

# China: Neither imperialist nor part of the Global South

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## Presentation

China's insertion in the global capitalist system has prompted many critical analyses among the Marxist left. Most debated is a simple but basic question: is China socialist, or capitalist? Some are unequivocal. For example, a recently published "manifesto" of a group centered at the University of Manitoba[1] states grandiosely that "no country represents working people's advance - economic, technological, ecological and social - more than China...." Its ruling Communist party "has made China the indispensable nation in humankind's struggle for socialism, offering aid and inspiration as a worthy example of a country pursuing socialism," more precisely, a form of "market socialism."

Other analysts sharply differ with this jovial portrayal. Some argue that post-Maoist China has experienced a counter-revolution that now ranks the country as a major imperialist power, second only to the United States in its geopolitical weight, while still others - unfortunately, very few - go behind these binary alternatives to engage in a dialectical examination of the evolving geopolitical reality and to probe the evolution of the conflicting social forces within the Chinese social formation.

A notable example of the latter group of scholars is the Argentine Marxist economist Claudio Katz. In the following article, which appeared first on his website (my translation), Katz confines his analysis to assessing China's location within the global constellation of national forces. I follow it below with links to a series of articles Katz published in 2020 discussing, inter alia, the evolution of China's internal class relations in the post-Maoist period.

**Richard Fidler**

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## **China: Neither imperialist nor part of the Global South**

### **ABSTRACT**

China's geopolitical status is the subject of increasing controversy. Its presentation as an imperialist power is based on mistaken analogies that overlook the way in which its productive expansion is accompanied by geopolitical restraint. An imperial profile is defined by international acts of domination and not by economic parameters.

China exhibits the features of an empire in formation, but only in an embryonic form. The limits to its capitalist restoration affect the degree to which it resembles an empire. It profits from Latin America's dependence on raw materials exports, but its intervention there is a far cry from that of the United States.

The tensions that capitalism generates in China are disguised by indulgent views that ignore the incompatibility of that system with an inclusive globalization. Its current trade and investment relations contradict calls for cooperation. China is not part of the Global South. It is grappling with the imbalances of a developed economy and the tensions of a creditor. Three possible scenarios can be envisaged for the medium term.

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The imperialist character of the United States is an indisputable fact of contemporary geopolitics. Extending this qualifier to China, on the other hand, arouses passionate debates.

Our approach highlights the asymmetry between the two contenders: Washington's aggressive profile and Beijing's defensive reaction. While the United States seeks to restore its ailing world domination, China is attempting to sustain capitalist growth without foreign confrontations. It also faces serious historical, political and cultural limits on its ability to intervene forcefully on a global scale. That is why it cannot at present be classed as part of the empires club (Katz, 2021).

This approach contrasts with approaches that describe China as an imperial, predatory or colonizing power. It also defines the degree to which it approximates such status, and what conditions would be needed to acquire it.

In our view, China has left behind its old status as an underdeveloped country and now is a core country among the world's central economies. This allows it to capture large flows of international value and benefit from its expansion with access to natural resources from the periphery. Because of its location in the international division of labor it does not form part of the Global South.

This view shares the various objections that have been raised to identifying China as a new imperialism. But it questions the presentation of China as an actor interested only in cooperation, inclusive globalization or the overcoming of its partners' underdevelopment.

A review of all the arguments being debated helps to clarify the contemporary complex enigma of China's international status.

## **INADEQUATE COMPARISONS**

The theses that postulate the total imperial alignment of China attribute it to the post-Maoist turn initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. They hold that this turn established a model of expansive capitalism that meets all of the characteristics of imperialism. They argue that this is confirmed by the African continent's economic subjection by China. And they denounce the hypocritical discourse used to hide this recurrence of the old European oppression (Turner, 2014: 65-71).

But this ignores the significant differences between the two situations. China - unlike France - does not dispatch troops to the African countries to protect its business. Its only military base, in a commercial hub, Djibouti, contrasts with the cluster of facilities installed in Africa by the United States and Europe.

China avoids getting involved in the explosive politics of the African continent and its participation in "UN peacekeeping operations" does not give it imperial status. Countless countries clearly outside of that category, such as Uruguay, contribute troops to UN missions.

