

Ukraine: Divisions Among The Indian and Global Left

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It was never expected that the response to the war on Ukraine of the Left internationally, would be so divided. Broadly there have been four positions held by those who consider themselves to be anti-capitalist socialists of one kind or the other. The arguments, rationalisations and justifications provided by the first three of these groups do, in some degree or the other, overlap.

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The first group (which is certainly the smallest of the four categories) includes those who fully support the Russian invasion as well as those who while not going gung-ho in supporting the invasion will neither call it an invasion nor condemn it in even the mildest of language. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation fully supports the action which it describes only as a “special military operation”. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM calls the war “unfortunate” and insists that US/NATO expansionism is the real cause forcing Russia to behave as it did. The older and smaller Communist Party of India (CPI) says much the same without using the word “unfortunate” even, and makes a meaningless general call for peace in the region. That is to say, neither of these parties make even a cursory criticism of the Russian action and put not just primary but sole blame on the US/NATO. Whatever the leaders and ideologues of these two parties in India may think privately, in public they do not even declare that Russia (and China) are now capitalist countries let alone that they are imperialist. In fact, a principal ideologue of the CPM, Vijay Prashad who has written a number of good books on the Middle East and on the Indian diaspora in the US, says that the only imperialist country in the world is the US. So France and the UK, despite their behaviour in Africa, the Middle East or elsewhere are no longer to be seen as imperialist powers despite their past. While lower order powers making military-political incursions abroad whether they be Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Israel, etc. are also absolved of any charge of being weaker imperialist countries or even sub-imperialisms. It is not just that the US is the biggest imperialist power with the ugliest historical record which it is; but that it is uniquely imperialist!. However, this claim cannot be used to deny the ugly and unjustified behaviour of either China or Russia or even the former USSR. Loyalty to the CPM/CPI, however, has generally triumphed to the point of its acolytes and leaders repeatedly defending the indefensible whether it is the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 or of Czechoslovakia in 1968 or post-Soviet Russia in Chechnya and Ukraine.

Second Group: Two Variants

The second group do condemn the Russian invasion in milder or stronger forms. But they generally avoid reference to Ukraine's 'right to self-determination' since if one were to endorse this clearly and unequivocally or even half-heartedly, then what follows as a matter of logic is endorsing the right to resist of the Ukraine people, whatever be the nature of their current government, to fight as they see fit to regain their freedom and sovereignty. However, the central preoccupation of this group of leftists is to focus on the iniquities of the US and NATO. The latter's expansionist drive is not seen as the sole reason for the invasion but it is seen as the main reason. This is the dominant prism used for understanding the why of the invasion and what the response of the Left and progressives should be to this development. Depending on whether one sees Russia as itself an imperialist country or not, there will be variation in the degree of culpability to be attached to Russia. a) Those reluctant to identify Russia as an imperialist power (even if of much lesser weight than the US) can then talk of its 'misadventures' or its 'imperial' behaviour but above all emphasize its 'reactive' character mistaken though this is or might be. They will highlight the iniquities of the Ukrainian government, its rightwing and even its supposedly far-right or Nazi character which can then serve as a kind of excuse for Russia's assault. b) Then there are those who say very clearly that Russia (and China) are imperialist powers though weaker than the US. Hence there is an inter-imperialist dimension to the Ukraine issue and a corresponding geopolitics that must be unravelled. That there is a geopolitical dimension that has to be addressed is obvious since the impact and implications of the Russian invasion are not confined to Ukraine and yes, these inter-imperialist rivalries have also been playing out within Ukraine's own internal politics.

