

Interview

## On imperialism in the twenty-first century

Pakistan: 'Neither Americans, nor Taliban, build the left'

Friday 30 September 2011, by [AHMAD Aijaz](#), [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2011).

***"You don't have to be for the Taliban, and you don't have to be for the Americans. Whether in Pakistan or elsewhere...the best thing is to build a left movement on grounds that are peculiarly and specifically the arena of left politics", says Aijaz Ahmad.***

**As a Marxist literary theorist and anti-imperialist crusader, Aijaz Ahmad is known worldwide. He has authored almost half a dozen books. He is a visiting professor at York University, Toronto. He writes for Indian magazine Frontline and an ezine, Newsclick.**

**In an interview with *Viewpoint*, he discusses different aspects of imperialism in the twenty-first century. Read on.**

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**Farooq Sulehria - Hardt and Negri announced, roughly a decade ago, that imperialism is dead. Their mystified Empire is progressive if not benevolent. Is imperialism really dead and an emerging Empire indeed benevolent?**

Aijaz Ahmad - There is a great deal in their earlier book, *Empire*, that is very good but I don't believe some of their fundamental premises are at all tenable. For instance, it is simply not true that nation-states have ceased to matter, or that national sovereignty has been abridged for all countries equally—as much for the NATO countries, their argument would imply, as for Libya or Afghanistan. Even if you set aside the permanence of imperialist wars in our time and think only of the economic aspects, you will find that while finance capital has become transnational in its operations, labour regimes are strictly national. In fact one of the contradictions of contemporary capitalism is that while the global polity rests upon a system of nation-states, transnational finance capital has no state of its own; nor does WTO or IMF or the World Bank for that matter. Their power to act coercively in the world is a power borrowed from the most powerful of the nation-states, principally the core capitalist countries, led by the US.

In this context, the US state has a dual role to play, as the state of US national capital itself but also as the primary state structure that acts on behalf of transnational capital as a whole. What we actually have is, finally, for the first time in history, a globalized empire of Capital itself, in all its nakedness, in which the U.S. imperium plays the dominant/central role, financially, militarily, institutionally, ideologically. Hardt and Negri tend to occlude this centrality of the US in global imperialist structure. US military personnel are stationed in over a hundred countries today, in one capacity or another. It is difficult to associate anything "progressive" or "benign" with a military empire of such a scale. You don't have to ask me. Just ask the Iraqis who have been at the receiving

end of it.

**How do you view the process of globalization. Is it really a new phase in human history as globalists want us to believe? Or is it a neo-imperialism?**

Well, the imperialism of our time really does have certain novel features. In that sense, you surely could call it “a new phase in human history.” The drive toward an integrated world market has been inherent in the logic of capitalism from the beginning, and colonisation of the world was therefore not an incidental aspect but an integral basis for this system. Between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when it all began, until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>, the process of real colonization was mostly centred on the Americas and it was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Asia and Africa were intensively colonized, dividing the world into a set of core industrialised countries of the advanced West and a vast hinterland of non-industrialised colonies and dependencies, many of them formally free and condemned to a semi-colonial status.

The story of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is essentially is the story of the crisis and dissolution of that system, brought about by freedom movements and wars of national liberation in the colonies that often intersected with struggles for socialism world-wide; but it is also the story, equally, of the rise of a new kind of non-territorial world empire and consequently a new kind of postcolonial, imperial sovereignty. One now forgets that two world wars were fought to determine whether Germany or the US would inherit the tottering colonial empires of Britain, France etc. With the defeat of Nazi Germany, the US did launch itself as a new global hegemon whose imperial sovereignty did not rest on colonisation as such but on economic, political, military, ideological, techno-scientific, juridic dominance.

And yet this hegemony could not be truly global so long as there was a large part of the world, comprised mainly of China and COMECON countries, that was largely outside the capitalist system. Dissolution of that alternate system in China and the Soviet zones finally made it possible for the empire to become truly global. It was really in the early 1990s, after the dissolution of USSR, that the term ‘globalization’ came to be used so frequently, as if it was pregnant with some novel social-scientific value.

