

US-China rivalry, 'antagonistic cooperation' and anti-imperialism in the 21st century

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Federico Fuentes. Over the past century, we have seen the term imperialism used to define different situations and, at other times, be replaced by concepts such as globalisation and hegemony. Given this, what value remains in the concept of imperialism and how do you define imperialism? And in defining imperialism, how much of Vladimir Lenin's writings on the subject remains relevant? What elements, if any, have been superseded by subsequent developments?

Promise Li. The concept of imperialism, especially as theorised by classical Marxists, is definitely still useful for us today — but we need to update and calibrate their analyses to contemporary conditions. Lenin's [observation](#) that a "characteristic feature of imperialism is finance capital" rings true, perhaps even more so today than in his times with the massive expansion of finance capital. More importantly, global imperialism remains a volatile formation — not a "peaceful cooperation" between capitalists, as Karl Kautsky ventured — featuring a "rivalry between several great powers in the striving for hegemony," as Lenin described.

Lenin said that "the briefest possible definition of imperialism" is "the monopoly stage of capitalism." If this represents an advanced stage of capitalism that began in his time, then we are currently living through the advanced stages of this advanced stage. Monopolies have only grown larger and more all-consuming. Capitalists are finding even more intricate ways of merging and associating with each other, from multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to "universal owners" such as BlackRock and Vanguard, which own majority shares in state-led or public-private partnerships associated with countries in supposedly rivalling geopolitical blocs. Lenin also describes how "the monopolies, which have grown out of free competition, do not eliminate the latter, but exist above it and alongside it, and thereby give rise to a number of very acute, intense antagonisms, frictions and conflicts." This contradiction between monopolies and competition has only grown more intense with the rise of multipolarity.

So, this rise of a new era of inter-imperialist rivalry is far from linear, nor does it clearly disrupt the imperial hegemony of Western capital. Here, I think, we do not pay enough attention to other classical Marxist theories of imperialism beyond Lenin. Though crude, Rosa Luxemburg's formulation of imperialism correctly [understands](#) imperialism as a "political expression of the process of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle over the unspoiled remainder of

the non-capitalist world environment.” She sees imperialism as a way to describe not simply the characteristics of distinct imperialist powers, but the very logic of how the capitalist world economy develops — by aiming toward the development of new actors in facilitating a global process of capital accumulation. Nicholai Bukharin [expanded](#) on this by identifying a dialectical feature in the capitalist world system, which is both “an internationalisation of capital” and “a process of ‘nationalising’ capital.”

Luxemburg and Bukharin’s focus on imperialism as a unified global process (though one rife with internal tensions) allows us to understand the new rise of national economic blocs, geopolitical tensions, and forms of industrial nationalism that have emerged within a world economy that is more interdependent than ever. Pronouncements about the decline of neoliberalism are premature: what we see today is really just a reconfiguration of different state capitals that are integrally connected through financialisation. New industrial policies and nationalisms merely dictate new terms in which globalisation persists. For one, economists are overstating the decline of Chinese imports to the United States: in reality, most of these commodities are only [re-routed](#) through countries such as Mexico and Vietnam. Working-class people, especially in the global South, continue to be exploited. New alliances and rivalries may shuffle around the relations between different bourgeoisie in the global South and traditional imperialists, but the core structure of global imperialism remains highly durable.

Of course, Lenin and Bukharin’s conception of inter-imperialist rivalry continues to be relevant. But unlike World War I, economic interdependence even across geopolitical blocs — reinforced by new multilateral financial organisms — establishes new terms through which inter-imperialist rivalry takes shape. For example, as economists such as [Minqi Li](#) and [Michael Roberts](#) point out, countries such as China receive less value than they export. But as [John Smith](#) has noted, dynamics like this are not all that determines if a country is imperialist. He names resource imperialism as a form of imperialism — one that goes beyond considerations of value transfer — that such countries engage in alongside traditional Western imperialist powers. Revanchist politics also strengthens the imperialist horizon of rising imperialists such as Russia. As Russian president Vladimir Putin openly admits, [Russia’s](#) interest in securing its sphere of influence in Ukraine through violently expansionist means goes *beyond* pressure from NATO (which undoubtedly play a key, but not all-encompassing, role in shaping the Russian invasion).

The persistence of traditional Western imperial claims (evidenced by France’s response to developments in Niger) and renewed revanchist claims by rising imperialist powers confirm another key feature of imperialism that Lenin (building on Rudolf Hilferding) [identified](#): among the myriad social antagonisms intensified by imperialism, a key one is “the intensification of national oppression”. Rohini Hensman [underscores](#) the persistence of “ethnic chauvinism” today, which Lenin highlighted as a fundamental characteristic of not just the ruling bloc but also workers, and even socialists, in the oppressing nation. Just as importantly, as Lenin emphasised in his writings on national self-determination, the fact that certain oppressing nations are subordinate to stronger imperialist powers in the world system does not erase the legitimacy of national liberation movements against those nations. Lenin [wrote](#) that “even Russia, for example, is entirely dependent, economically, on the power of the imperialist finance capital of the ‘rich’ bourgeois countries ... even nineteenth-century America was, economically, a colony of Europe ... but that has nothing whatever to do with the question of national movements and the national state.” In other words, Western imperialist powers have no monopoly on imperialism and national chauvinism — Lenin’s constant attacks on Great Russian chauvinism highlighted this. With the rise of new imperialist and advanced capitalist countries outside of the Western bloc, we must remember how Lenin underscored the right of nations to self-determination, even those caught between imperialist powers.

