

# **Toward Interimperialist War - What would it look like to build international solidarity against imperial rivalry from below?**

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The daily news is filled with stories about the spiraling conflict between the U.S. and China over everything from trade to geopolitical squabbles and dueling military exercises. All of these converge over Taiwan — a small nation claimed by China as a renegade province, backed by the U.S., and home to the most advanced microchip manufacturing plants in the world.

These plants produce chips that power everything from iPhones to Washington's [F-35 fighter bomber](#), and other high-tech weaponry. That fact raises the stakes of a long-simmering dispute punctuated with periodic "[Taiwan Strait Crises](#)," turning it into a volatile diplomatic, economic and military confrontation.

On Capitol Hill and in boardrooms, [as Edward Luce notes](#), "the old Washington Consensus" of integrating of China has been replaced with a new one of "dis-integrating China." Joe Biden has continued Donald Trump's grand strategy of great power rivalry with Beijing.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and the Republicans rail about a [new Cold War](#) and have launched a [Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party](#), which most recently subjected TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew to a [racist grilling](#). And corporations such as [Apple](#) are in the early stages of moving their supply chains out of China.

Beijing has launched a counteroffensive against what [Xi Jinping calls](#) Washington's policy of "containment, encirclement and suppression" of China with the aim of reestablishing his nation as a [great power in a multipolar world](#). As a result, the two states, despite their deep economic integration, seem headed for ever greater geopolitical conflict and even war.

Their antagonism is the 21<sup>st</sup> century's central interimperial rivalry, with the U.S. trying to preserve its dominance and China trying to challenge it.

## From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The development of this rivalry was the last thing the U.S. wanted. After the end of the Cold War, it basked in what Charles Krauthammer called a “[unipolar moment](#).” The U.S. aimed to consolidate its status as the world’s sole superpower and prevent the rise of a new peer competitor by incorporating all the world’s states into its so-called rules-based order of free-trade globalization.

As Gilbert Achcar argues in his recently published book, *The New Cold War*, the U.S. particularly wanted to prevent any challenge from Russia and China. In order to contain them and other potential threats to its dominance, Washington expanded NATO, maintained its vast network of military bases in Asia, carried out military operations against so-called rogue states like Iraq, and imposed “stability” on countries like Haiti wrecked by its neoliberal economic policies.

However, the best-laid plans often go astray. Three developments ushered in today’s asymmetric multipolar world order, triggering the rivalry between Washington and Beijing at its center.

First, China and several sub-imperial powers rode the [long neoliberal boom](#) from the 1980s through 2008 to become new centers of capital accumulation. Thus, economic expansion began to change the relative balance of power between states within global capitalism.

Second, Washington’s attempt to lock in its hegemony through its [invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq](#) blew up in its face, bogging it down in two decades of counter-insurgency warfare. China and others took advantage of the situation to become more assertive of their economic and political interests.

Third, the Great Recession of 2008 ended the neoliberal boom and hammered the U.S. and its European allies. China’s enormous state investment successfully [dragged its economy out of the downturn](#) and spurred a commodity boom that sustained in expansions in countries like Brazil and Australia.

All this led to the relative decline of U.S. imperialism and the rise of today’s [asymmetric multipolar world order](#). The U.S. remains, of course, the most dominant imperialist state, but it now faces China as a rising rival, a revitalized Russia as an outsize regional power and a host of sub-imperialist states from Saudi Arabia to Israel and Brazil, which variously challenge and cooperate with the U.S.

## The Rise of Chinese Imperialism

Washington views China as its biggest rival. Beijing has transformed itself from an autarchic, underdeveloped economy into a [capitalist superpower](#). It is now the world’s second-largest economy, the number one manufacturer, the largest exporter, main trade partner with most of the world’s major economies, a leading exporter of capital, largest creditor and a top recipient of foreign direct investment.

A combination of economic competition and crisis have driven China to challenge U.S., Japanese and European capital throughout the world. To bolster China’s high-tech industry, Xi Jinping launched a new industrial policy — Made in China 2025 — to fund national champions to produce advanced semiconductors, leap up the value chain and end dependency on foreign suppliers.

The Great Recession and China’s vast state stimulus, however, led to systematic problems in its economy. As Ho-fung Hung argues in his book, *Clash of Empires*, an over-accumulation crisis developed, “characterized by rising indebtedness, excess capacity, and falling profits for Chinese enterprises.”