Also debatable is the comparison of China with the trajectory followed by Germany and Japan during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Turner, 2014: 96-100). This is not a course consistent with the facts. China has to this point avoided taking the warmongering path travelled by those predecessors. It has achieved impressive economic protagonism, taking advantage of the competitive openings encountered in globalization. It does not share the compulsion for territorial conquest associated with German or Japanese capitalism.

China has developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized forms of production that did not exist in the previous century. This has given it novel and unprecedented leverage to expand its economy with patterns of geopolitical discretion that were inconceivable in the past.

The erroneous analogies extend as well to what happened in the Soviet Union. China, it is said, is establishing capitalism in a similar way and substituting "social imperialism" in place of internationalism. This is a foretaste of conventional imperialist politics (Turner, 2014: 46-47).

But China has not followed the lead of the USSR. It has imposed limits on capitalist economic restoration and maintained the political regime that collapsed in the neighboring country. As one analyst rightly notes, Xi Jinping's management has been guided throughout by an obsession with avoiding the disintegration suffered by the Soviet Union (El Lince, 2020). The differences currently extend to the foreign military terrain. China has not taken any action similar to what Moscow has deployed in Syria, Ukraine or Georgia.

## **WRONG CRITERIA**

Assessments inspired by a widely-used text of classical Marxism, Lenin's Imperialism, are also used to situate China in the imperialist camp. It is said that China conforms to the economic characteristics listed in that book, such as the weight of capital exports, the size of its monopolies, and the existence of financial groups (Turner, 2014: 1-4, 25-31, 48-64).

But those economic features are insufficient to define China's international place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To be sure, the increasing weight of monopolies, banks or exported capital accentuates rivalries and tensions among the powers. But those commercial or financial conflicts do not illustrate imperialist confrontation or define the specific status of each country in the pattern of global domination.

Switzerland, the Netherlands or Belgium occupy an important place in the international ranking of production, exchange and credit, but they do not play a leading role in the imperialist realm. France and England do play a prominent role on that terrain, but this is not derived strictly from their economic primacy. Germany and Japan are economic giants, but their intervention is largely confined within that sphere.

China's case is much more unique. The pre-eminence of monopolies on its territory is simply consistent with the existence of such conglomerates in any country. So also with the influence of finance capital, which plays a lesser role than it does in other large economies. Unlike its competitors, China has achieved its position in the global order without resorting to neoliberal financialization. Furthermore, it bears no resemblance to the German banking model of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century studied by Lenin.

It is true that the export of capital – which Lenin singled out as an outstanding characteristic in its time – is a significant characteristic of China today. But its influence simply confirms the country's significant connection with global capitalism.

None of the analogies with the economic system prevailing in the past century is of help in defining China's international status. At most, they help us to understand the changes registered in the functioning of capitalism. It takes another type of thinking to clarify what is happening in global geopolitics.

Imperialism is a politics of domination exercised by the global powers through their states. It is not an enduring or final stage of capitalism. Lenin's writing clarifies what occurred a century ago, but not the course of recent events. It was developed in a setting quite distant from one of generalized world wars.

The dogmatic attachment to this book leads to a search for forced similarities in the present conflict between the United States and China to the conflagrations of the First World War. The major contemporary struggle is seen as a mere repetition of the inter-imperialist interwar rivalries.

China's militarization of the South China Sea is denounced using a similar comparison. Xi Jinping, it is said, is pursuing the same goals covered up by Germany in seizing Central Europe or by Japan in conquering the South Pacific. But overlooked is the fact that China's economic expansion up to now has been achieved without firing a single shot outside of its borders.

It is also forgotten that Lenin did not claim to be elaborating a classificatory guide to imperialism based on the capitalist maturity of each power. He simply emphasized the catastrophic militarism of his time without specifying the conditions that each of the participants in this conflict had to meet in order to qualify as part of the imperialist world order. For example, he placed an economically backward power like Russia within that group because of its active role in the military bloodbath.

Lenin's analysis of classical imperialism is a theoretical acquisition of great relevance, but another toolbox is needed to clarify China's geopolitical role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **A POTENTIAL STATUS ONLY**

The basic Marxist notions of capitalism, socialism, imperialism or anti-imperialism are not enough to characterize China's foreign policy. These concepts provide only a point of departure. Additional notions are needed to account for the country's course. Its conversion into the "second biggest economy in the world" (Turner, 2014: 23-24) is not enough to deduce imperial status, or to ascertain

the enigmas involved.

