

'Empire-ism' vs a Marxist analysis of imperialism: Continuing the debate with Argentinian economist Claudio Katz on Great Power rivalry, Russian imperialism and the Ukraine War

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Argentinian economist Claudio Katz has published a lengthy reply [1] to my critique of his analysis and political conclusions about Russian imperialism and the Ukraine War. [2] I strongly welcome such a debate since the issues involved - starting from Great Power rivalry to major wars (like the current one in the Ukraine) - are key questions of the present historic period and will remain so in the foreseeable future. Likewise, I appreciate Katz's critical comments since such a debate can only be stimulating for Marxist thinking. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced by his arguments. In fact, while I respect his serious approach to the debate, I consider his theoretical concept as a basis for an ideological whitewash for Russian and Chinese imperialism.

Let's go in *medias res*. In my previous reply, I presented an analysis that combined a theoretical conception of world capitalism in the current period with concrete facts and statistics. I illustrated that the world is - contrary to Katz's claim - neither "unipolar" nor is it dominated by only "one Empire". It is rather characterized by the existence of several imperialist Great Powers (primarily the U.S., China, Western Europe, Russia and Japan) which are in a state of rivalry and temporary alliances. Given the global decline of capitalism - most sharply expressed in the current Great Depression of the world economy, the food and energy crisis, the climate crisis and wars - the rivalry between these powers has massively accelerated in the past years. For the same reason, individual imperialist powers try to expand their sphere of influence in the so-called Global South or, as orthodox Marxists call it, the semi-colonial capitalist countries. Hence the military interventions, wars and occupations that we have seen in the past two decades (e.g. the U.S. and other Western powers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia; Russia in Georgia, Syria, Kazakhstan, Ukraine; France in Afghanistan and in several countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, etc.). [3]

Katz does not attempt to refute the concrete facts that I have provided to underline my analysis. Instead, in a dogmatic manner characteristic of structuralism, he claims that our analysis could not be correct because it does not recognize the changes in capitalism and the global hegemony of an "empire" led by the U.S. Or to put it in his own words: "Our approach underlines the presence of an imperial system that preserves the dominant role of the United States, in close connection with alter-imperial partners in Europe and co-imperial appendages in other hemispheres. Washington continues to lead the web of alliances forged to deal with the so-called socialist camp."

As it turns out, our opponent takes us into the realm of structuralist philosophy of history, which is rich in concepts but poor in facts. This has both advantages as well as disadvantages. On one hand,

it makes a concrete debate about the dynamics of the current world situation and the relation of forces between the Great Powers pretty difficult. On the other hand, it allows us to discuss the present developments in a broader, historical context.

In the end, it is essential that we discuss Katz's conception of imperialism since he views world development exclusively through the schematic lenses of a dogmatic version of the *dependencia* theory. Unfortunately, such lenses are made up of alabaster glass and therefore our opponent can only recognize a single "empire" and not the contradictory reality of several imperialist Great Powers.

Basically, the failure of Katz's analysis can be briefly summarized as follows:

- He has an ahistorical understanding of imperialism in the tradition of the American world-system theorist Immanuel Wallerstein.
- Hence, he knows only one Empire and denies the existence of several rivaling Great Powers. Essentially, imperialism for Katz equals the domination by a single Empire.
- He denies not only that China has become an imperialist Great Power but even that it is capitalist.
- He advocates a policy which identifies the "Empire" as the main enemy against which socialists need to lend support to other powers (including Russia and China).
- He sympathizes only with struggles of oppressed people which rebel against the U.S. (or its allies) but opposes such struggles if such are directed against Russia or China (or their allies).

In the following, we will limit ourselves to reply to the most important theses in Katz's essay.

Imperialism: what it is and what it is not

The problem begins with a mistaken conception of imperialism. He rejects the orthodox Marxist analysis, which views imperialism as a specific epoch of capitalism that began at the turn of the 20th century with the domination of the world by monopolies and their Great Powers. Instead, he provides the following concept:

"Imperialism constitutes in our understanding a device that guarantees the international order of exploitation. It ensures the capture of resources of the dependent countries by the capitalists at the center through the use of force or indirect coercion. Pröbsting similarly understands that an imperialist state profits from its dominant position in order to nourish the oppressor classes at the expense of other states and nations. But the historical characterization of this mechanism does not coincide. In our view, imperialism has been present since the beginnings of capitalism and has mutated along with that social regime. It has been qualitatively different from pre-capitalist empires, and its familiar early 20th century modalities were succeeded by a more collective coordination, under US command."

This quote summarizes the differences quite clearly. While we consider imperialism as a specific (final) stage of capitalism, Katz views imperialism as the aggressive foreign policy of the ruling class. Consequently, he views imperialism not as a modern phenomenon related to capitalist monopolies, capital export, domination of the world by a few capitalist Great Powers, etc. For him, it is rather a policy that has existed for about five centuries since capitalism came into existence. (At one point in his essay, Katz even speaks about "imperialism ... in antiquity")

We did already point out in our last essay that Katz's approach bears important similarities with the well-known revisionist theoretician Karl Kautsky against whom Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky

published several sharp polemics. In his rejoinder, Katz strongly denies such a relation. However, in his essay under discussion, Katz demonstrates once again his closeness to Kautsky's theory:

"First of all, we must be clear about what we understand by imperialism. This word is used all the time today, but the more people talk about it and discuss it, the more indefinite it becomes, which of course makes understanding very difficult. By now, the meaning of the word imperialism has expanded so far that all the manifestations of modern capitalism are included in it – cartels, protective tariffs, the domination of finance, as well as colonial policy. In that sense, naturally, imperialism is a vital necessity for capitalism. But that knowledge is just the flattest tautology; all it says is that capitalism cannot exist without capitalism. If we take the word not in that general sense, but in its historical determination, as it originated in England, then it signifies only a particular kind of political endeavor, caused, to be sure, by modern capitalism, but by no means coincident with it. [4]"

Hence, we can only repeat Lenin's criticism when he said that "Kautsky divorces imperialist politics from imperialist economics, he divorces monopoly in politics from monopoly in economics..." [5] Katz too separates the aggressive foreign policy from the interests of the imperialist Great Powers and the capitalist monopolies. As we will see below, his superficial understanding of imperialism which reduces the issues to the sphere of aggressive foreign policy, has profound consequences for his whole analysis as well as for his political conclusions.

Related to this methodical weakness, Katz follows in the footsteps of the American world-system theorist Immanuel Wallerstein by identifying imperialism with domination by an empire. Since the mid-20th century, this has been the U.S. It is telling that in his whole essay, Katz does not speak so much about "imperialism" but rather prefers the category "imperial system". This is a result of his respecting Wallerstein's view that capitalism has been dominated by one empire in each cycle of different epochs in the past five centuries.

This is a very one-sided view. While it is of course true that usually there has been one power that was stronger than others, the characteristic feature of capitalism is not so much complete domination by one power but rather competition and rivalry of various capitalists as well as of states. In fact, it is such rivalry which has been a driving force of development. Essentially, Katz's concept is not so much a theory of imperialism but rather of "Empire-ism".

This weakness relates, by the way, to the mechanistic, undialectical method of Katz's structuralism, which ignores the centrality of motion as a result of contradictions and the unity of opposites. Lenin once noted in his philosophical writings on materialist dialectic that "development is the 'struggle' of opposites." [6] Unfortunately, Katz has not sipped from this cup of wisdom.

Class interests or 'aggressive vs. defensive powers'?

As readers of our past contributions will be aware, the key feature of the difference between Katz and myself is the assessment of world capitalism. Is it, as Katz claims, a system dominated by one "empire" (led by the U.S.) or is it, as I contend, a system which is characterized by the domination of several imperialist powers that are in rivalry with each other and try to expand their spheres of influence in the semi-colonial world (or the "Global South").

