with at our Party’s 14th Congress in 2015:

The two-stage Australian strategy for independence and socialism

The realisation that a two-stage theory of revolution accorded with the characteristics of Australia as a developed capitalist country dominated by US imperialism emerged and was accepted by us in the early 1970s. Comrade E.F. Hill led theoretical development of this strategy and our younger comrades enthusiastically implemented it both within the Party and in a number of mass organisations influenced by us.

In developing and implementing this policy, two erroneous lines emerged. The first was a rightist tendency to deny the socialist content of the theory, to over-emphasise patriotism and the maintenance of a national bourgeois economy during the first stage of the revolution.

In effect, this line accepted some form of intermediate stage between the anti-imperialist revolution and the socialist revolution. Its adherents discouraged mention of socialism for fear of alienating allies in the struggle against US imperialism. This line was publicly criticised in February 1978 in “For independence and socialism”. This document clearly stated that the struggle for independence must not weaken the sentiment for socialism.

From the left came a movement led by some previously influential younger members of the Party. This group started to organise a faction within the Party in 1977. By then their erroneous position on the two-stage revolution (over-emphasising the socialist objective and dismissing the patriotic non-socialist elements within the united front) was caught up in their support of the “Gang of Four” in China. They tried to establish a group in opposition to the Australian Independence Movement led by Party activists. Their influence quickly waned.

The legacy of our development of the two-stage theory of revolution is that a number of people and organisations on the Left still mistakenly ascribe to us a position that is similar to the rightist line mentioned above. For three decades or more we have been maligned as “patriots” and “nationalists”. They essentially continue to criticise us

for believing in some form of intermediate stage between capitalism and socialism. Mainly Trotskyite in their own ideological commitment, they reject the two-stage theory of revolution, shouting loudly against imperialism in the context of international arenas of struggle, but denying that it is the main enemy of the Australian people and main target of an initial stage of revolutionary struggle in this country. In opposing the first, anti-imperialist stage of the Australian revolution they portray Australia as an imperialist country in its own right, a situation which, if it was correct, would place an exclusively working class revolution on the agenda. It is true that some Australian capitalists engage in imperialist activity in their own right, but they do not constitute the majority of the Australian bourgeoisie and their activities are not so representative of that bourgeoisie or so independent of US imperialism as to be able to characterise the Australian state as an independent imperialist entity.

There is no intermediate stage between capitalism and socialism embedded in our two-stage theory of the Australian revolution. During the first stage, assets belonging to the imperialists and their local compradors will be expropriated by new organs of state power and pressed into service for the benefit of the majority of Australia's working class and its allies. The first stage, the anti-imperialist stage, is defined by the socialist character of that expropriation which can only occur under working class leadership exercised through working class organs of state power.

Giant foreign multinational corporations have killed off many Australian capitalist firms. Some Australian capitalists see potential for growth in working for and with imperialist corporations and financiers; however, imperialism is predatory and cares nothing for the capitalists of other countries who will always be threatened by it. Sooner or later all will face ruin from imperialist competition. It may be that some of them will see the sense of allowing the anti-imperialist movement to develop. Some may contribute financially or in other ways to that movement. Is it impossible that as the anti-imperialist movement develops and grows, that a section of the Australian capitalists will permit their workers to engage in paid time and without penalty in anti-imperialist demonstrations and rallies? Is it impossible that they might not cooperate with the revolutionary movement in ensuring supplies of food and other necessities to suburban areas under the control of an anti-imperialist front? Is it impossible that some might provide needed

services to an anti-imperialist state power in exchange for a guarantee of continued existence within a private sector enclave of a socialist economy? The division of the Australian revolution by stages means that some sectors of the economy owned by national bourgeois elements who are either supportive of, or neutral towards, the anti-imperialist stage will still operate as capitalist businesses into the period of the second stage, necessitating the deepening of the socialist revolution and its embrace of all economic functions throughout the second stage. This will be a period during which the proletarian organs of state power license the operations of cooperative Australian capitalists whilst directing them towards activities which strengthen the socialist orientation of the economy, eventually resulting in their absorption into that economy as socialist concerns with appropriate compensation to their former owners. Thus there is an overlap with the first stage melding into the second stage, both having predominantly socialist content, and certainly no intermediate national bourgeois economic stage between capitalism and socialism.