More successful is the search for concepts that register the coexistence of China's enormous economic expansion with its great distance from the primacy of the United States. The formula of an "empire in formation" is an attempt to portray its place in this gestation, still far from North American predominance.

But the specific content of that category is controversial. Some are prepared to assign it a scope that is more advanced than embryonic. In their view, China is already on the fast track toward acting as an imperial power. The military base in Djibouti, the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and the offensive reconversion of the armed forces are evidence of a turn, they say.

According to this view, several decades of intensive capitalist accumulation have now led to the beginning of an imperial phase (Rousset, 2018). This assessment approximates the typical contrast between a dominant imperial pole (United States) and another imperial power on the rise (Turner, 2014: 44-46).

But there are still major qualitative differences between the two powers. What distinguishes China from its North American counterpart is not the degree to which the same model has matured. China has yet to complete its own capitalist restoration before it can embark on the imperial adventures undertaken by its rival.

The term "empire in formation" could serve to indicate the embryonic character of that gestation. But the concept would only be meaningful if China were to abandon its present defensive strategy. Neoliberal capitalism exhibits this tendency in its investments abroad and its expansive ambitions. However, for that faction to prevail, China would have to subdue the opposing faction, which privileges internal development and preserves the present modality of the political regime.

China is an empire in the making only in potential terms. Its GDP is second in the world, it is the primary manufacturer of industrial goods, and it receives the largest volume of funds. But that economic weight has no equivalent correlate in the geopolitical-military sphere that defines imperial status.

## **UNRESOLVED TRENDS**

Another view is that China has all the characteristics of a capitalist power but lags in developing a hegemonic imperial profile. In its description of the spectacular growth of China's economy it points to the limits the country faces in order to achieve a winning position in the world market. And it notes the restrictions it confronts technologically compared to its Western competitors.

From these ambiguities it concludes that China is a "dependent capitalist state with imperialist features." It combines restrictions on its autonomy (dependency) with ambitious projects of foreign expansion (imperialism) (Chingo, 2021).

But while this view is correct in assigning China an intermediate location, it includes a conceptual blunder. Dependency and imperialism are two antagonistic notions that cannot be integrated in a common formula. We cannot refer to them – as we do in the distinction between center and periphery – as economic dynamics of transfer of value or hierarchies in the international division of labor. That is why the specific pattern we find in the semi-periphery is excluded.

Dependency presupposes the existence of a state subject to external orders, requirements or

conditioning, while imperialism implies the opposite: international supremacy and a high degree of external interventionism. These should not be intermingled in the same formula. In China the lack of subordination to another power coexists alongside great restraint in its involvement with other countries. This is neither dependency nor imperialism.

The characterization of China as a power that has completed its evolution toward capitalism – without being able to jump to the next stage of imperial development – presupposes that the initial development does not provide sufficient support to consummate advances toward global domination. But this reasoning presents a set of different economic and geopolitical-military actions as two stages in the same process. It overlooks an important differentiation.

A similar view of China as a finished capitalist model navigating in a lower echelon of imperialism is expressed by another author (Au Loong Yu, 2018) along with two auxiliary concepts: bureaucratic capitalism and sub-imperialist dynamics.

The first term indicates the fusion of the ruling class with the governing elite and the second portrays a limited policy of international expansion. But because the country is also assumed to act as a superpower (competing and collaborating with the US giant), it is only a matter of time before it becomes fully imperialist.

This assessment emphasizes that China has completed its capitalist transformation without explaining the reasons for the delays in this imperial conversion. But those delays could also be noted in terms of its capitalist transformation.

To avoid these dilemmas, it is easier to note that the continued insufficiencies of capitalist restoration explain the restrictions on its evolution toward imperialist status. Since the dominant class does not control the levers of the state, it must accept the cautious international strategy promoted by the Communist party.