The crucial question is how much weight to give to this inter-imperialist dimension as a causal or explanatory factor behind Russia's decision to invade. Those subscribing to approach a) given above will give much more weight to the geo-political dimension (they are reluctant to call Russia imperialist) and will in their arguments provide at least implicit rationalisations, even justifications, that will greatly soften their explicit words of formal condemnation. Supplementary arguments will be used to buttress their case. There will be talk of Kiev's repression in the Donbas region where pro-Russia separatist forces are presumably wanting to exercise their choice of political self-determination. This argument then becomes a cover of sorts for Russian intervention in the past (the 2014 takeover of Crimea) and the 'understandable' desire of Moscow today to 'counter' this drive against the more culturally Russified eastern part of the Ukraine. Focussing more attention in one's arguments on the 'Nazi' character of the government and the ruling classes for example, becomes a way of diverting attention away from the fact that it is the huge mass of ordinary working people in Ukraine who are angry, who are suffering deaths, injuries and devastations from the military assault and who are fighting back in whatever way they can. To pretend or even imply that the broad masses are dupes of their authoritarian rulers is shameful. One can certainly criticise the far-right forces and ruling government in Ukraine but there are liberals, socialists, Marxists, feminists who are very much part of the forces resisting the Russian forces. This is rarely if ever mentioned; nor is it pointed out that Ukraine's quite flawed democratic polity is less flawed than that of Putin's Russia. Instead, most efforts are made to promote the view that since the 2014 Maidan protests (supposedly engineered by Washington) the Kiev regime is basically a puppet or near-puppet regime of the US led West.

Those subscribing to approach b) will usually say a lot more about Ukraine's sovereignty being violated. They will make more noises about the suffering of the Ukrainian people and that they are resisting. They will generally be more critical of both the domestic and external behaviour of Putin and the Russian ruling classes---after all, Russia is an ambitious imperialist power. Its recent record from 1990 onwards can be brought in to defend the argument that they too are an imperialist power though not one able to match the US. So Russia's military-political interventions into Afghanistan,

Georgia, Moldova, Abkhazia, Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazakhstan, Chechnya, Armenia and Azerbaijan and its own establishment of a pact of countries over which it can exercise some degree of control and influence, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) are much more likely to be pointed out. But since this lot of leftists also claim that the primary factor in causing this war is inter-imperialist rivalries, this section of the Left will also greatly underplay the more fundamental reason for why the Russian government carried out this invasion. Ironically, this is not something that Putin and the key decision-makers and supporters around him have ever been shy of publicly voicing---that the very formation of a post-Soviet Ukraine as an independent country is unacceptable and that, in part or preferably whole, it should cease to exist and be part of a Greater Russia and subordinate to the dictates from Moscow. That Putin declared as much to the Russian people just before invading is either ignored or only very briefly mentioned in the most cursory way. No, it is US/NATO expansionism that is the main culprit alongside the geopolitical ambitions of Russia beyond the specific concern with Ukraine that must be understood to make proper sense of what has happened.

In both the cases of a) and b) it is essentially assumed that Putin is so naive that he would not recognise that his attack on Ukraine (the country had not even reached the stage of getting a NATO Membership Plan), far from weakening this western expansionism, would solidify and spur it forward towards greater hostility and efforts to militarily encroach nearer Russia's borders. It should occasion no surprise that Finland and Sweden have now decided to become members of NATO thus providing newer border outposts against Russia. It is also revealing that Putin has dismissed these developments as of little worry or consequence indicating that for him, capturing as much as he can of Ukraine and dismembering it is a much greater priority than concern about US/NATO expansionism. Both a) and b) use the language of this being a 'proxy war' between Russia and the US-led West. What an extraordinary claim! The term 'proxy war' is used in cases where within some country there is an internal conflict between two major forces, something like a civil war situation where two major external forces or blocs are militarily-politically respectively supporting opposing sides. The 'external' aspect is then to be seen as the major arena of contestation rather than the internal conflict itself. The geopolitical dimension is given a higher political status and concern than the national dimension. Is it any wonder then that upholders of this approach go on and on about the global impact of the war in Ukraine, of how global food supplies are being affected and how a new Cold War is emerging and how this new and growing tension is making things globally worse and dangerous. All true of course. But this then should lead to a more severe and forthright condemnation of the culprit Russia which has caused it and should reinforce support from the international Left for Ukrainian resistance. Moreover, to call this basically a 'proxy war' is absurd. It is an actual war launched by one side, Russia against another capitalist country which is not itself an imperialist country or a weaker imperialist power or even a sub-imperialist one. The use of the term 'proxy war' disguises what is the central characteristic---that for Ukraine this is a war of national liberation against a foreign power out to crush and subordinate it and that Ukraine therefore deserves the support of the international left which must always be both unconditional in defending its right to self-determination and yet always prepared to be critical and even opposed to the ways its government and other forces may go about conducting this struggle.