Of course, no principle should be so absolute that — as Lenin [criticised](#) Kautsky for weaponising

Serbian national liberation against Austria to justify socialist support for imperialist war — it justifies “any isolated examination of an object.” At the same time, he also [refused](#) to dogmatically delegitimise all national liberation movements just because they are weaponised by other imperialist actors: “The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilised by another ‘Great’ Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous case of the bourgeoisie utilising republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.” The [key](#) is not to peddle in generalities, but to “investigate any social question ... within definite historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country (e. g., the national programme for a given country), that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch.”

The rise of fascism and intensification of the entanglements between inter-imperialist war and different national liberation movements in World War II called for a new approach to questions of national liberation and anti-imperialism (which [Ernest Mandel](#) ventured to answer). Similarly, we must update our analyses to account for old and rising imperialists to most effectually empower revolutionary movements not just in one locale, but for many living through vastly different political legacies — from the bureaucratic capitalism of formerly “actually-existing socialist states” to the horrors of neoliberal shock therapy under “liberal democracies”.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, global politics seemed largely dominated by wars that sought to reinforce US imperialism’s role as the sole global hegemon. However, in more recent years, a shift appears to be taking place. While the US has been forced to withdraw from Afghanistan, we have seen Russia invade Ukraine, China’s expanding economic role abroad, and even relatively smaller nations such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia flexing their military power beyond their borders. In general terms, how would you understand the current dynamics at play within the global imperialist system?

I want to revive a term first coined by German Marxist August Thalheimer, and expanded by Austrian-Brazilian Marxist Erich (Erico) Sachs and other members of the Brazilian Marxist collective *Política Operária* (POLOP), that adequately describes the global imperialist system today: “antagonistic cooperation”. The term was used by Thalheimer, following Bukharin’s analysis of the capitalist world system as a contradictory unity in *The Politics and Economics of Transition Period*, to account for how sharp and even violent tensions between capitalist states can exist, while all continue to maintain the same global process of capital accumulation. As POLOP’s 1967 program [describes](#), antagonistic cooperation illustrates “a cooperation aimed at the conservation of the system and which has its basis in the very process of centralisation of capital, and which does not eliminate the antagonisms inherent in the imperialist world.” POLOP theorists went beyond Thalheimer to specify that such an impulse to preserve capitalist social relations can characterise ruling classes that express an “anti-imperialist” foreign policy. Anti-imperialist sentiments among the people can force these bourgeoisies toward this position, but in turn, “this nationalism, often taken advantage of by the native bourgeoisies, serves as pressure on the imperialist powers to improve the terms of their economic relations [which ensured] the continuity of imperialist exploitation was assured after the withdrawal of the colonial armies.”

This perfectly describes the actions of BRICS+ countries today. [Patrick Bond](#), [Ana Garcia](#), [Miguel Borba](#), among other political economists, have long pointed out how these regimes “talk left, walk right”. Growing rivalries between different states do not cancel out interdependence. BRICS has missed countless opportunities to break free of Western economic hegemony in practice, despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric. The New Development Bank, touted by some as an alternative to Western

banking institutions for the global South, recently [formalised](#) its partnership with the World Bank. Bond [observes](#) that China has increased and consolidated the third-highest voting power in the IMF, even gaining some at the expense of global South countries such as Nigeria and Venezuela. [Public-private partnerships](#) and [institutional investors](#) represent ways Saudi Arabia, China, Brazil, etc. develop new nodes of accumulation — and perpetuate existing ones in collaboration with the West. US-China rivalry has led to some strategic decoupling of industries, just as many commodities are merely being re-routed through third parties. The horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine supposedly introduced a new era of Western isolation of Russian capital through sanctions, but the [Caspian Pipeline Consortium](#) — which sees Chevron executives working alongside sanctioned Russian companies — continues uninterrupted. Growing tensions between China and India are one example of how potentially irreconcilable contradictions exist within the BRICS+ bloc too. As Tithi Bhattacharya [writes](#), “the new Cold War allegiances are made of a looser fabric. They tend to be less absolute; they are partial, and subject to ongoing push-and-pull.”