To overcome these, Xi launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. China promised to make over \$1 trillion in loans from its state-owned banks to build infrastructure in the Global South, largely to facilitate exports of raw materials to fuel its economy in [classic imperialist fashion](#).

China has parlayed this economic power into geopolitical strength. It established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which brought together Russia and Central Asian states, and also united Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa into a geopolitical bloc (the BRICS) along with its New Development Bank to rival the G7 dominated by the U.S. It has used both (among other bilateral and multilateral political and economic agreements) to project its interests in Asia and throughout the world.

To back these efforts up, China revolutionized its military. It has steadily increased military spending by between 5 percent and 7 percent a year over the last two decades to reach an expenditure of nearly [\\$300 billion](#), second only to the U.S.

It has concentrated on projecting this power in the East China and South China Seas. It built militarized islands to patrol international shipping lanes, claimed maritime areas with undersea fossil fuel reserves, and asserted control of fisheries. All of this has brought Beijing into conflict with other countries with rival claims including Japan, Brunei, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

*The conflict between the U.S. and China is coming to a head over Taiwan, with American Gen. Mike Minihan going so far as to predict war in 2025.*

China developed a military strategy of “anti-access area denial” to protect its interests and deter the U.S. and its allies. It has also established its first foreign military base in Djibouti, with another planned for Equatorial Guinea and more expected to be established in various countries in the [Asia-Pacific, Middle East](#) and [Africa](#) it considers strategic.

### **Biden’s Imperialist Keynesianism**

Of course, the U.S. remains the world’s [largest economy](#), controls the dollar as the international reserve currency, boasts the largest network of military allies, spends nearly three times as much as China on defense and possesses over [750 bases](#) around the world. To enforce its supremacy, it has taken an increasingly aggressive turn to contain Beijing.

Barack Obama initiated this with his [Pivot to Asia](#) policy, and Donald Trump escalated it with his declaration of [great power rivalry with China and Russia](#). But if anything, Trump’s erratic misrule exacerbated Washington’s relative decline.

To restore its hegemony, the Biden administration adopted a strategy of [Imperialist Keynesianism](#). It has begun to implement an industrial policy entirely designed to ensure U.S. economic and military supremacy.

Biden has maintained the tariffs and sanctions Trump imposed on Chinese exports to the U.S. and is preparing to [add new ones](#). Specifically, he has used national security as justification to block the sale of advanced microchips, which have both industrial and military applications.

Biden has also encouraged corporations to “friend shore” their supply chains, relocating them from China to the U.S. and its allies. To sweeten the offer, he signed a [\\$1 trillion infrastructure bill](#) to refurbish the U.S.’s dilapidated transportation system, upgrade its woefully backward internet and fund construction of new network of electric vehicle charging stations, all essential to 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalism.

He enacted the Chip and Science Act that will pour over [\\$280 billion](#) into businesses and universities to design and manufacture advanced computer chips in the U.S. to lessen its dependency on foreign suppliers. Finally, his \$385 billion [Inflation Reduction Act](#) (IRA), while sold as addressing climate change, trots out tired and dubious green capitalist “solutions.”

But, at the same time, it expands fossil fuel extraction for export, especially to European countries to enable them to achieve energy independence from Russia. The IRA also funds domestic production of solar panels, electric cars, batteries and their components to end dependence on foreign suppliers and competitors, most importantly China.

### **“Democracies” Versus Autocracies**

To complement this imperialist industrial policy, Biden has launched a geopolitical campaign to forge a front of democracies against autocracies. A lot of this is ideological posturing, as U.S. democracy is, to say the least, ridden with crisis (remember January 6?) and the allies it invited to its two “[Democracy Summits](#)” included states that [Freedom House](#) categorized as “partly free,” “not free at all” and “electoral autocracies.”

Nevertheless, Biden has made progress in building an alliance, mainly comprised of its Cold War allies against China and Russia. It used the alibi of Beijing’s oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang as justification to stage a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympics that was joined by Britain, Canada, Australia, India, and a list of smaller states. Washington’s pretensions to care about human rights reeks of hypocrisy as it enforces the New Jim Crow at home and backs oppressive states abroad like apartheid Israel.