As for the possible advocacy and exercise of the right to self-determination in Donbas and Crimea, this cannot ever be justifiably done under the military jackboot of a foreign occupier. The military takeover of Crimea in 2014 followed by a referendum under occupation was a deliberate and ruthless violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum whereby Russia, in return for retrieving Ukraine's nuclear arsenal (then the third largest in the world) promised never to violate its territorial integrity---a betrayal that gets little or no mention among the geopolitical preoccupations of the Left rationalisers of Russian behaviour.

Third Group

This third group is for peace and an end to militarism. It notes the suffering of the Ukrainian people and condemns Russia for what it has done. But for various reasons---the danger of further military escalation, the nefarious designs of the US for wanting to 'bleed' Russia over time by continuing the war---it wants a settlement as quickly as possible. This group is therefore against US/NATO supplying of arms to Ukraine---a posture also held by the first and second group of leftists discussed above. Another common position held by these three groups is that economic sanctions against Russia should be opposed because these will hurt ordinary working people economically. That they are in fact endorsing and supporting an undeclared regime of sanctions against the Ukrainian people (their desired embargo on arms) whereby on a mass scale the suffering endured by Ukrainians---millions displaced as refugees, physical deaths and injuries, destruction of homes and devastation of everyday life is far beyond what can happen in Russia through sanctions---does not even seem to register on the minds of these leftists. How is this settlement to be achieved? Why, through diplomacy presumably! And how is that going to happen? Is a ceasefire and settlement to be somehow imposed on the belligerents or at least made more possible through pressures applied from outside powers? Since Russia is much the more powerful side in this war isn't it logical that it would be easier to achieve a settlement by pressuring the weaker side, the Ukrainians? In brief, what follows from this logic is that for the peace advocates, in the name of a practical and realistic assessment of the balance of forces on the ground, the least consideration should be given to what the Ukrainians themselves think or want.

Ukrainians want justice; they want a retreat of Russia, they want reparations. Their only hope of being able to move some way at least towards these goals depends on changing the course of this war in a direction whereby the costs to Russia, material and political, become progressively higher. Weapons support, whatever be the motivations of the suppliers which are not the same as those of the Ukrainian people fighting, is vital. Certainly, those motivations can be fiercely criticised by left voices but solidarity with the people of Ukraine is primary. They have to decide whether and when to stop fighting. We on the outside can disagree with tactics, strategies and policies and warn about this or that. But we must respect their freedom of agency to decide as they see fit because they are the people oppressed! On this issue the position of Chomsky and other peace votaries like him is not to be upheld or supported.

Fourth Group

This fourth group aligns itself with what the anti-Stalinist Marxists and Socialists and Socialist Feminists and progressive Anarchists of Ukraine themselves say. Listen to us, they say. We are as much against the US and NATO as you in the West and elsewhere are. But this war is not about Russian security concerns but primarily about its imperialist ambitions. We are fighting this war; we need political, moral, material support and yes a continual supply of weapons to enable us to effectively resist this military onslaught. The more determinedly the international left supports us the stronger can the Ukrainian left become internally, for we are much more aware than you outsiders of our own class and internal divisions and its dangers even as we are broadly united as we must be, in opposing the Russian military and its government. We, like leftists internationally, also want a dismantling of NATO which has now become more difficult to attain. But what about the dismantling of all imperialist blocs like the CSTO about which you say little or nothing?

Any end to this war, whether temporary or prolonged or permanent will be shaped by the course this war will take. And that trajectory will itself depend on the strength and durability of the will of the Ukrainian people to keep resisting this great injustice done to them. The calculations of the US and

other Western powers, that currently say they support Ukraine, are always subject to change and to the proclivity of their elites/governments to making unprincipled deals with others including Russia if they think this will best suit their 'national interests'. The international revolutionary and democratic left should be the most principled supporters in the fight against injustices everywhere.