APPENDIX: Programme of the CPA (M-L) CPA (M-L) Programme (14th Congress 2015)

1. The Programme of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) aims to examine Australian and world reality from the standpoint of Marxism.

Marxist philosophy holds that the material world – matter – is primary. Ideas – consciousness – are the reflection of this objective reality.

Marxism is a guide to action, based on practice. It recognises all things in nature and society as constantly coming into being and passing away.

The Communist Party arises from the struggles of the Australian people. It aims to embody the highest ideals and hopes of the working class.

2. From this basic standpoint the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) views Australia as a capitalist society characterised by production for profit. Profit is derived from unpaid labour time.

Workers' labour power is purchased on the market by the owners of capital. Put to work in Australia, on average in half the working week it produces value sufficient to cover wages to maintain workers and their families. The value produced in the remainder of the working week constitutes surplus value, the source of profit.

The goods and services produced by workers' socialised labour are privately appropriated by capitalists. They will continue to be produced so long as they can be sold for profit on the market.

The system of capitalist production leads inevitably to the alternating cycle of boom and bust and periodical crisis under capitalism.

3. It is inevitable that sooner or later these social conditions will impel people to organise to end the conflict between the socialised labour process and the private ownership of the decisive means of production, the big factories, mines and corporate farms, by the establishment of socialism. With socialism, production is planned and rational, and takes place for peoples' use.

To prevent the tiny minority of previous exploiters destroying the newly-established socialist system, the

working class and its allies, who together can call upon the support of the majority of the people, will set up a new political state apparatus. Over time, this state withers away as society becomes self-managing.

In the socialist era, the material and moral conditions are laid to proceed to the higher epoch of classless communist society in which the full potential of all human beings is realised and the needs of all can be met.

4. We live in the era of imperialism, that stage of capitalism when monopolies and finance capital (i.e. bank and industrial capital merged) dominate; when the export of capital as against the export of commodities assumes pronounced importance; when the world has been divided among big banks, financial institutions and multinational corporations and when there are no longer any new territories to be seized without imperialist conflict.

The extraordinary advance of technology over the recent period does not alter fundamental social laws. On the contrary, it illustrates and sharpens those fundamental laws.

5. The present stage in the struggle to end capitalism in Australia is the battle to win Australian independence from the foreign imperialist interests and their local allies which constitute the core of Australian capitalism. Though the Australian people have achieved an important measure of formal independence, US imperialism holds decisive political, economic, diplomatic, military and cultural influence. The US has taken over from Britain as the dominant imperialism in Australia. The key sectors of Australia's economy are owned or controlled by giant foreign multinationals and a few big local monopolies which are bound up with them through joint ventures, foreign borrowings, and trade. US imperialism holds 'de facto' state power.

6. The great cause which unites the Australian people is the struggle for Australian independence. The nation's wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small number of foreign monopolies. As a result millions of ordinary Australians suffer intensified exploitation, growing debt and insecurity, increased repression and discrimination, bankruptcy. Australia's natural wealth and heritage are looted for monopoly profit. The resulting struggles against foreign imperialist domination at the heart of Australian capitalism are objectively struggles for Australian independence, although the participants in many cases

may not make this connection.

7. The working class is the leading class in this struggle. While imperialism takes a heavy toll on the lives of the majority of Australians; workers, farmers, small and medium local business people, self-employed, professionals, shopkeepers, black and white, irrespective of ethnic origin, the centre of its attack is aimed at the working class from whose labour it derives maximum profit. Large-scale production forces the Australian working class to be the most disciplined cohesive and politically-conscious class. With the working class as the core, peoples' sentiment for anti-imperialist independence will be transformed into a mighty peoples' movement building up to eventually launch revolutionary struggle against imperialist domination.

8. To maintain and protect foreign imperialist domination of Australia, a powerful state machine has emerged. It consists of the bureaucracy, police, courts, gaols, armed forces, intelligence agencies. It seems to stand independently over Australian society but in fact it exists to enforce imperialist domination. Parliamentary democracy with its limited formal democratic rights operates within this context.