In response, China and Russia announced in the run-up to the Olympics a “friendship without limits” in a [joint statement](#) that calls for “[a multipolar system of international relations](#)” and denounces “certain States’ [the U.S. and its allies] attempts to impose their own ‘democratic standards’ on other countries,” a policy it denounces as “attempts at hegemony.”

With the rivalry intensifying, Biden has ratcheted up military budgets each year, dishing out [\\$780 billion](#) in 2022, almost [\\$820 billion](#) for 2023, and has proposed [\\$886 billion for 2024](#). And he has pushed for all U.S. allies, especially those in [Europe](#) and [Asia](#), to increase their defense spending, fueling an [international arms race](#).

In Asia, Biden has placed special emphasis on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes Australia, India, Japan and has staged joint military exercises for years. He orchestrated its first summit with heads of all the states in 2021, in a move explicitly designed to [counterbalance China](#).

He also initiated the new trilateral military pact between the Australia, the U.K. and the U.S. (AUKUS) to arrange for Canberra to acquire nuclear-powered submarines to [counter Beijing’s increasing naval power](#). And he has pressured South Korea to forget its historic grievances with Japanese imperialism and [join it and the U.S.](#) in a united front against North Korea and China.

## **Russian Imperialism Superheats Rivalries**

Russia's [invasion of Ukraine](#) brought this interimperial rivalry to a fever pitch. [Putin launched the war](#) to rebuild Russia's empire, colonize Ukraine, crush domestic and regional struggles for democracy, and counter NATO's expansion into what he regards as Russia's sphere of influence.

Putin believed Russia was in an ideal position to launch the war after securing "friendship without limits" with China and in the wake of Biden's shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan. What he underestimated was the [Ukrainian resistance](#), which stopped Russia in its tracks and surprised the U.S. and NATO powers who expected Kyiv to fall.

Washington has backed Ukraine, as [Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin declared](#), to weaken Russia and rally its allies against both Moscow and Beijing. Indeed, Putin's war has been a gift to U.S. imperialism. Washington has re-legitimated and galvanized NATO, which should have been abolished after the Cold War. The expanding security alliance recently accepted Finland and is negotiating Sweden's membership. And the U.S. successfully pressed its European allies to increase their military budgets.

Moreover, Washington managed to convince the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to identify China as one of its "[systemic challenges](#)." Already, France, the Netherlands and Germany have joined the U.S. and Japan in [naval exercises](#) in the Asia Pacific.

For its part, Washington ramped its confrontational policies with China since the war. Biden shot down China's spy balloon, arrested [Chinese police agents](#), and, as the [recent leaks](#) document, increased its surveillance operations not only on Russia and China but also allies like South Korea, Egypt and even the head of the UN.

Biden also used national security as justification to escalate Washington's [chip war against China](#). The U.S., along with [Japan and the Netherlands](#), banned the export to China of advanced semiconductors and machines to make them on the grounds that such high technology has both civilian and military applications.

Morris Chang, the founder of Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturer, TSMC, which had already agreed to stop selling advanced chips to Huawei, said that he "[supported](#)" the ban, something designed to hobble China's high-tech industry. But, he warned, it meant that "globalization is dead" and "free trade" in danger.

In reality, however, despite the tariffs, sanctions and bans, trade between the U.S. and China hit a record high in 2022 of \$690 billion. At this point, therefore, Washington, as Treasury Secretary [Janet Yellen recently reiterated](#), is not pursuing "decoupling" but "[de-risking](#)"- moving militarily strategic industries and supply chains out of China.

## **China's Counteroffensive**

Beijing has responded to Washington's attacks with a counteroffensive. Before doing so, it had to overcome a slowing economy, increased unemployment and [domestic resistance](#) all in part caused by its draconian policy of zero-COVID.

So, Xi abandoned lockdowns, reopened the country to the world and increased support for state and private capital, triggering [4.5 percent](#) growth in the first quarter of 2023. He is guiding this new growth with a new industrial policy designed to create [dual circulation economy](#) with an increasingly

self-reliant domestic system alongside one for export to the world.

China also slapped [sanctions on U.S. companies](#) including Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, and has launched an [investigation of U.S. chipmaker Micron](#), all in retaliation against what it calls the Washington-led “technology blockade.” As a CIA analyst admitted, however, China “has many levers it can pull exerting pressure on U.S. allies and partners whose economies are dependent on trade with China.”