The result of Katz's conception is that he underestimates the contradictions within his so-called "empire" – i.e. the different interests between the U.S. and its allies in Western Europe and Asia. Basically, this is because his concept of "empire" does not allow him to recognize the existence of imperialist national states with a monopoly bourgeoisie at the top that has its own class interests.

At the same time, Katz faces the challenge that the decline of U.S. imperialism and its hegemonic position has become an obvious fact. However, he claims that while the U.S. “empire” tries to keep its dominance via an aggressive foreign policy (“imperialist”), its challengers – like Russia and China – would only “defend” their “natural interests” in the struggle for “their rightful place in the world”:

“Our approach underlines the presence of an imperial system that preserves the dominant role of the United States, in close connection with alter-imperial partners in Europe and co-imperial appendages in other hemispheres. Washington continues to lead the web of alliances forged to deal with the so-called socialist camp. (...) The US setback is also highlighted by our approach. But we underline the manifest preponderance of conflicts opposing the imperial system, with the powers excluded from this framework. NATO stalks Russia ... The Atlantic Alliance also harasses Russia ... The Atlantic Alliance also harasses China ... In our opinion, the dynamics of the imperial system generate aggressive tendencies commanded by the US leadership, with hostile countries responding with defensive strategies.”

This approach pervades the whole essay of our opponent. Hence, he criticizes our statement that all imperialist powers have interests to expand their spheres of influence at the costs of their rivals and that, therefore, it does not make sense to qualify them with categories like “aggressive” and “defensive”. On such a basis, he insists on siding with the weaker power against the stronger “empire”, since the latter would be the main enemy:

“But the critic omits the facts. NATO’s renewed expansion on Russia’s border had no counterpart in the defunct Warsaw Pact. Ukraine moved closer to the Atlantic Alliance without any Western European country negotiating such partnerships with Moscow. Nor did the Kremlin imagine setting up a synchronized bombing system against US cities similar to that deployed by its enemy among its Caribbean allies. This asymmetry has been so naturalized that Pröbsting himself ignores who is primarily responsible for imperial incursions. Our objector considers that the category “harassment” is meaningless in a Marxist discussion of power rivalries. This concept does not fit into his assessments of imperialism in terms of competitiveness, productivity, rate of surplus value or percentage of profit. But the discarded notion is very relevant for determining responsibilities in war tensions.”

Based on such a conception, Katz views Putin’s invasion in Ukraine as a defensive act. The same for Beijing’s claim to the whole South China Sea at the cost of all other countries in this region. We limit ourselves to just two brief quotes from his essay:

“Pröbsting’s view deprives the current war in Ukraine of any geopolitical reading. His approach tends to look at this confrontation as a simple dispute over the spoils of a country with enormous food and energy resources. Our approach instead highlights the defensive purposes of the Russian incursion vis-à-vis NATO, the geopolitical goals of controlling the post-Soviet space, and the domestic motivations of a president interested in prolonging his term in office.

“In the case of China, Pröbsting’s postulation is more implausible. He claims that Beijing has increased its military spending and operates as the world’s fifth largest arms seller, to match its US rival. But he omits any concrete analysis of the conflict. China rejects the US demand to internationalize its coastal space and resorts to measures to control fisheries, shipping lanes and offshore gas reserves. It does not send ships to sail in the vicinity of New York or California. It exercises its sovereignty within a limited radius,

which contrasts with the huge maritime areas under US control. It is absurd to present the Pentagon's deployment in the vicinity of Taiwan as an incursion equivalent to the international expansion of the Silk Road. They are not actions deployed on the same plane. The terms that Pröbsting dismisses (decline, aggression, offensive) are crystal clear in the China Sea."

These two examples reveal very clearly the unmaterialistic, moralistic approach behind Katz's approach. Basically, Katz thinks that Great Powers have an "entitlement" to spheres of influence. According to this approach, Ukraine and the whole of the former Soviet Union (which is basically the whole territory of the old Tsarist Empire until 1917) "belong" to Russia. It is Moscow's - and not Washington's right - to put these areas under its control. The same in East Asia. According to Katz, China is entitled to control the South China Sea (including its islands and resources). Hence, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia - countries with a combined population of half a billion - have bad luck, sorry guys, this is Beijing's territory!

I am sure that Katz will protest against my charge but, basically, he accepts the logic of the notorious Monroe Doctrine. At that time, in 1823, the U.S. imposed its foreign policy position that Latin America would be its backyard and European powers - at that time the hegemonic "empire" - must stay out. Effectively, Katz calls to accept Moscow's and Beijing's version of the Monroe Doctrine.

In other words, Katz promotes a concept of "just" imperialism - each Great Power (we could also say each "empire" if Katz prefers this terminology) has the right to have its sphere of influence. Russia gets its old Tsarist Empire, China gets Asia, Western Europe gets, let us say, Eastern Europe and Africa and the U.S. gets Latin America. Maybe this is the kind of "multipolar order" with a "peaceful coexistence" of several Great Powers, about which Katz and like-minded Putinista ideologists are dreaming? In any case, we are sure that many Latin American friends of Katz would rightly object to such a vision.

Furthermore, Katz's concept of "aggressive" and "defensive" powers is alien to a materialist conception, which is based on the class character and interests of Great Powers. Separating between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" spheres of influence for Great Powers can only get you into hot water. Based on such an approach, one should have supported Germany in 1914 as it clearly was disadvantaged in terms of colonial possessions compared to the vast empires of Britain, France and Russia. On the other hand, Hitler's invasions in Saarland, Rhineland, Austria and Sudetenland in 1935-38 could not be branded as such since he only reclaimed "German" territories. Turning to more recent events, it is certainly true that NATO did expand in Eastern Europe. But then, Russia is also expanding its sphere of influence in new regions. Just think about Syria and Libya. Or, more recently, its advances in Mali and other African countries, which have been traditional spheres of influence of French imperialism. What is "aggressive" from one point of view, is often "defensive" from another. These are useless, subjectivist and moralistic categories which do not help to understand the class character of Great Power policy.

It is likely that Katz will accuse us of supporting Washington's interference in Ukraine or in the South China Sea. But we do not. In fact, we oppose each and every imperialist Great Power. There is no "just" imperialism and no Great Power - neither in East nor in West - deserves support by socialists.

The real causes for the U.S. hegemony among the imperialist powers in the post-1945 period

Katz claims that the orthodox Marxist theory of imperialism is not valid because after World War II the U.S. became a hegemonic power, or – to use his words – an “empire”. As a result, he emphasizes, there has been no war between Washington and its European or Japanese allies since 1945:

“The old pattern of inter-imperialist clash was thus altered, belying the durability that Pröbsting postulates. This change introduces a striking exception to his model, which does not provoke the critic’s reflections. If inter-imperialist wars are intrinsic to capitalism because of the automatic translation of economic rivalry into military confrontation, how could such an outbreak be frozen for such a prolonged period of time? This alteration already indicates the existence of more serious underlying processes than the pure sequence of competition transformed into war. Pröbsting’s principle does not apply with the forcefulness assumed by its enunciator. (...) But none of these narrow disagreements had any military correlates. The United States never considered a military response to its partners’ insubordination. The armed consequences of tensions between Western powers disappeared completely after 1945.”

At another point, Katz asks:

“He [Pröbsting – ed.] fails to note that the current clashes continue to be framed by the same alliances of the second half of the twentieth century and the old oppositions between NATO and Russia or China. If the inter-imperialist dispute of 1914-1918 has reappeared, why does the geopolitical configuration that emerged in 1945 persist?”