Even as we criticise those sections of the Western left who are not prepared to give unconditional yet critical support to Ukraine and go on and on about the Russian invasion as basically a reaction to the US and its allies, we can be grateful that at least they are strongly critical of and opposed to their own governments for their imperialist behaviour or collusion in imperialist pacts like NATO. In India, however, too many liberals as well as many of those who see themselves as on the left refuse to similarly attack the stand of the Indian government but actually applauded its so-called neutrality on the war in Ukraine. This is an India which is, in all but name, a strategic ally of the US and whose own imperialist ambitions to become a dominant regional (perhaps global) power require it to maintain a strong military relationship with Russia and Israel and with the US as well. India has the second largest army in the world. It has the third largest military budget and is the fourth largest purchaser of arms. Its healthcare expenditure as a proportion of GDP is the fourth lowest in the world and it has the largest absolute number of malnourished and undernourished people in the world. India itself is a lower order imperialist power with ambitions to become an ever more powerful imperialist one. Why should leftists support such an orientation let alone cover it up with false references to India having a foreign policy of 'strategic autonomy' or 'neutrality'?

In a world divided into separate nation-states the left everywhere must always also take a stand against the pernicious, immoral and unprincipled positions adopted by its own national governments. This, much of the Indian organised left has failed to do. The position of the Radical Socialist (RS) group is clear. That the Communist Party of India Marxist Leninist-Liberation (CPIML-Liberation) has also taken a forthright stand condemning the Russian invasion and supporting the Ukrainian resistance is to its credit. The Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) does condemn Russia and declare its support for Ukrainian sovereignty and resistance. However, its public statement is a very long and rambling text which spends most of its time making generalities about 'proletarians of the world unite' and of 'turning the imperialist war into a civil war and revolution'. The statement has more to do with propagandising the general perspectives of the Party than with analysing or focusing on the specificities of the Russia-Ukraine issue. One of the more interesting sidelights revealed in the text is that the CPI-Maoist calls China a "social imperialist" country. This means it sees China as still not a capitalist country but one which turned towards social imperialism presumably after the leadership of Mao ended. That the two biggest parties of the mainstream Indian left--the CPM and CPI--have neither condemned Russia nor the stand of the Indian government nor offered solidarity to the Ukrainian people, is but another symptom of why we need to build a newer revolutionary and democratic left in India.

An Addendum

Many of those who position themselves on the anti-capitalist radical Left nonetheless have viewed the war in Ukraine through a lens which saw the primary conflict as between a much stronger and more hegemonic imperialist power the US and a weaker one Russia. Even for those who didn't give primary status to this imperialist face-off, some did believe that this would require them to more generally support the lesser imperialism since counter-balancing against the stronger US (and allies) opens up greater spaces globally for progressives forces and struggles against capitalism. Another term when used on the left buys into a similar kind of thinking. This is the belief that in today's world there is real merit in supporting the development of 'multipolarity' as against a unipolar order represented by the US. In effect, the way is made clear for these sections of the Left to, in some way

or the other, take sides with the “lesser evil” imperialism and endorse its regressive foreign policy behaviour.

A Realist Discourse

This language of ‘poles’ and ‘polarity’ (whether of unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity) is a standard refrain in the Realist discourse on international relations and foreign policy behaviour and is used by rightwing and liberal thinkers who have no interest whatsoever in fighting against capitalism, domestically or globally. So why do leftists who believe they are inspired by Marxism, adopt the same terminology not only using the term ‘multipolarity’ as a conceptual tool but also ascribing virtues to it as a desired outcome?

In this Realist discourse, states are seen as the primary actors on the world stage. But the state entity that they refer to is understood as a ‘national territorial totality’ when it is actually a much smaller set of apparatuses that is encased within a much wider social formation involving all kinds of tensions and relations between the state and civil society, between different sections in that larger social order, with above all, the division between classes. All states are class states that are structurally biased towards the interests of their ruling classes. In the post-1990 overwhelmingly capitalist world we live in today, these are the interests of capitalists, weaker or stronger, more or less independent from others. However, this much more important reality is covered up and obscured by the notion of the state in its foreign policy acting as a ‘national territorial totality’. The fact that world politics is very much shaped by the competition among the most powerful such states, each pursuing the interests domestically and externally of their own capitalist classes and TNCs, is similarly obscured.

Talk of polarity (single, dual or multi-) is another way of shifting the understanding of vertical power relations away from its social and class nature to a supposedly horizontal set of power relations between a few ‘poles’, each of which is also understood as a ‘national territorial totality’. A state defined in such a way is then axiomatically pursuing the ‘national interest’ and to question this means one is being anti-national and unpatriotic. There is all too often much wisdom in the saying that “patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.”