To capitalize on these, Xi launched a [multifront diplomatic offensive](#) against Washington. He orchestrated an agreement between [Saudi Arabia and Iran](#) to restore diplomatic relations, surprising and sidelining the U.S. while demonstrating China’s new status as a power broker in the Middle East.

Soon after that, Xi held a [summit with Vladimir Putin](#) in Russia, affirming their “no limits friendship,” agreeing to trade deals denominated in China’s yuan, and reiterating their shared commitment to build a multipolar world order against Washington’s hegemony. Xi also called for a ceasefire in Ukraine, issued a framework for [peace negotiations](#) and promised to call President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

After a delay, he finally contacted Zelenskyy, but their discussion [yielded no progress](#) toward a ceasefire and negotiations let alone a just peace, whose precondition is the withdrawal of Moscow’s forces. Nevertheless, Beijing clearly hopes to exploit [divisions over Russia’s war](#) and use economic deals to [lure the sub-imperial powers](#), especially the BRICS, as well as other governments in the Global South into its orbit and prevent Europe from blocking with the U.S.

The Chinese government has scored some successes in this effort, welcoming several heads of state to China and leading the [IMF](#) to worry that the world economy is on the verge of fragmenting “into rival economic blocs.” Brazilian President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva traveled to Beijing, announced “Brazil is back,” criticized Washington’s dollar hegemony, called for a multipolar currency world, initiated discussion about new trade and investment deals, reiterated Putin’s justifications for invading Ukraine, and called for a ceasefire and negotiations.

As part of his effort to woo European states, Xi welcomed [German Chancellor Olaf Scholz](#) to Beijing. Scholz, whose economy is highly dependent on exports, did pressure Xi to lobby Russia to end the war, but stuck mainly to cutting lucrative trade and investment deals.

France’s Emmanuel Macron, facing mass strikes at home, joined European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on a junket to Beijing. Macron attempted to carve out a [geopolitical position independent of the U.S.](#), stating that on the question of Taiwan, the EU must resist becoming “followers” or “[vassals](#)” of the U.S. and get “caught up in crises that are not ours.”

In a sign of division, [von der Leyen rebuked Macron](#), warned China against any use of force and reiterated the commission’s support for Washington’s policy on Taiwan. Other European leaders like [EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell](#) struck a different note.

He stated that the EU had identified Russia as a threat to security, but not China, and that Brussels needed to keep talking with China “because of its massive influence in the world.” Thus [European leaders remain divided over China](#), despite their appearance of unity over Taiwan and Ukraine at the [recent G7 summit](#).

To back this geopolitical offensive up with force, China announced a [7.2 percent increase](#) in defense spending for this year. Beijing’s protectionist industrial policy and militarism contrasts with its repeated defense of multilateralism, free trade and globalization.

## Taiwan: Strategic Flashpoint of Imperial Rivalry

The conflict between the U.S. and China is coming to a head over Taiwan, with American Gen. Mike Minihan going so far as to predict war in 2025. Beijing claims the island as a renegade province it aims to reintegrate, while the U.S. holds a position of “strategic ambiguity,” upholding a One China policy that only officially recognizes Beijing, while remaining unclear whether it would militarily defend Taiwan in order to deter China from invading and Taiwan from declaring independence.

The stakes of the conflict are not just geopolitical, but also economic. Taiwan is home to some of the most advanced semiconductor industries in the world. Corporations like TSMC manufacture and export [90 percent of the most advanced computer chips](#) to countries including China that power everything from iPhones to military drones.

China promises to block any move by Taiwan to declare its independence and repeatedly states its determination to retake the island by force if necessary. In response to these threats, Joe Biden has several times declared, in apparent violation of strategic ambiguity, that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in the event of an attack.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s provocative visit to Taiwan triggered a fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis. She [declared](#) “America’s unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan’s vibrant democracy” as the “world faces a choice between autocracy and democracy.” At the same time, she claimed to support the One China policy and oppose any “unilateral efforts to change the status quo.”

*It is essential for the international left to agitate against the drive toward imperialist war.*

China reacted to the visit by launching the [largest military exercises ever](#) near Taiwan, firing ballistic missiles, deploying warships in the Strait and sending fighter jets over the island. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen’s visit to the U.S. precipitated yet another round of Chinese military exercises, this time simulating a [blockade](#) to prevent the U.S. from defending the country.