It seems to us that Katz superficially replaces a Marxist analysis of the socio-economic causes of world politics with geographic factors. Germany and Russia fought each other in two devastating wars in 1914-18 as well as in 1941-45. Superficially, these were the same kind of wars between the same two countries. But, in reality, the first was an inter-imperialist war in which socialists opposed both sides while the second was a war between an imperialist power (Germany) and a degenerated workers’ state (Soviet Union) in which socialists sided with the latter, irrespective of the Stalinist dictatorship.

Similarly, we have to approach other cases of world politics and conflicts and alliances between states in the same way. China was a powerful empire until the mid-19th century that expanded and oppressed other peoples (e.g. the Uyghurs, Tibetans, Koreans, Vietnamese). However, with Britain’s Opium Wars, a rapid decline of the Middle Kingdom began and it transformed into a semi-colony harassed and humiliated by the European powers and later also by Russia and Japan. However, with the Chinese Revolution in 1949 another radical social transformation took place, and the country became a Stalinist degenerated workers’ state which, again, experienced another fundamental social transformation half a century later.

We see, a state in one and the same country can have different class characters in different historical epochs. Hence, one must not be fixated on the geographical location of states but has to analyze their political and socio-economic character. Likewise, Great Powers can be in conflict with each other in one historic period but can become allies in a different one as new political and economic factors come up.

Basically, relations between Great Powers cannot be understood in isolation but rather have to be viewed in the context of fundamental class contradictions within a given historical stage of a mode of production. In principle, Great Powers are necessarily in rivalry with each other, like capitalists who compete. But such rivalry or competition does not preclude temporary cooperation or alliances. And some states (or monopolies) can create a cartel in order to defeat other, more dangerous opponents. All this does not remove the fundamental capitalist or imperialist nature of such states, and neither

does it abolish the contradictions between these. However, in viewing the relations between states, Marxists take into account other, more fundamental contradictions. The most important of these is the antagonism between classes which means, in the age of capitalism, the contradiction between the bourgeois and the proletariat. In the epoch of the final stage of capitalism – monopoly capitalism or imperialism – this fundamental contradiction between classes creates another important antagonism: between the small group of imperialist Great Powers and the large majority of the world population which lives in (semi-)colonial countries.

It should be added that for a certain historic period, the amalgamation of the contradictions – between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between the imperialist states and the (semi-)colonies and between the Great Powers – created the phenomenon of degenerated workers' states. These countries – the USSR, China, Eastern Europe, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Cuba – experienced social transformation resulting in the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a planned economy. At the same time, the working class did not exert political power (except in the early years of Soviet Russia) but was rather dominated by the dictatorship of the Stalinist bureaucracy. [7]

The emergence of such degenerated workers' states (often wrongly called "socialist" countries) had profound consequences for the relationship between the imperialist Great Powers. This process, in combination with the tremendous changes in the Global South – anti-colonial liberation struggles in East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa, various uprisings and civil wars in Latin America, crisis and collapse of the old colonial empires of France and Britain, etc. – pushed the imperialist powers to join forces in order to keep their dominating position in the world order.

The creation of such an alliance – and this was an important difference to the situation after 1918 – was enhanced by two important factors. First, the growth of productive forces and the "Long Boom" of the capitalist world economy from the late 1940s to the early 1970s – a development which allowed the ruling class to offer concessions to the proletariat as well as to reach compromises between the imperialist states. [8]

The second factor was the specific relationship of forces between the Great Powers. Germany and Japan were defeated, and France and Britain were substantially weakened – particularly in relation to the U.S. In other words, a clear hierarchy had been established among the imperialist states.

Contrary to the assumption of Katz and the world-system theory, this did not mean that the European and Asian Great Powers were no longer imperialist states in their own right but would have become part of the U.S. Empire. This was clearly not the case. But these were imperialist states which – because of the above-mentioned specific conditions of the post-war period – were forced to enter a long-term alliance with the U.S., with the latter in a hegemonic position. In short, more fundamental class contradictions forced the imperialist power to temporarily soft-pedal their rivalry in order to safeguard their collective class interests.

As a result, there were no armed conflicts between the imperialist Great Powers (albeit a few wars did take place where these powers took opposing sides like the Suez War in 1956). However, this did not mean that the period was peaceful. There were a number of bloody wars in the Global South with direct or indirect involvement of imperialist powers, the USSR or China (e.g. the Korean War or the Vietnam War).

In addition, there was the Cold War between NATO and the USSR (in which the Stalinist bureaucracy of China lent tacit support to the U.S., after Nixon's visit, and even invaded Vietnam, an important ally of Moscow, in 1979). This Cold War was several times close to a hot war (e.g. during the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962 or in 1983) and ended only with the implosion of the Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe after a wave of popular uprisings in 1989-91.

Finally, a brief look to the history of the 19th century is also helpful to see why Katz is mistaken to interpret the temporary lack of armed conflicts between the imperialist states as proof of his thesis that these would be no longer individual Great Powers with their own interests but simply part of a global hegemonic empire led by the U.S. After a quarter of a century of devastating wars which ended with the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the continent experienced hardly any armed clashes between the European power. And after the short Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, the continent underwent a period of peace ... until the largest war began in 1914, followed by an even more devastating confrontation in 1939-45. Had the European powers become part of an Empire in the period before 1914, without their individual, rivaling interests? Surely not, as history did show.

Or, to give another example. Britain and France were at war for most of the time between the late 17th century and 1815. However, since then they had stopped fighting each other and became close allies in World War I and II and since. Again, this did not mean that they had stopped being individual Great Powers, but rather reflected the reality that they were facing more important challenges which made them subordinate their differences.

Materialist class analysis vs geographism: The period after 1991

Katz believes his thesis about the U.S.-led empire, with the EU and Japan only as integral subordinates, has been vindicated by the continuing alliance between these states since the collapse of the Stalinist USSR in 1991. He thinks so even more because this alliance is in conflict - meanwhile one can speak about a new Cold War - with Russia and China:

“The mystery that Pröbsting does not solve is the continuing contrast between the unified Western Alliance and the two adversaries [Russia and China - ed.] excluded from that network.”

But, in fact, this mystery is not so difficult to solve. First, there are numerous indicators which reflect that both European as well as Japanese imperialism are striving to become more independent powers. This is the driving force between the EU's attempts to pursue an independent trade and defense policy. Just think about the threats of sanctions in 2021 because of Germany's insistence to keep the Nord Stream II pipeline with Russia (a problem which was “solved” by mysterious explosions at undersea pipelines in the course of the Ukraine War), the projects to increase the EU's independent military institutions and to build its own missiles defense system, etc. Or take the current conflict between Washington and Brussels because of Biden's *Inflation Reduction Act* - a gigantic state-capitalist subsidy program for corporations - which provoked EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager to warn the U.S. “I think one war is enough”. [9] In the case of Japan, we can refer to the strategy initiated by the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who proclaimed the necessity to build a fully independent and proactive Japan that is “able to defend itself”.

It is true, as Katz objects, that this has not resulted in a collapse of the Western allied institutions as these remain dominated by the U.S.:

“But Pröbsting loses sight of the coexistence of this economic decline with Washington's continued military leadership. This divorce is a fact underestimated by the critic. The United States has not lost war muscle in proportion to its productive regression and its rivals in the West have validated rather than exploited this anomaly. NATO remains under the unchanging reign of the Pentagon.”

There are several reasons for this development. First, the ruling class in Europe and Japan can not end their participation in military alliances with the U.S. from one day to another. It requires a number of years to build a strong independent military industry which, again, requires a gigantic

expansion of the military budget. Such a shift is only possible via a radical transformation of domestic policy since it means that governments have to massively slash expenses in other sectors. The continuing strong support of Japan's population for its "pacifist" constitution – despite a decade of Abe's militarism – reflects the challenges of the ruling class in such countries. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Germany.