In other words, there were a few preconditions for the emergence for a full-scale globalisation of a unitary empire toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and these too can be summarised. (1) The divisions of the old colonial empires had to be overcome if the whole capitalist world was to be united under a single hegemony. (2) There had to be a pre-eminent power equipped to accomplish this. (3) The non-capitalist states had to be dissolved and brought back into the capitalist market so as to make it truly global. (4) A degree of industrialisation of the former colonies was necessary, and the capitalist law of value had to be extended into the farthest corners of third world agriculture, if the reach of the capitalist market was to be extended to virtually the whole of humanity. (5) New kinds of technology were required to integrate the world financial markets and to make not only finance capital but also large portions of even productive capital itself more mobile. (6) Similarly, new types of military technologies, from the famous *automated battlefields*’ of the Vietnam era to the whole array of unmanned drones of our time, were required which could deliver imperial power effectively and swiftly against various and largely elusive little enemies that were perceived to be proliferating all over the world. (7) Finally, a complex network was required for moral pressure, ideological legitimisation and cultural acceptance, ranging from all kinds of NGOs to high-minded postmodernism to the *End of History*’ ideology to products of mass culture as well as the ‘high culture’ of the most powerful university system that the world has ever known.

**In liberal discourses Soviet Union is also delineated as an imperial power. Given the Soviet role in Poland, Finland and later Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Afghanistan, can we characterize Soviet Union as an imperial power?**

I have a host of reservations about the system that prevailed in the former USSR. It was too autocratic, centralised and bureaucratised for a country that was certainly non-capitalist and thought of itself as socialist. Military interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia were completely indefensible, and the even more massive intervention in Afghanistan was foolish and very costly in human and material terms. I think that Soviet leaders were greatly preoccupied with the virtually unbearable military and economic pressure from the US and its NATO allies (which of course broke them eventually). They lived in great fear that the system would just start cracking under this pressure, and that the cracks will first begin in the smaller countries and then just spread like a contagion. So, at every significant display of what they perceived as a systemic challenge inside the Soviet bloc, they punctually over-reacted, with full repressive force. I think it was wrong and brutish, but I think there was a reason for that kind of hysterical over-reaction. One does not have to justify it but one does have to understand the causes of such conduct. The case of Afghanistan, though, is entirely different. Even Brzezinski now says proudly that he had organised the Islamic jihad in Afghanistan through what turned out to be history's largest CIA operation, explicitly to force the Soviet Union to intervene and that the USSR simply walked into the trap.

Was USSR imperialist? Well, imperialism has to do with capitalism, capitalist accumulation, transfer of wealth from other countries to the imperial centre, extraction of surplus value from the labouring masses of the imperialised countries, the enrichment of the imperialist bourgeoisie, enforcement of capitalist relations of production in the dominated countries etc etc. I don't see how the word imperialist could be applied to USSR. East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the very countries where Soviet forces suppressed the opposition, consistently had higher standards of living and per capita incomes than the Soviet Union itself. It supplied weapons to a host of national liberation movements but is not known to have gained anything materially in return. Countries like Nehruvian India and Nasser's Egypt had very extensive economic relations with the USSR, and I know dozens of Indian officials who were directly involved in those relations but I have never known anyone complaining of Soviet exploitation of India's economic weakness. For forces of national liberation in the tricontinent certainly, from Palestine to Cuba, the dissolution of the Soviet Union has been an unmitigated disaster. This is something very difficult to explain to western leftists.

**Similarly, one hears about Islamic imperialism or Saudi imperialism. How justified are these characterisations?**

That kind of nonsense does not deserve a serious answer. Every nation-state that has a bit of money seeks influence beyond its borders. Saudis have been brandishing their petrodollars and petro-Islam ever since the Israelis destroyed the Egyptian and Syrian armies in 1967. For the rest, they are essentially US clients.