In contrast to the United States, England or France, China's capitalists are not accustomed to calling on the political-military intervention of their state when they confront difficulties in their international business. They have no tradition of invasions or coups when confronted by countries that nationalize companies or suspend debt payment. No one knows how quickly the Chinese state will or will not adopt those imperialist habits, so it is incorrect to think that trend is consummated.

## **PREDATORS AND COLONIZERS?**

The presentation of China as an imperial power is frequently exemplified with descriptions of the impact it is having in Latin America. In some cases it is argued that China acts in the New World with the same predatory logic employed by Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ramírez, 2020). In other visions warnings are issued against the military bases that China is said to be building in Argentina and Venezuela (Bustos, 2020).

But none of these characterizations makes any solid comparison with the overwhelming intrusion of the US embassies. That is the type of intervention that signifies imperialist conduct in the region. China is miles away from any such encroachment. Profiting from the sale of manufactured goods and the purchase of raw materials is not the same as sending the Marines, training police and financing coups d'état.

Saner (and more debatable) is the presentation of China as a "new colonizer" of Latin America. It is argued that the ascendant hegemon tends to agree with its partners in the area on a "commodities

consensus” similar to the one previously forged by the United States. This networking with Beijing is said to complement the one secured by Washington and to increase the region’s international insertion as a supplier of unprocessed commodities and purchaser of manufactured products (Svampa, 2013).

This approach accurately portrays how Latin American’s current relation to China deepens the dependency of the region on raw materials exports or its specialization in basic lines of industrial activity. Beijing is emerging as the continent’s primary trading partner and it exploits the advantages of this new position.

On the other hand, Latin America has been gravely affected by transfers of value in favour of the powerful Chinese economy. It does not occupy the privileged position China assigns to Africa, nor is it an area of manufacturing relocation like Southeast Asia. South America is courted for the extent of its natural resources. The present oil, mining and agricultural supply scheme is very favorable to Beijing.

But this economic exploitation is not synonymous with imperial domination or colonial invasion. The latter concept applies, for example, to Israel, which occupies other peoples’ territories, displaces the local population and seizes Palestinian wealth.

Chinese emigration plays no similar role. It is scattered in all corners of the planet, with significant specialization in retail trade. Its development is not remotely controlled by Beijing, nor does it adhere to underlying projects of global conquest. A segment of the Chinese population simply emigrates in strict correspondence with contemporary movements of the labour force.

China has consolidated unequal trade with Latin America, but without consummating the imperial geopolitics that is still represented by the presence of the Marines, the DEA, Plan Colombia and the Fourth Fleet. Lawfare and coups perform the same function.

Those who are unaware of this difference tend to denounce China and the United States alike as aggressive powers. They situate the two contenders on the same plane and stress that they intervene indifferently in those conflicts.

But this neutralism fails to note who is primarily responsible for the tensions that shake the planet. It fails to see that the United States sends warships to its rival’s coast and raises the tone of its accusations in order to generate a climate of growing conflict.

The consequences of this positioning are especially serious for Latin America, with its stormy history of US interventions. Equating this trajectory with some equivalent conduct by China in the future confuses realities with possibilities. And it overlooks the role of potential counterweight to US domination that China could develop in a dynamic of Latin American emancipation.

On the other hand, the discourse that places China and the United States on the same plane is permeable by the anticommunist ideology of the Right. Those tirades reflect the combination of fear and misunderstanding that predominates in all the conventional analyses of China.

The Latin American spokespersons for this narrative tend to combine it with broadsides against Chinese “totalitarianism” and regional “populism.” Using the old language of the Cold War, they warn of the dangerous role of Cuba or Venezuela as pawns in a forthcoming Asian capture of the entire hemisphere. Chinaphobia encourages absurdities of all kinds.



## **FAR FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

Approaches that rightly reject the characterization of China as an imperialist power include many nuances and differences. A wide spectrum of analysts – who correctly object to its classification among the dominators – tend to include it as part of the Global South.

This view confuses China's defensive geopolitics in the conflict with the United States with membership in the segment of economically backward and politically subordinate nations. China has so far avoided the actions carried out by imperialist powers, but its conduct does not place it on the periphery, or in the universe, of dependent nations.