However, the main reason for this is that the dynamic of rivalry between Great Powers of North America, Western Europe, and Japan has been countered by another, opposite development. This is the emergence of Russia and China as imperialist powers. As we demonstrated in our last essay with various statistics, China has become – beside the U.S. – the largest capitalist power in terms of industrial production, trade, number of corporations, billionaires, etc. It is no accident that US President Joe Biden's recently published strategy paper states unambiguously that Beijing represents the most important challenge for the U.S.: "The PRC, by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective." [10]

Both Russia as well as China had been important empires with long traditions until the Opium Wars in the 1840s in the case of China, and until the socialist October Revolution in 1917 in the case of Russia. With the abolition of capitalism in these countries, these two states were no longer imperialist. However, the huge programs of industrialization and military armament in their Stalinist periods laid the material fundament for another transformation, after the restoration of capitalism in the early 1990s had taken place. After a crisis-ridden decade, Putin managed to make Russia an imperialist power again in the early 2000s. [11] And another decade later, China had accumulated enough economic and military strength to join the league of imperialist Great Powers. [12]

It should not be difficult to understand that China replacing the old Western powers as the largest producer and exporter of capitalist commodities (and increasingly also of capital) constitutes a threat for Washington, Brussels and Tokyo. And, in this context, Russia – as the largest nuclear power with an increasing appetite to expand its spheres of influence – also constitutes a clear danger for the Western imperialists. Is it not obvious that under such conditions, the Western powers keep existing institutions of alliances in order to counter such threats? It reflects their own class interests, not subordination to the U.S. Empire, that the European and Japanese imperialists combine attempts for an independent policy with confronting the challengers of the East in alliance with Washington.

All these developments can only be understood on the basis of a materialist analysis of the class character of Great Powers and their interests but not with the blunt instrument of superficial geographism.

Is the rise of Russia and China as imperialist powers unprecedented in history?

This leads us to the next problem in Katz's concept. He tries to deny the imperialist character of Russia and China. Basically, his objections rest on two assumptions. First, these states could not have an imperialist character because the U.S. does not accept them as members of their "imperial system". Secondly, he claims that China has not even become capitalist. It is difficult to say which argument is more removed from reality.

The first argument is tautologic in essence. Since when does the imperialist character of states depend on if the strongest power accepts these in their alliance? Carthage or the Parthian kingdom were empires even when Rome did not accept these as part of its "imperial system". Rising England became an empire despite the hostility of Spain and Portugal. Later, Germany became an imperialist power despite its lack of colonies and despite the enmity by Britain. The same goes for Japan. The

whole history of class societies is characterized by stronger and weaker powers, by established and new, emerging powers. Since established powers usually do not cede their position voluntarily, it is a recurrent feature in world history that tensions and wars take place between old and new powers.

Katz refers to the military strength of the U.S. and its aggressive policy to use it:

“The record of this change also explains why the aggressive dynamic is intrinsic to the structure that runs the Pentagon. Such American militarism is inherent to a power that tries to compensate for its economic decline with military dominance and lacks the flexibility to try other paths.”

No doubt, it is true that Washington tries to balance its economic decline with its military strength. But, again, Katz’s analysis is very one-sided. First, the U.S. is not unchallenged. We remind our critic of the fact that Russia has basically the same number of nuclear weapons; that China is catching up in several important military branches; and that both are quite advanced in building new powerful weapon systems (like e.g. hypersonic missiles).

Furthermore, one must not forget that Britain – the dominating power in the 19th and early 20th century – was also by far the strongest state in several key sectors. As we can see in Table 1, it had a foreign investment stock in 1913 which was as large as the combined sum of the next three imperialist powers.

Table 1. Great Powers’ Share in Global Capital Export, 1913 [[13](#)]

Britain	41% (44%)
France	20%
Germany	13%
United States	8%

Britain was also the dominating naval power as we can see in Table 2.

Table 2. Warship Tonnage of the European Powers, 1880 and 1914 [[14](#)]

Country	1880	1914 (1)	1914 (2)
Britain	650,000	2,714,000	2,205,000
Germany	88,000	1,305,000	1,019,000
France	271,000	900,000	731,000
Russia	200,000	679,000	328,000

And in Table 3, we see that after the decline of Britain in the inter-war period, the U.S. had already risen as the strongest imperialist power with a manufacturing output larger than the combined output of the next four rivals.

Table 3. Imperialist Powers’ Share of World Manufacturing Output in 1938 [[15](#)]

United States	31.4%
Germany	12.7%
Britain	10.7%
France	4.4%
Italy	2.8%

In short, we see that the hegemonic position of the U.S. among the imperialist powers in the post-war period was not without precedence. But even such a dominant position could not prevent the rise of new imperialist rivals – like Germany and Japan in the first half of the 20th century.

China: still not capitalist?

The idea that China would not be capitalist is absurd to the extreme. Of course, Katz can not deny the capitalist features. But he claims that the process of capitalist restoration is unfinished and that the ruling class does not control the state:

“Pröbsting proclaims that China cannot contest leadership in the world economy without first maturing its capitalist status. But he also accepts that this power is the protagonist of the greatest economic transformation of the 21st century, in an era of moribund, decadent and parasitic capitalism. The critic does not register how contradictory it is to assign such vitality to Chinese capitalism, when at the same time it is postulated that this system is at the gates of the graveyard. Our answer to this variety of dilemmas is the presence of an unfinished course of capitalist restoration. There is no doubt that such a social regime is present in China, along with all the features of competition for exploitative profit. But the ruling class engendered by this model does not control state power. This situation is very different from the typical state capitalism that Pröbsting observes in China, drawing analogies with the same type of schemes during the twentieth century.”

Likewise, he cites China’s economic success as proof for his thesis that it is not a capitalist power:

“This attribute is as secondary for Pröbsting as the entire economic policy pursued by Beijing. He considers these orientations to be very similar to the Keynesian courses of the US governments. But he does not stop to consider that such a gigantic expansion of production or such an impressive eradication of poverty – as has been seen in China – do not seem feasible with the usual recipe book of bourgeois heterodoxy. Their perspective prevents them from understanding the effects of the omnipresence of the public sector in 40 % of the GDP and the rigorous planning (or control) of foreign investment. These data determine the validity of an international economic model distanced from the US imperial pattern. Our critic simply disregards the manifest uniqueness of this scheme.”

As we have dealt with China’s economy and its process of capitalist restoration extensively in several works, we limit ourselves at this place to a few comments. [16] First, as we demonstrated with a number of figures in our last essay, China has a larger number of profitable corporations and billionaires than the U.S. How can this be the case if China would still not be fully capitalist?