While such rights have positive aspects, imperialist domination, capitalism and the state machine's repressive, violent character are still the central feature of the capitalist state. Australia's ruling class uses the mass media, education system, culture, etc., to push a whole system of ideas which disguises imperialist domination and monopoly exploitation and presents them as inevitable. Capitalism's "natural" tendency is towards erosion of democratic rights and more open repression, particularly in periods of deep economic or social difficulties for the imperialists. There is always the danger that Australia's imperialist overlords will discard the democratic facade and rule through systematic, open, ruthless violence - fascism.

9. Imperialism gives rise to constant international instability and wars of aggression. The root cause of instability and war is imperialist expansionism and rivalry of and between the United States of America and the European Union and to a lesser extent, Russia. This expansionism and rivalry overshadows world events, carries with it the danger of world war and greatly influences the situation within Australia. Nor has US imperialism given up its dreams of destroying the

People's Republic of China or once again attacking the Republic of Cuba or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and other progressive countries. People in the underdeveloped countries and former colonies continue to struggle against the cruel debts imposed by unfair trade pacts, and the political interference, economic blackmail, and military threats of the imperialist powers. Ordinary people everywhere demand the right to live in peace. They are actively fighting to force their governments to abandon all aggressive policies and action. They want an end to all nuclear weapons, chemical and other means of mass destruction starting with the US, holders of the largest stock of weapons. The Australian people want an end to US military bases and involvement in imperialist wars.

10. The struggle for anti-imperialist independence embraces all people's action to improve their lives. The Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) supports all demands which arise out of people's struggle against imperialism.

In the course of that struggle people will conclude that parliament and the main political parties operate to administer the system on imperialism's behalf.

As an alternative to foreign imperialist domination, the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) supports demands to nationalise the key industries and financial institutions, to vigorously tax the large multinationals and the super-rich, and to expropriate and redistribute foreign-owned corporate farms. With the establishment of people's democratic institutions at national and regional level, and people's ownership of press, radio, TV and electronic media, the mass of Australian working people can be informed and consulted as they participate in the building of a new life. With this energy it will be really possible to wipe out poverty, provide high-quality health, education and social services for all the Australian people, and repair the damage done to the natural environment.

An essential task is to support a just Treaty with the indigenous people who were violently dispossessed by British imperialism, to end their dispossession, oppression and exploitation.

11. The foreign imperialists will fight all moves towards real Australian independence. In the face of likely ruthless and violent suppression by the capitalist state machine which serves foreign imperialism, and with the necessity

of defending people's democracy against aggression, interference and subversion, the people must be prepared for all means of struggle. Their hopes for a better life demand that they take power into their own hands.

12. The Party must be able to function under any circumstances and be able to maintain its work through rapid changes of conditions. In particular, full attention must be paid to the hostile activities of the state machine.

13. The strategic policy of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) is revolution by stages. The Party organises to assist the current stage of winning Australian independence and, through that, laying the foundations for Australian socialism and moving towards communism.

14. The Communist Party arises from the struggles of the Australian people. It aims to embody the highest ideals and hopes of the working class. It endeavours, from the scientific standpoint of Marxism, to examine Australian and world reality and participate in changing Australian society in accordance with the process of development which Marxism shows is actually going on. It strives for the most intimate possible knowledge of Australia, its history and its present situation.

The Party acts with complete confidence in the Australian people. Its organisation is among the people. It strives to work in accordance with the degree of understanding of the people at a given time and with the objective of step-by-step raising that understanding towards an understanding of the overall social process.

The Party seeks to inspire the working class to lead the way in building a massive people's movement against US imperialist domination, involving all progressive Australian forces, winning over the middle forces, and isolating the handful of reactionary enemies of the people.

15. Members of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) accept a lifetime commitment to the welfare of the working class and the great cause of Communism.

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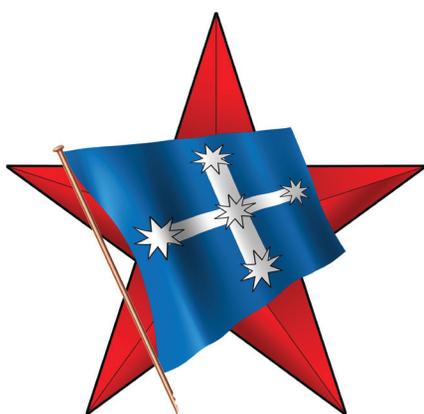
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September 2017