China has differentiated itself from the new group of "emerging" nations, becoming now a new hub for the global economy. Suffice it to note that in 1990 it accounted for less than 1% of total manufacturing exports, while today it generates 24.4% of industrial added value (Mercatante, 2020). China absorbs surplus value through firms located abroad and profits from the supply of raw materials.

In this context, it has mounted the podium of the advanced economies. Those who continue identifying it with the agglomeration of Third World countries ignore this monumental transformation.

Some authors maintain the old image of China as an area of investment by multinational corporations that exploit the huge eastern workforce and transfer their earnings to the United States or Europe (King, 2014).

This outflow was indeed present in the takeoff of the new power and persists in certain segments of production. But China has achieved its impressive growth in recent decades by retaining the bulk of that surplus.

Today the mass of funds captured through trade and foreign investment is far greater than the outward flows. One need only look at the size of its trade surplus or its financial claims to gauge what this means. China has left behind the major features of an underdeveloped economy.

The scholars who posit the continuity of underdevelopment tend to play down the development of recent decades. They tend to highlight signs of backwardness that are now of second-rate importance. The imbalances China faces derive from over-investment and processes of overproduction or over-accumulation. China has to deal with the contradictions characteristic of a developed economy.

China does not suffer the outflows that typically drain the dependent countries. It is exempt from the trade imbalance, technological deficiency, scarcity of investment or strangling of purchasing power. There are no data from today's China suggesting that its stunning economic might constitutes a mere statistical fiction.

This new power has risen in the global economic structure. It is incorrect to situate it in a place similar to the old agrarian peripheries, subordinate to the metropolitan industries (King, 2014). That is today the place occupied by the enormous cluster of African, Latin American or Asian nations which provide the basic inputs for Beijing's manufacturing machinery.

China is from time to time ranked along with the United States as the G2 powers, those that define the agenda established for the G7 of the big powers. This is hardly compatible with ranking the country in the Global South. Assigning it to the Global South cannot explain the battle it wages



against its North American rival for leadership of the digital revolution, or the leading role it has played during the coronavirus pandemic.

As a result of its accelerated development, China is now in the position of a creditor, in potential conflict with its clients in the South. The indications of those tensions are numerous. Fear that China will seize the assets that guarantee its loans has generated resistance (or cancellation of projects) in Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar or Tanzania (Hart-Landsberg, 2018).

The controversy over the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka illustrates this typical dilemma of a major creditor. The non-payment of a large debt led in 2017 to a 99-year lease of those facilities. Malaysia reviewed its agreements and questioned the accords that locate the best employment activities in Chinese territory. Vietnam raised a similar objection to the creation of a special economic zone, and investments involving Pakistan re-ignite disputes of all kinds.

China is beginning to contend with a status opposed to any membership in the Global South. At the end of 2018 there was fear that China might take control of the port of Mombasa if Kenya were to suspend payments on its liabilities (Alonso, 2019). The same concern is beginning to emerge in other countries with many commitments of doubtful collectability such as Yemen, Syria, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe (Bradsher; Krauss, 2015).

## **INDULGENT VIEWS**

Another stream of authors that is tracking the unprecedented role of today's China praises its convergence with other countries and hails the transition toward a multipolar bloc. These scenarios are expounded with simple descriptions of the challenges facing the country as it continues its upward course.

But these cheerful portraits overlook the fact that the consolidation of capitalism accentuates in China all of the imbalances already generated by overproduction and surplus capital. These tensions, in turn, accentuate inequality and deterioration of the environment. Ignoring these contradictions prevents us from noting how China's defensive international strategy is undermined by the competitive pressure imposed by capitalism.

The presentation of the country as "an empire without imperialism" – a self-centered operation – is an example of those condescending views. It posits that China is developing a respectful international demeanour so as not to humiliate its Western adversaries (Guigue, 2018). But it forgets that this coexistence is broken not only by Washington's harassment of Beijing but by the existence in China of an economy increasingly subject to the principles of profit and exploitation, which amplifies that conflict.

It is true that the current scope of capitalism is limited by the state's regulatory presence and by the official restrictions on financialization and neoliberalism. But the country already suffers from the imbalances imposed by a system of rivalry and dispossession.