Secondly, it is well-known that the role of State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) has been massively reduced. Their share in industrial output declined from almost four-fifths in 1978 to 20% in 2015. [17] More importantly, the character of SOE has completely changed in the course of the

process of capitalist restoration in the 1990s. Unprofitable enterprises were closed, most workers were sacked, and the corporations were made operating on the basis of the capitalist law of value to create profit. Between 1998 and 2006, the number of SOEs declined from 64,737 to 24,961. As a result, the share of employment in the state sector (this includes employment in SOEs as well as employment in government and public organizations) was massively reduced. While state sector employment as a share of total urban employment was 61.0% in 1992, this share had declined to 22.7% in 2006. As a result of their capitalist restructuring, profits massively increased in the SOE. While its Return on Assets was only 0.7% in 1998, this figure rose to 6.3% in 2006. (See Table 4) [18]

Table 4. Capitalist Restructuring of China's State-Owned Enterprises

	1998	2006
Number of State-Owned Enterprises	64,737	24,961
State Sector Employment as Share of Total Urban Employment	61.0% (1992)	22.7%
Return on Assets	0.7%	6.3%

In other words, China's SOE's are not "socialist" but state-capitalist corporations exploiting their workers no less than similar enterprises in other capitalist countries. This view is also confirmed if we compare the profitability of China's leading corporations with those of other imperialist countries. Take the profitability of the Fortune Global 500 Corporations in 2020 which we show in Table 5. China's corporations have a "profit margin" of 4.5%, which is about half of the U.S. but higher than France (4.3%), Germany (3.3%) and Japan (2.7%). [19]

Table 5. Profit Margin of the Fortune Global 500 Corporations in 2020

U.S.	8.9%
UK	5.9%
China	4.5%
France	4.3%
Germany	3.3%
South Korea	2.8%
Japan	2.7%

It is evident that China's leading corporations – many of these are state-owned – have a similar profitability to their Western rivals because they operate on the same basis of the law of value, because they are capitalist.

Thirdly, Katz claims that the ruling class is not controlling the state. A bold statement! Well, bold but baseless. The (non-capitalist? socialist?) Chinese state has spearheaded a rapid development in the past decades that saw the rise of capitalist corporations, of foreign investment, and a massive increase in the number of billionaires... Why did the Chinese state promote such dramatic expansion of capitalism if it is not controlled by the ruling capitalist class? How can such a state not be capitalist if it is the most effective instrument to advance the rise of China to become one of the strongest capitalist powers?

Fourthly, Katz claims that China's economic "miracle" proves that it follows a unique (socialist?) economic model. However, as we discussed in more detail elsewhere, China's economic success is neither unique nor "miraculous". Basically, it has been the result of the combination of state-capitalist regulation and a process of primitive capitalist accumulation based on the super-exploitation of the domestic working class (in particular so-called "migrants"). Such economic success is not without precedent in modern history. [20] Capitalist countries like Japan, Taiwan or South Korea – the latter two during long periods of military dictatorships – also experienced decades of high-growth rates via combining similar instruments of economic policy. However, after a certain period, these factors exhausted themselves. There are, by the way, strong indicators that China might also have reached such a moment in the last 2-3 years.

In summary, when Katz says that China is still not capitalist or has no capitalist state, we wonder, which China is he talking about? That China, which exists on this planet, is definitely capitalist.

'Imperial system' or 'imperial systems'?

Katz rejects our historical analogies by stating that the rise of China would be something qualitatively different from the rise of other Great Powers in the late 19th and early 20th century:

"Our critic also fails to note that the US setback is enhanced by the rapid rise of an adversary, operating outside the imperial system. Herein lies the big difference between the current clash with China and the preceding conflicts with Japan or Germany."

Obviously, Katz believes that Germany and Japan were "inside the imperial system" while China has been "outside". But on which facts is such an assertion based? China is closely connected with all other imperialist powers via trade, foreign investments, etc. China's economic connections with Western countries are certainly not less than Germany's connections with Britain before 1914. China was the United States' largest supplier of goods imports in 2020 and the third largest goods export market. [21] Germany's position before 1914 was no different. It was Britain's third largest trade partner before World War I and Britain was the most important trade partner of the Reich. [22]

If we follow Katz's logic, one could not recognize the imperialist character of Germany before World War I (or II). Britain was the dominant power in key economic and military areas. Germany was not part of London's "imperial system". If China does not qualify as imperialist, Germany before 1914 does neither! Of course, in reality, both Germany as well as China are imperialist powers. It is rather Katz's structuralist dogmatism which does not meet the challenges of reality.

Let us look at China's and Russia's global political position today. China is part of all kinds of global and regional institutions – from the United Nations Security Council to the WTO, from ASEAN to COP27 – and participates in various initiatives of global imperialism. Katz might object that China is not part of NATO. Well, obviously, this is true. But so what? China has built (partly together with Russia) its own economic, political and military institutions. Think about BRICS, about the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, about the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, etc. Russia also has its "Eurasian Economic Union" as well as the military alliance CSTO.

In short, NATO is the military alliance of the North American and European imperialists. Being not part of this alliance means ... being not part of this alliance. Nothing else. It does not mean that a state is not imperialist. Powers like China and Russia have their own alliances. But these are not as strong as NATO, Katz will object. Well, on the economic terrain, China is definitely not weaker than the U.S. Guess why traditional allies of the U.S. – e.g. Saudi Arabia and UAE – are trying hard to build closer relations with Beijing. Guess why Türkiye and India – the first a member of NATO, the

second a member of the US-led Quad – are intensifying their economic collaboration with Russia.

And politically or militarily? Sure, the U.S. tries hard to keep its hegemony. But, as a matter of fact, rival alliances led by China and Russia are expanding. The five member states of BRICS as well as of the SCO encompass more than 40% of the world population. In June 2022, countries such as Algeria, Argentina and Iran applied to join BRICS. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye announced plans to apply in a similar way. The SCO, at its recent summit in Samarkand, admitted Iran to the organization and the status of dialogue partner was granted to Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Belarus has applied to join the SCO as a full member. In short, China and Russia do not need NATO to be imperialist. They are building their own “empires”. And these “empires” are expanding and becoming more and more influential. If the U.S.-led “empire” was so strong, so hegemonic that no imperialist power could exist outside its sphere of influence, why is this “empire” not capable of stopping all these other countries flocking to the China- and Russia-led “empires”?!

In the second paragraph of his famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx emphasized that “man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice.” [23] Two crucial, one might even say historic, events in world politics – the current Ukraine War and Washington’s trade war against China – are such a test to prove the validity of a theory in practice.

It is well-known that the Western imperialists have imposed unprecedented financial and economic sanctions against Russia since February 24. Likewise, the U.S. – first under Donald Trump and now under Biden – have imposed an escalating series of trade sanctions against China since 2018. The latest, and most draconic, step has been a number of restrictions and sanctions which forbid companies from exporting advanced chips, chipmaking equipment and design software to China. Furthermore, U.S. Congress adopted a few months ago the so-called *CHIPS and Science Act* – a bill which provides about \$280 billion dollars in new funding to boost domestic research and manufacturing of semiconductors in the United States.

If the U.S. leads the one and only “imperial system” and if Russia and China are not imperialist powers, clearly Washington would be able to subjugate these two states or, at least, substantially weaken them. But, as everyone can see, this is not the case. Very few states have joined the Western sanctions against Russia or the U.S. sanctions against China. It is evident that neither Moscow nor Beijing are accommodating to the dictates of Washington. Moreover, Western economies themselves are seriously harmed since both Eastern powers – China more than Russia – play a crucial role in the capitalist world economy. [24]

Katz should ask himself: if Russia and China are not imperialist powers, how is it possible that the U.S. and the European Union fail to impose their will among the G-20 countries and the Global South? And how is it possible that Russia and China have managed to resist the massive financial and economic pressure of Western sanctions until now and, in fact, are also causing serious damage to the American, European, and Japanese economies? Is it not evident that China and Russia are only able to resist this pressure, and are only able to mobilize powerful allies for its interests, because they are imperialist Great Powers? No, Katz, the world political events of the past years are demonstrating in front of our eyes that the two Eastern powers are not only not part of the U.S.-led “imperialist system” but, if you prefer this language, have successfully established their own “imperial systems”.