Soon after, the U.S. and the Philippines [staged military exercises](#) that included attacking a mock Chinese warship in the South China Sea, sending an obvious, belligerent message to Beijing. These operations came hot on the heels of Washington’s new agreement with Manila to establish four new military bases near waters contested by Beijing, including one on [Luzon close to Taiwan](#).

The [Taiwanese people are caught](#) between China and the U.S., their right to self-determination threatened by Beijing and cynically supported by the U.S. for imperial motives.

## Neither Washington, Nor Beijing

War between the U.S. and China is, however, unlikely at this point. Their economies remain deeply integrated, both possess enormous stockpiles of [nuclear weapons](#), and they are embedded in elaborate international geopolitical and economic institutions, all factors that mitigate the chances of war.

But, amid [global capitalism’s multiple crises](#), both powers are whipping up nationalist hostility and

implementing increasingly antagonistic geopolitical and economic policies. In such volatile conditions, it is essential for the international left to agitate against the drive toward imperialist war.

In the U.S., the left's top priority must be to oppose Washington's attempt to enforce its hegemony against China's challenge. Washington remains, as Martin Luther King Jr. said decades ago, "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," a fact most recently confirmed by its destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the same time, we should not fall for the politics of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" and support Washington's main imperial rival, China, nor lesser ones like Russia. They are no less predatory and avaricious imperialist states, as Beijing's record in Xinjiang and Hong Kong attests, as does Moscow's similarly brutal one in Syria and Ukraine.

## **Building International Solidarity From Below**

Instead, the left must build international solidarity from below between oppressed nations like Palestine, Ukraine and Taiwan, as well as exploited workers in both countries and throughout the world. This project is not an abstraction, but a necessity and possibility.

Global capitalism has bound workers together across borders, and its crises are producing resistance from below in the U.S., China, and throughout the world. Indeed, since the Great Recession, we have witnessed a wave of protests and revolts against the profound inequalities in each and every country.

The political challenge for the left is to build solidarity within and between them. The most immediate way to do that is organizing in the large Chinese and Chinese American population, including nearly 300,000 Chinese international students, in the U.S.

A left embedded in these communities has and will play an essential role in leading struggle against the anti-Chinese racism Washington has whipped up. It can also help organize labor struggle, especially on campuses where Chinese students have played a leading role, most recently in the [university strikes that swept California](#). Such organizing has tremendous potential for building international solidarity, as many Chinese students have connections to the labor movement in China as well as to the [Chinese feminist movement](#).

There is also a large diaspora of people oppressed by the Chinese state, including many from Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan. It is essential for the left to build solidarity with these struggles in order to provide an alternative to the U.S. state, which cynically postures as their friend, while weaponizing their oppression as part of its interimperial rivalry with China.

All this work will open up avenues to build common struggle with workers in China and Asia. *Labor Notes* already set a precedent with its [tours of Chinese strikers](#). While Xi's [repression of labor NGOs and worker militants](#) over the last few years has made this far more difficult, the left must look out for every possibility, however tenuous, to build bridges of solidarity to their struggles.

In 2019, for example, 80,000 [tech workers](#) from the U.S. and all over the world signed an international call for solidarity with their Chinese counterparts' protest against a policy that required them to work from 9 am to 9 pm six days a week. Thus, even in the high-tech industry, which is a key site of interimperial rivalry, workers demonstrated the possibility of joint action against their exploiters.



Finally, the U.S. left must collaborate with the Chinese left (and the Asian left more broadly), which despite repression and difficult conditions, have developed extensive networks and publications like Hong Kong's [Lausan](#), Taiwan's [New Bloom](#), and Chinese groups and publications like [Gongchao](#), [Chuang](#) and [Made in China Journal](#). Now is the time to build internationalist anti-imperialism that rejects the false choice between Washington and Beijing and organizes across borders in a fight for international socialism that puts people and the planet first.

**Ashley Smith** , TRUTHOUT

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## **P.S.**

- Truthout. May 4, 2023:  
<https://truthout.org/articles/as-us-china-tensions-mount-we-must-resist-the-push-toward-interimperialist-war/>
- : Ashley Smith's article on Truthout:  
<https://truthout.org/authors/ashley-smith/>
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