The belief that a "market economy" governs in the East that is qualitatively different from capitalism and oblivious to the disruptions of that system is the enduring misunderstanding cultivated by a great world systems theorist (Arrighi, 2007: ch. 2). This interpretation fails to note that China will be unable to escape the consequences of capitalism if it continues with the as-yet unfinished restoration of that system.

Other ingenuous views of the present developments tend to characterize China's foreign policy as

“inclusive globalization.” They highlight the peaceful tone that characterizes an expansion based on business and boasting the alleged benefits shared by all participants. They also praise the “intercivilizational alliance” generated by the new global linkage of nations and cultures.

But is it possible to forge an “inclusive globalization” under capitalism? How could the principle of mutual gains be reflected in a system governed by competition and profit?

In fact, globalization has involved dramatic rifts between winners and losers, with the consequent widening of inequality. China cannot offer magic remedies for those hardships. On the contrary, it boosts their consequences by expanding its participation in economic processes governed by exploitation and profit.

So far it has managed to limit the volatile effects of that dynamic, but the ruling classes and neoliberal elites of the country are determined to break from all restraints. They press for Beijing to accept the increasing asymmetries imposed by global capitalism. Ignoring the reality of this tendency is an exercise in self-deception.

The Chinese government itself praises capitalist globalization, exalts the Davos summits and extols the virtues of free trade with vacuous praise of universal values. Some versions attempt to reconcile this claim with the basic principles of socialist doctrine. It is claimed that the Silk Road synthesizes the contemporary modalities of economic expansion analyzed by the Communist Manifesto in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

But critics of this unlikely interpretation have recalled that Marx never applauded that development (Lin Chun, 2019). On the contrary, he denounced its terrible consequences for the popular majorities of the entire planet. The irreconcilable cannot be reconciled with theoretical alchemy.

## **CONTROVERSIES OVER COOPERATION**

Another complacent view of the present course underscores the cooperation component of Chinese foreign policy. It notes that China is not responsible for the misfortunes suffered by its clients in the periphery and highlights the bona fide nature of investment powered by Beijing. It recalls as well that export strength is based on increases in productivity which in themselves do not affect the subordinated economies (Lo Dic, 2016).

But this idealization of business relations omits the objective effect of unequal exchange, which marks all transactions carried out under the aegis of global capitalism. China appropriates surpluses from the underdeveloped economies through the particular dynamic of these transactions. It obtains large profits because its productivity is superior to the average productivity of those clients. What is presented naively as a peculiar merit of China is the principle of generalized inequality that reigns under capitalism.

Affirming that China does not relegate its partners in Latin America or Africa to production of raw materials tends to assign exclusive responsibility for this misfortune to the world system. This overlooks the fact that China’s leadership is a central fact of international trade.

To suggest that China is “not to blame” for the general effects of capitalism amounts to covering up the benefits obtained by the country’s dominant classes. They profit from the weighted increase in productivity (through mechanisms of exploitation of salaried employees) and realize those earnings in the exchanges with the lagging economies.

When Chinese expansion is praised as “based more on productivity than on exploitation” (Lo, Dic, 2018), this fails to note that both components are interrelated aspects of the same process of appropriation of alienated labour.

The contrast between the vaunted productivity and the spurned exploitation is characteristic of neoclassical economic theory, which envisions the convergence in the market of distinct “factors of production,” forgetting that all of those components are based on the same extraction of surplus value. That expropriation is the only real source of all profits.

The mere recognition of China’s productive profile also tends to highlight the counterweight it has introduced to the international primacy of financialization and neoliberalism (Lo Dic, 2018). But the limits imposed on the first of these (international streams of speculation) do not dilute the support provided to the second (capitalist abuses of workers).

The reintroduction of capitalism in China has been the great incentive for the relocation of firms and the consequent cheapening of the labour force. This turn has helped to reconstruct the rate of profit in recent decades. If China were to play an effective role in international cooperation it would have to adopt internal and external strategies for the reversal of capitalism.

## **DICHOTOMIES AND SCENARIOS**

China has left behind its former status as a territory torn apart by foreign incursions. It is no longer experiencing the tragic situation it faced in recent centuries. It confronts the North American aggressor from a status far removed from the prevailing destitution in the periphery. Pentagon strategists know they cannot treat their rival as they treat Panama, Iraq or Libya.