Political consequences: Reformist pacifism vs revolutionary defeatism

Let us move to the final part of our reply, the area of political strategies. Katz accuses us of having a fatalistic view about the inevitability of another world war and of neglecting political anti-militarist demands:

“Pröbsting foresees a context of war in the not too distant future, as a result of the inter-imperialist rivalries that followed the Great Recession that began in 2008. He anticipates a forthcoming scenario of a Third World War and estimates that this conflagration will settle primacy between a power that maintains military superiority (the United States) and another that is catching up (China). (...) Our critic extrapolates the past with omens of wars that would maintain an intrinsic historical pattern of capitalism. But he is unaware of the enormous variability of this parameter and issues alarms, on the same grounds as newspaper articles that are exposed one day and forgotten the next. In any case, what is important is not the abuse of forecasts, but their disqualification of the political battle against war. The horizon of disarmament and coexistence does not appear in his script as a goal to be conquered through sustained popular mobilizations, and this lack of interest distances him from effective action. The banner of peace that shuns is the frequent emblem of many progressive initiatives. Hence the well-known demands to reduce the war budget, dismantle military bases or abolish NATO.”

We shall answer our critique step by step. Again, I will limit myself to a brief response since I have dealt with these issues extensively in other works. [25] First, it is not true that we do not put forward concrete demands directed against militarism and imperialism. Opposing any military budgets in imperialist states, calling for the dissolution of military bases or alliances, supporting the struggle for democratic rights of soldiers – such demands have been advocated by my friends (in Western countries as well as in Russia) for many years.

However, raising such slogans must not mislead one into useless utopianism. Strong mass mobilizations can result in this or that reform, and can delay this or that militaristic decision of the ruling class. But it reveals a high degree of political naivety to imagine that it would be possible to enforce a peaceful, disarmed capitalism. Look at the reality of imperialism in the past 130 years! In addition to the countless wars in the Global South, world politics has always been marked by militarism and armament. There existed, nearly without interruption, always a state of Cold War or even hot war.

What is the purpose of advocating political drugs which can make people only fantasize about a peaceful capitalist world system? No, we need to state the truth! As a matter of fact, as long as capitalism exists, there will be militarism and imperialism. Only the global abolition of the system of class exploitation and oppression can ensure a peaceful world.

In essence, the issue of war and peace is similar to the field of social justice. Of course, socialists need to fight against all attacks on the living standard, against unemployment, etc. Every small concession, every delay of an attack is a step forward. We certainly do not neglect such struggles. But it is utterly naive to imagine that a social just form of capitalism would be possible. As long as the capitalists own and control the economy and the political system, their social laws will dictate. And as long as this is the case, so will the tendency to improvisation, to crisis and collapse persist.

We can not fail to point out that we see here, again, a strong similarity between the policy of Katz and Kautsky. The ancestor of “Marxist” revisionism also dreamed about a stage of imperialism – famously called “ultra-imperialism” – where capitalism and Great Powers could exist without militarism and the threat of war: “Hence, from the purely economic standpoint, it is not impossible that capitalism may still live through yet another phase, the transfer of cartel-policy into foreign policy: a phase of ultra-imperialism, against which, of course, we must struggle as energetically as we do against imperialism, but whose perils would lie in another direction, not in that of the arms-race and the threat to world peace.” [26]

Symbolically, these idiotic lines saw the light of publicity when the guns of August 1914 were

drowning all voices of peace! Lenin was quite right in his criticism of Kautsky: “Advancing this definition of imperialism brings us into complete contradiction to K. Kautsky, who refuses to regard imperialism as a “phase of capitalism” and defines it as a *policy* “preferred” by finance capital, a tendency of “industrial” countries to annex “agrarian” countries. Kautsky’s definition is thoroughly false from the theoretical standpoint. (...) Kautsky *divorces* imperialist politics from imperialist economics, he divorces monopoly in politics from monopoly in economics in order to pave the way for his vulgar bourgeois reformism, such as “disarmament”, “ultra-imperialism” and similar nonsense. The whole purpose and significance of this theoretical falsity is to obscure the *most profound* contradictions of imperialism and thus justify the theory of “unity” with the apologists of imperialism, the outright social-chauvinists and opportunists.” [27]

Unfortunately, Katz falls back not only behind the level of knowledge of Lenin but even of the Socialist International before World War I. In its well-known resolution on war and militarism (which would become a programmatic point of reference for the anti-war Zimmerwald movement after 1914), the delegates of the Socialist Congress in Stuttgart in 1907 stated: “Wars, therefore, are part of the very nature of capitalism; they will cease only when the capitalist system is abolished or when the enormous sacrifices in men and money required by the advance in military technique and the indignation called forth by armaments, drive the peoples to abolish this system.” [28]

The whole policy of Lenin’s revolutionary defeatism, which Katz unfortunately rejects, is based on the recognition that capitalism inevitably provokes militarism and wars and that, therefore, only its abolition can provide the fundament for a peaceful future. This is why not only Lenin and Trotsky but also all authentic socialists before 1914 took the position of intransigent opposition against all Great Powers and advocated the utilization of any war for preparing the overthrow of capitalism.

Such stated the resolution of the Stuttgart Congress, after the inclusion of an important amendment drafted by Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Julius Martov: “In case war should break out anyway, it is their duty to intervene in favor of its speedy termination and with all their powers to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.” [29]

Political consequences: Defend the victims of one Great Power but let the victims of the other Great Power perish?

Unfortunately, Katz is not only a pacifist who has illusions in the reformability of imperialism. He also denies the subjectivity of oppressed nations in the non-imperialist world. This becomes evident from the following quote:

“Pröbsting proposes the opposite approach. Because he equates all enemies in all circumstances and in all places, he tends to vindicate the various movements for national self-determination per se. It attaches no importance to the various connections of these forces to the Pentagon. This discrepancy in approach determines the discrepancy with the assessment of what happened in Kosovo and Yugoslavia.”

This means, in other words, that only those peoples who are victims of U.S. imperialism deserve support by socialists. However, those who suffer from the benefactions of Russian (or Chinese) imperialism, have bad luck. Here, according to Katz, socialists should refuse solidarity. This is a shameful position of social-chauvinism.

The logic of Katz is that national oppression is not the oppression of one people by another or of one people by a Great Power. It exists only if the U.S.-led empire is the perpetrator. If a rival of Washington commits such oppression, Katz refuses to support the resistance of these victims. In

other words, national self-determination is not a demand for oppressed people, but only an instrument to weaken the U.S. (and to aid Russia and China?). Hence, in the structuralist mindscape of Katz, the people of Chechnya, Syria, Ukraine, East Turkestan / Xinjiang, ... are objectively agents of U.S. imperialism and do not deserve solidarity.

Such an approach has nothing to do with socialism. Such an approach of white-washing Russian and Chinese imperialism helps explain why many people who hate Putin (and Xi) for their autocracies misidentify Marxism with such crimes.

Political consequences: Back to Marx's strategy of the 19th century of the 'main enemy'?

At the end of his essay, Katz indicates more clearly the consequences of his analysis for political strategy. Instead of internationalist and anti-imperialist opposition against all Great Powers – as I and like-minded socialists advocate – Katz favors the approach to identify a “main enemy”. This basically means that socialists should focus on fighting against one Great Power (and their allies). It also means that other, rivaling powers (such as Russia and China) are viewed as potential allies for socialists. Furthermore, it means that liberation struggles of oppressed people in the Global South are viewed within the prism of the so-called “main enemy”, i.e. do they advance the struggle against the U.S.-led empire or not.