Revolutionary Marxists should (a) unconditionally but critically support oppressed nations subject to military invasions by imperialist powers even if they are capitalist and autocratic e.g., opposing the US invasions of 1991 and 2003 of Iraq. b) They should support progressive anti-capitalist forces and struggles in all countries (whether liberal democratic or authoritarian) against their own capitalist ruling classes even if these capitalists are feeble and subordinate to other ruling classes in other countries. c) It is important to fight for greater democratization even within a capitalist country and to oppose any steps being taken toward greater authoritarianism internally. However, when it comes to the external bullying and imperialist behaviour of the stronger countries it is not their internal political character i.e., whether they are liberal democratic or authoritarian that is the key explanatory factor but their capitalist character. All such imperialist behaviour and efforts to establish their respective ‘spheres of influence’---a euphemism for bullying and trying to subordinate in one way or the other weaker neighbouring and even more distant countries---must be opposed.

No Longer the Cold War Era

What about the idea that multipolarity provides greater global space for progressive and revolutionary struggles? In today’s world this is a dangerous delusion. Today’s world order is

fundamentally different from that in the Cold War era. Then the world was not 'Bipolar'---a deeply misleading term---but had a systemic divide. That is to say, there were two fundamentally different socio-economic systems, a capitalist vs. a non-capitalist bloc arraigned against each other. The existence of such a non-capitalist but far from socialist bloc meant that an objective space was created for progressive struggles in the developing world to advance, most notably de-colonization. But even here the primary reason for successful liberation came from the internal struggle for national liberation howsoever much it may have been helped by outside material and political support. Even so, in this misnamed 'Socialist or 'Communist' bloc, because of their governments ridiculous belief in the possibility of "socialism in one country", the nationalism became much more important than socialist aspirations which required the strongest commitment to the principles of Proletarian Internationalism. The end result was nationalist hostilities and rivalries---Stalin vs. Tito, the Sino-Soviet split, the USSR against Albania, China militarily attacking Vietnam (1979), Kampuchea's war with Vietnam, not to mention the diplomatic games played between the USSR and the US, the former's repressions against progressive and pro-Socialist struggles in Hungary (!956) and Czechoslovakia(1968), and the shameful entente between Mao's China and the US under Nixon. The best characterisation of the external behaviour of the most powerful non-capitalist regimes of USSR and China is that they were deeply contradictory---both progressive and reactionary.

Today's world order is very different. The most powerful countries are now capitalist and imperialist. Different imperialist powers (US, Russia, China and a few others) are interested in supporting regime change in other countries if this can result in governments that are more amenable to their own regime. Even better if after such changes they become subordinate or best of all if they become basically puppets. Of course over time, even such alliance arrangements and networks because of imperialist competitions will be subject to shifting compositions among their country-members. But the one thing to be absolutely sure about is that none of these imperialist powers want to promote or see anti-capitalist regimes emerge anywhere. Capitalist competition will always create temporary or longer term winners and losers as well as shifts in power rankings. But what remains the common global commitment is that the world must remain capitalist.

Nor do the imperialist countries care whether their allies are internally more democratic or authoritarian--- the crucial thing is that they remain allies and subordinates. As for the weaker and smaller countries which are capitalist or seeking to establish a more stable or independent capitalism, they too are bitterly opposed to progressive anti-capitalist politics and struggles. Why then should revolutionary leftists see any virtue in today's world of such inter-imperialist rivalries? We should not be fighting to shift the world from a "super-imperialism" to a "multi-imperialism" but against all imperialist and capitalist states. Our strategic allies in this much longer term domestic and global struggle are not governments but progressive and anti-capitalist forces and organisations everywhere.

From the time of Marx till the 1990s despite all ups and downs, the banner of internationalism was upheld by the Left. Today, contra the hopes of Marx, it is the biggest capitalists of the world who are saying "Despite all differences let us try and unite to protect and strengthen the world capitalist order since we having nothing to lose, certainly not our privileges"!

The struggle for the Revolutionary Left to once again capture the banner of internationalism has now become more necessary than ever.

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