But that consolidation of sovereignty has fragmented with China’s abandonment of its anti-imperialist traditions. The post-Mao regime has turned away from the radicalized international politics sponsored by the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement. And it has buried any gesture of solidarity with the popular struggles in the world.

This turn is the other side of its international geopolitical restraint. China avoids conflicts with the United States, without interfering in the outrages that Washington commits. The governing elite has buried all traces of sympathy with the resistances to the planet’s main oppressor.

But this turn confronts the same limits as restoration and the leap toward a dominant international status. It is subject to the unresolved dispute over the internal future of the country. The capitalist orientation favoured by the neoliberals has pro-imperialist consequences as compelling as the anti-imperialist course promoted by the Left. The conflict with the United States will directly affect these demarcations.

What are the scenarios envisioned in the conflict with the North American competitor? The hypothesis of a détente (and consequent reintegration of both powers) has been attenuated. The signs of enduring struggle are overwhelming and refute the predictions that China will be assimilated into the neoliberal order as a partner of the United States, as some writers have posited (Hung, Ho-fung, 2015).

The current context also dispels the anticipation of the gestation of a transnational capitalist class with Chinese and US participants. The choice of a path that is distinct from neoliberalism is not the only reason for this divorce (Robinson, 2017). The “Chinamerica” association – prior to the 2008 crisis – included neither amalgamations of the ruling classes nor the outlines of an emerging shared

state.

In the short term, there is the robust rise of China in the face of an obvious decline of the United States. China is winning the dispute in all areas and its recent management of the pandemic is a confirmation of this. Beijing quickly achieved control over the spread of the infection while Washington coped with an overflow of cases that left the country with one of the highest numbers of deaths.

China has also excelled in its international health assistance, in contrast to the shocking self-interest of its rival. The Chinese economy has regained its high rate of growth while its US counterpart is coping with a doubtful recovery in its level of activity. Trump's electoral defeat capped the failure of all the US operatives to subdue China.

But the medium-range scenario is more uncertain and the military, technological and financial resources maintained by North American imperialism stand in the way of any prediction as to which power will emerge victorious from the confrontation.

In general terms, it is possible to conceive of three dissimilar scenarios. Should the United States gain the upper hand it could begin to reconstitute its imperial leadership, subordinating its Asian and European partners. If, on the other hand, China manages to triumph with a capitalist free-trade strategy, its transformation as an imperial power would be confirmed.

But a victory for the Eastern giant achieved in a context of popular rebellions would completely modify the international context. It could induce China to resume its anti-imperialist stance in a process of socialist renewal. The profile of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism will be determined by whichever of these three scenarios ultimately prevails.

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## FURTHER READING

In the following articles (unfortunately, unavailable in English), Claudio Katz focuses on the major dichotomies of China's heterogeneous class structure and socio-political regime: in particular the creation in recent years of a new urban proletariat that is already mobilizing in defense of its interests; the rise of a new capitalist class heavily involved in international trade and investment but not in direct control of the state; and a bureaucratic and autocratic ruling elite that is still autonomous of this bourgeoisie. China's future evolution, he concludes, depends very much on

external circumstances, and in particular the impact of mass workers' and popular struggles in the global context.

DESCIFRAR A CHINA I. ¿DESACOPLE O RUTA DE LA  
SEDA?<https://katz.lahaine.org/b2-img/DESCIFRARACHINAI.DESACOPLEORUTADELASEDA.pdf>

DESCIFRAR A CHINA II. ¿CAPITALISMO O SOCIALISMO?  
<https://katz.lahaine.org/b2-img/DESCIFRARACHINAIL.CAPITALISMOOSOCIALISMO.pdf>

DESCIFRAR A CHINA III. PROYECTOS EN DISPUTA  
<https://katz.lahaine.org/b2-img/DESCIFRARACHINAIIL.PROYECTOSENDISPUTA.pdf>

[1] Through Pluripolarity to Socialism: A Manifesto,  
<https://internationalmanifesto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/through-pluripolarity-to-socialism-a-manifesto-final.pdf>

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## **P.S.**

• Life on left. Monday, Posted by Richard Fidler at Monday, September 06, 2021:  
<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2021/09/china-neither-imperialist-nor-part-of.html>