“The strategy of defeatism - which Pröbsting tries to update - was conceived in dispute with another principle, centered on the main enemy. That criterion seems more appropriate for the present period. It was the great barometer of Marx, Engels and Lenin himself until the First World War. It underlined the distinction between just or legitimate wars and purely oppressive conflagrations. The first type of conflict contained positive elements for the liberation of peoples, involving confrontations against monarchs, colonialists and the nobility, in battles that took on progressive tones. The proponents of socialist thought appreciated this type of warfare, which undermined colonial domination and affected the strongholds of reaction. This strategy contains elements that are valid for a current scenario marked by the pre-eminence of the imperial system. This system invariably plays an aggressive role. The principle of the main enemy is a guideline for the struggle against priority adversaries.”

Katz is both politically as well as historically wrong. He says that socialists before World War I applied a strategy of focusing the struggle against a “main enemy”. True, Marx and Engels had advocated such a program during their lifetime (i.e. until Engels death in 1895). They viewed Tsarist Russia as the reactionary bulwark of Europe. Their analysis was based both on the backward absolutist nature of the Tsarist autocracy as well as on the reactionary role that Russia played with its huge army both in the Napoleonic Wars in 1814/15 as well as during the revolutionary years in 1848-49.

For these reasons, Marx and Engels sided with every state which fought the main enemy – Russian Tsarism. Hence, in 1848 they called on Germany to wage war against Moscow as Marx poetically expressed it in his exclamation: “Only a war against Russia would be a war of revolutionary Germany, a war by which she could cleanse herself of her past sins, could take courage, defeat her own autocrats, spread civilisation by the sacrifice of her own sons as becomes a people that is shaking off the chains of long, indolent slavery and make herself free within her borders by bringing liberation to those outside.” [\[30\]](#)

Likewise, they sided with the Ottoman Empire, England and France during the Crimean War of 1853-56 and criticized London and Paris for their hesitant and lukewarm approach to their military campaign. And when another war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire took place in 1877-78,

Engels explained: “We are most decidedly espousing the Turkish cause and for 2 reasons: 1. because we have studied the Turkish peasant—i.e. the mass of the Turkish people—and in this way have come to see him as indubitably one of the ablest and most moral representatives of the peasantry in Europe; 2. because the defeat of the Russians would have greatly expedited social revolution in Russia, of which all the elements are present in abundant measure, and hence radical change throughout Europe. Things took a different course. Why? In consequence of England’s and Austria’s treachery.” [31]

However, with the transformation of capitalism at the turn of the century and the beginning of the imperialist epoch, Marxists, including Kautsky, took into account important changes in the world situation. In particular, the revolutionary upheavals in 1905-07 demonstrated that Russia was no longer a reactionary bulwark but rather a crisis-ridden country with a significant and revolutionary proletariat and poor peasantry.

From this moment onward, i.e. a number of years before 1914, Marxists no longer viewed Russia – or any other Great Power – as the “main enemy”. The above-mentioned resolution of the Stuttgart Congress in 1907 makes clear that there is not one “main enemy” but that socialists had to oppose all capitalist powers: “Wars between capitalist states are, as a rule, the outcome of their competition on the world market, for each state seeks not only to secure its existing markets, but also to conquer new ones. In this, the subjugation of foreign peoples and countries plays a prominent role. These wars result furthermore from the incessant race for armaments by militarism, one of the chief instruments of bourgeois class rule and of the economic and political subjugation of the working class.” [32]

Katz’s retreat to the strategy of pre-imperialist epoch in the 19th century has also another peculiar feature. In his reference to Marx’s and Engels’ strategy he does not mention once who their “main enemy” was. This is most likely not accidentally because, as already said, this main enemy was Tsarist Russia. The autocracy was such a main enemy not because it would have been the strongest or most advanced power. This was obviously not the case since at least Britain and France were clearly more developed – in terms of capitalist production, trade, global spread via colonial possessions as well as in military power (as the Crimean War had clearly demonstrated).

However, Tsarist Russia was the main enemy for Marx and Engels because it was the most backward, most dictatorial power. This decisive factor must be uncomfortable for Katz since Tsarist Russia resembles in many ways Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China. At the same time, continuing our historical analogy, the U.S.-led “empire” with its wealth and its limited bourgeois democracy resembles rather the British Empire or the *Empire colonial français* – the capitalistically most advanced Great Powers of the 19th century.

In short, if Katz insists on returning the strategy of the “main enemy” he would have to direct his enmity against Putin and his wars, instead of advocating a strategy of support for Russian and Chinese imperialism. We see, Katz’s analogy to the 19th century strategy of the “main enemy” does not support his argument but rather demonstrates its lack of inner logic and consistency.

Finally, leaving aside the principles of Marxist anti-imperialism which requires opposition against all Great Powers – bigger and smaller, stronger and weaker – there is also an additional factor that makes Katz’s concept of the US-led “empire” as the “main enemy” highly unconvincing. It is simply not true that the world is any longer dominated by a Washington-led “unipolar order”. Russia is waging its wars in Ukraine and Syria against the will of the U.S., and China is expanding its influence globally. As mentioned above, these two powers dominate institutions like the BRICS or the SCO which play a crucial role and act as a counter-force to the Western powers. More than 40% of the world population live in the current member states of BRICS and SCO, and this does not

include all those countries which are not members but have friendly relations with Moscow and Beijing (e.g. Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Syria, Myanmar, Cambodia – to name a few examples). [33] So why should only the US-led Empire be the main enemy? Why are the Eastern powers, which influence and dominate the fate of a large part of the world population, not also and equally enemies of socialists?

It seems to us that Katz imagines the world has not changed since the 1990s – a short period after the collapse of the USSR and before the rise of China and Russia as imperialist powers. Yes, in this brief period there existed a certain “unipolar order”. But this was a short transition period, and it has already been over for a long time. Today, the world is very different, and the “unipolar order” has ended.

This is recognized not only by Marxists but even by representatives of Russian and Chinese imperialism. Alex Lo, a well-known Chinese journalist who is an advocate of the Xi regime and who writes as columnist for the prestigious *South China Morning Post* (owned by Alibaba, one of China’s leading corporations) wrote recently: “Since then [the 1990s - ed.], though, the West, but especially the US, has been humbled, not least by ‘the rise of the rest’, but by their own internal conflicts, collapses and contradictions. The unipolar moment has passed, and a more chaotic period has followed as the world tries to establish a multipolar international order.” [34] And Putin himself stated already in 2018: “Thank God, this situation of a unipolar world, of a monopoly, is coming to an end. It’s practically already over.” [35]

It is not without irony that even leading representatives of European imperialism (which Katz wrongly views as underlings of the U.S. Empire), are starting to advocate the concept of a “multipolar world”. Such said the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at his official visit to China in early November: “A multipolar world is needed in which the role and influence of emerging countries can be taken seriously. Germany opposes bloc confrontation, for which politicians should be held responsible. Germany will play its role in furthering Europe-China relations.” [36]

Conclusions

We conclude by emphasizing that one has to recognize that the 2020s are very different from the 1990s. The world is not “unipolar” but “multipolar”. There is not only one imperialist Great Power (with several allies) but there are several imperialist Great Powers which are competing. This is the reality on which internationalist and anti-imperialist socialist must base their strategy.

This reality can not be understood via the structuralist concept of “Empire-ism” which is strongly influenced by world-system theory. This is a theory which is content with the packet soup of fact-free schemes unconcerned about classes and nation states.

Contrary to the claims of Katz, the Marxist analysis of imperialism is not out of date. It rather provides the analytical method for a correct understanding of the current dynamics of world politics.

Katz’s concept provides the ideological basis for Anti-Americanism, not for anti-imperialism. Consequently, it is the theoretical fundament of support for Russian and Chinese imperialism.

We repeat that socialists today must oppose not only one Great Power or one group of allied Great Powers but all imperialists – those in the West as well as in the East. No solidarity with any of these robbers – international solidarity only with the workers and the oppressed fighting for freedom and to live in dignity!