**China is penetrating Africa or Brazil is infiltrating Latin America. Can the Chinese penetration of Africa, or Brazilian infiltration of Latin America, be described as imperialism?**

"Penetrating" and "Infiltrating" are strange words in this context, lifted as they are from worlds of sexual intercourse and espionage. Brazil cannot "infiltrate" Latin America. It IS virtually half of Latin America—with the largest land mass, largest population, most advanced economy in South America, and a magnificent intelligentsia across the humanities, arts, social sciences and the techno-managerial fields; and it also has Latin America's vastest slums. Brazil is so very much more in the news these days for essentially two reasons. Domestically, Lula's very prudent and non-

confrontational but systematic left politics did stabilize Brazilian economy and it is now supposed to be an emerging power on the global scale, alongside China, Russia and India. The other reason is that the two countries, Argentina and Mexico, that could have built equally powerful economies, have not done so, and Mexico in particular is in utter mess of various kinds. I personally believe that some of Brazil's newly minted economic fame is just plain hype, and there are structural problems, especially in its financial architecture, that are bound to become quite menacing sooner rather than later.

My comment on China shall be even more brief, precisely because a lot more could be said. The basic fact is that China simply does not have the natural resources to build the kind of economy it is building but it does have immense financial resources. So, it is going to a very large number of countries, not only in Africa, offering very handsome terms of exchange for the resources it needs. For instance, China had large number of workers—I have seen figures going up to 35,000—in Libya, who quietly went home after NATO launched the invasion. Imperialism in Libya has come from NATO, not from China. And one of the reasons why NATO and America's own AFRICOM are both seeking so many military bases and military partnerships all across Africa is to deny to China the oil and other strategic raw materials that it needs. And, by the way, Indian multinationals are buying up tens of thousands of hectares of land in Africa.

**In the Muslim world, the anti-imperialism has been appropriated by Islamists. What should be the left strategy in Muslim countries, particularly countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan? Should left join hands with anti-working class and misogynist forces to fight back imperialism? Or should they support imperialism (drone attacks, occupations) as liberals suggest owing to the fact that Taliban are an immediate existential threat, ready to eliminate progressives? Or is there any third option given the marginalized position of left in these countries?**

The situation is quite different in different Muslim-majority countries. Nothing can be said that applies to Turkey as well as Afghanistan, Tunisia as well as Pakistan. I think you really have Pakistan in mind when you pose this broader question, and, knowing relatively little about the current situation in Pakistan, I shall nevertheless limit myself to this one situation. You have yourself described the left there as "marginalised." My own impression also is that neither the Taliban nor the Americans are particularly keen to get the support from the Pakistani left; it is too "marginalised" for them to care one way or the other. So, the Pakistani left contemplating to offer its support to one or the other strikes me as something like the case of Sancho Panza and the windmills. You don't have to be for the Taliban, and you don't have to be for the Americans. Whether in Pakistan or elsewhere, and not just in Muslim-majority countries, the best thing is to build a left movement on grounds that are peculiarly and specifically the arena of left politics. If there is "an immediate existential threat" from either the Taliban or the Americans, the best thing is to try and get out of the line of fire until you are strong enough to fight back, and, in the meanwhile, build some sort of underground into which you can disappear when a bullet comes looking for you. But build that left. Build that left. Spare yourself the useless luxury of offering your help to one variety of detestable creature or another, neither of whom wants you anyway.

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### **Books by Aijaz Ahmad:**

*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*

Lineages of the Present: Ideological and Political Genealogies of Contemporary South Asia

Iraq, Afghanistan and the Imperialism of Our Time

On Communalism and Globalization-Offensives of the Far Right

A Singular Voice: Collected Writings of Michael Sprinker - Editor (with Fred Pfeil and Modhumita Roy)

In Our Time: Empire, Politics, Culture

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<http://www.viewpointonline.net/neither-americans-nor-taliban-build-the-left-ajaz-ahmad.html>

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