Michael Pröbsting

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P.S.

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<https://links.org.au/empire-ism-vs-marxist-analysis-imperialism-continuing-debate-argentinian-economist-claudio-katz>

Footnotes

[1] Claudio Katz: “Desaciertos sobre el imperialismo contemporáneo”, 18.09.2022, <https://katz.lahaine.org/desaciertos-sobre-el-imperialismo-contemporaneo/>. To our knowledge, this essay exists only in Spanish language until now. It has been reproduced on various websites. All quotes are from this essay if not indicated otherwise. The translation from Spanish to English has been provided by my comrade Rubén Jaramillo who so often assists me greatly.

[2] Michael Pröbsting: Russia: An Imperialist Power or a “Non-Hegemonic Empire in Gestation”? A reply to the Argentinean economist Claudio Katz, *New Politics*, 11 August 2022. <https://newpol.org/russia-an-imperialist-power-or-a-non-hegemonic-empire-in-gestation-a-reply-to-the-argentinean-economist-claudio-katz-an-essay-with-8-tables/>. This essay has also been published in Spanish language ([Periodistas Unidos](#)), Portuguese language ([RCIT](#)), and Greek language ([E LA LIBERTA](#)).

[3] I have elaborated such a Marxist analysis of imperialism in various works. The most important ones are two books: *Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry. The Factors behind the Accelerating Rivalry between the U.S., China, Russia, EU and Japan. A Critique of the Left's Analysis and an Outline of the Marxist Perspective*, RCIT Books, Vienna 2019, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/anti-imperialism-in-the-age-of-great-power-rivalry/>; *The Great Robbery of the South. Continuity and Changes in the Super-Exploitation of the Semi-Colonial World by Monopoly Capital Consequences for the Marxist Theory of Imperialism*, RCIT Books, Vienna 2013, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/great-robbery-of-the-south/>; see also: “Great Power Rivalry in the Early Twenty-first Century”, in: *New Politics* Vol. XVIII No. 3, Whole Number 67, https://newpol.org/issue_post/great-power-rivalry-in-the-early-twenty-first-century/

[4] Karl Kautsky: “Imperialism” (1914), in: Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido (Eds.): *Discovering Imperialism. Social Democracy to World War I*, Brill, Leiden 2012, p. 757

[5] V. I. Lenin: “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism”; in: *LCW* Vol. 23, p.107

[6] V.I. Lenin: “On the Question of Dialectics” (1915); in: *LCW* 38, p.358

[7] For the analysis of the Stalinist states in the tradition of Leon Trotsky see his book: *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), Pathfinder Press, New York 1972; see also the following two books:

LRCI: *The Degenerated Revolution. The Origin and Nature of the Stalinist States*, London 1982; Michael Pröbsting: *Cuba's Revolution Sold Out? The Road from Revolution to the Restoration of Capitalism*, RCIT Books, Vienna 2013 (Chapter II)

[8] For an analysis of the post-war boom see e.g. two highly informative books by Ernest Mandel: *Late Capitalism*, New Left Books, London 1975; *Long Waves of Capitalist Development. A Marxist Interpretation*, Verso, London 1995; see also Keith Hassell: "Revolutionary theory and imperialism: from Hilferding to Trotsky", in: *Permanent Revolution* Vol. 8 (1989)

[9] Trade: Vestager on trade conflict with USA: One war is enough, 6 December 2022, <https://24hoursworlds.com/economy/309280>

[10] The White House: *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, p. 8

[11] I have dealt with the analysis of Russian imperialism in a number of works. My latest one where readers can find references to previous studies, is: "Russian Imperialism and Its Monopolies", in: *New Politics* Vol. XVIII No. 4, Whole Number 72, Winter 2022, https://newpol.org/issue_post/russian-imperialism-and-its-monopolies/

[12] I have analyzed the character of Chinese capitalism and its emergence as an imperialist power in various works. My latest pamphlet is: *China: An Imperialist Power ... Or Not Yet? A Theoretical Question with Very Practical Consequences*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/china-imperialist-power-or-not-yet/>; see e.g. also: "Chinese Imperialism and the World Economy", an essay published in the second edition of *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (edited by Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope), Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020, https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-3-319-91206-6_179-1; "China's Emergence as an Imperialist Power", in: *New Politics*, Summer 2014 (Vol:XV-1, Whole #: 57)

[13] Paul Bairoch and Richard Kozul-Wright: *Globalization Myths: Some Historical Reflections on Integration, Industrialization and Growth in the World Economy*, UNCTAD Discussion Papers No. 113, 1996, p. 12. The late Eric Hobsbawm, one of the finest Marxist historians in the Post-World War period, gives the figure of 44% for Britain's share in foreign investment. (E. J. Hobsbawm: *The Age of Empire*, Vintage Books, New York 1989, p.51)

[14] Figures for the columns 1880 and 1914 (1) are taken from Paul Kennedy: *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Unwin Hyman, London 1988, p. 203; figures for the column 1914 (2) are taken from Niall Ferguson: *The Pity of War*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London 1998, p. 85.

[15] Paul Kennedy: *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 202.

[16] We have dealt with the process of capitalist restoration in China in several works. In particular, we refer to chapter 10 in the above-mentioned book *The Great Robbery of the South* as well as the essay: "How is it possible that some Marxists still Doubt that China has Become Capitalist? An analysis of the capitalist character of China's State-Owned Enterprises and its political consequences", 18 September 2020, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/pts-ft-and-chinese-imperialism-2/>

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National University Press and the Social Sciences Academic Press (China), Australia, p. 333

[18] Yunhua Liu: "A Comparison of China's State-Owned Enterprises and Their Counterparts in the United States: Performance and Regulatory Policy", in: *Public Administration Review*, Dec., 2009, Vol. 69, Supplement to Volume 69: *Comparative Chinese/American Public Administration* (Dec., 2009), p. S47

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[20] See chapter "Is China a Unique Case of Capitalist Miracle?" in my above-mentioned book *Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry*, pp. 112-115

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[22] Stefano Battilossi: *The Determinants of Multinational Banking during the First Globalization, 1870-1914*, Working Papers 114, Oesterreichische Nationalbank (Austrian Central Bank), 2006, p. 40

[23] Karl Marx: "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), in: *MECW* Vol. 5, p. 5, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

[24] We have dealt with this issue in various articles. See e.g. our pamphlet: *World Situation: In the Midst of a Global Political Tornado. Notes on global developments characterized by the Ukraine War, inter-imperialist rivalry, global energy and food crisis as well as spontaneous mass protests*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/world-situation-april-2022/>; see also "The G-7 Oil Price Cap: A New Stage in the Great Power Rivalry. The Cold War between the Western powers and their Eastern rivals points towards escalation", 7 September 2022, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/global/the-g-7-oil-price-cap-a-new-stage-in-the-great-power-rivalry/>

[25] See e.g. my above-mentioned book *Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry*.

[26] Karl Kautsky: *Imperialism* (1914), p. 774

[27] V. I. Lenin: "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism"; in: *LCW* Vol. 23, p.107 (Emphasis in the original)

[28] Stuttgart Resolution on War and Militarism, adopted at the Seventh International Socialist Congress 1907, in: John Riddell: *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International: Documents, 1907-1916, The Preparatory Years*, Monad Press, New York 1984, p. 34

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[31] Karl Marx: "Letter to Wilhelm Liebknecht" (4 February 1878), in: *MECW* Vol. 45, p. 296

[32] Stuttgart Resolution on War and Militarism, adopted at the Seventh International Socialist Congress 1907, in: John Riddell: *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International: Documents, 1907-1916, The Preparatory Years*, Monad Press, New York 1984, pp. 33-34

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