The US remains the dominant imperialist power in the world, though the left often overlooks how its supposed rivals actually help maintain its power, just as they challenge aspects of it to get a share of the pie for themselves. The interests of different national capitalists also do not often neatly align: major US and German CEOs eagerly accepted Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang’s invitation for meetings and deeper collaboration, just as the US’s House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) further fuelled anti-China policies. Any proper analysis of the global imperialist system today must consider such contradictions and fluidity between imperialist powers. Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh recently called this “[liquid imperialism](#)”, in the context of the US and Russia’s shared interest in maintaining Bashar al-Assad’s rule in Syria. Such new concepts get us closer to understanding the world system today, more than straightforward US unipolarity or traditional inter-imperialist rivalry without qualifications, but still more analyses are needed.

In light of current debates, how do you view China and Russia fitting into the global imperialist system today? And how do you view the issue of multipolarity?

Multipolarity, without the influence of militant anti-capitalist mass movements, can be just another expression of global imperialism. Indeed, neoliberalism has persisted with the help of these new poles. Vijay Prashad admitted in 2013 that BRICS is nothing but “neoliberalism with Southern characteristics.” Prashad has since grown much more hopeful about BRICS, which is astounding given the recent entry of authoritarian neoliberal monarchies such as Saudi Arabia into BRICS and Russia’ blatantly imperialist invasion of Ukraine. There is now less and less basis for an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist ideological cohesion — much less than what united the ruling elites at the [Bandung conference](#) in the past — and only more room for continuing capital accumulation.

The two key leaders of BRICS+, China and Russia, may be spearheading economic independence from the West in some aspects. But these measures fail to break with capital accumulation. Worse yet, BRICS+ sometimes *reinforces* the central role of Western imperialist institutions. The [Johannesburg II Declaration](#) in August upholds the authority of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and G20, and “encourage[s] multilateral financial institutions and international organisations to play a constructive role in building global consensus on economic policies and preventing systemic risks of economic disruption and financial fragmentation.” As the Brazilian theorists of antagonistic cooperation once described, the national bourgeoisie of so-called non-aligned or “anti-imperialist” countries can struggle for a greater share of the profits without fundamentally altering the global imperialist system. In this sense, China (like Russia) is increasingly developing what Minqi Li [calls](#) “imperialist-like behaviours in developing countries”, just as it has certainly played a sub-imperialist role. Multipolarity, far from being an alternative to imperialism, indexes a new terrain in which large and mid-sized powers both preserve and challenge different aspects of Western imperialism, each to secure a greater sphere of influence in the capitalist system. Regardless of one’s assessment of

whether China or Russia is an imperialist country by whatever metric, it should be undoubtedly clear that these countries reinforce global imperialism in some capacity, rather than challenging it.

Anti-imperialism today must begin with this recognition, not with a naive hope that the very existence of different poles will open up space for revolutionary practice. [Samir Amin](#) warned about this in 2006, saying that “necessary economic options and political instruments will have to be developed in accordance with a coherent plan; they will not arise spontaneously within the current models influenced by capitalist, neoliberal dogma.” In countries such as China, Russia and Iran, spaces for mobilisation such that movements can come together to formulate such coherent plans have drastically narrowed, not expanded, with the rise of BRICS+. Movement-backed electoral victories in Latin America for the left in recent years — also now under renewed attack from the right — do not automatically translate into better conditions for movements on the other side of the world. Depending on the strength of movements on the ground, multipolarity can lead to better conditions for struggle than US imperialism — or turn out to be just as bad, if not worse. The point is that multipolarity itself does not guarantee any of these realities, it is the relationship between objective conditions and the real activity of movements that determines its future.

How have US-China tensions impacted upon politics and struggles in Hong Kong and among the Hong Kong/Chinese diaspora in the US?

Inter-imperialist rivalry between the US and China has made sustaining independent movements in Hong Kong and in the diaspora much more difficult. The [pro-Western](#) bent of many dissidents in these communities is undeniable, and why this inclination exists is a complicated question. In my writings, I [explore](#) why many Hong Kong dissidents are predisposed to the West. For one, generations of influence by Sinophone liberal dissidents who are averse to class critique and endorse Western liberalism. Another key reason is that US-China tensions have exacerbated what Yao Lin calls a politics of “[beaconism](#)” among dissident communities. As Lin explains, “the traumatising experience of Party-State totalitarianism propels Chinese liberals on an anti-CCP pilgrimage in search for sanitised and glorified imageries of Western (especially American) political realities, which nurtures both their neoliberal affinity and their proclivity for a Trumpian metamorphosis.” The polarisation of tensions, and parts of the US establishment’s hypocritical support for the Hong Kong protests, only accelerated this beaconism.

A shared goal among the US and Chinese ruling elites, bolstered by some among the pro-democracy dissident camp, is to dissuade the growth of a political alternative grounded on building independent mass organisations toward an anti-capitalist horizon. The main problem is not just that the left was weak and fragmented in Hong Kong and the diaspora even before the repression began in 2020, but that for decades people have been unable to even conceive of what left-wing — let alone socialist — politics or models of organisation even means. (Many Hongkongers unfortunately associate “the left” with the CCP or the US Democratic Party!) This confusion emerges from, but cannot be reduced to, any of these factors alone: the legacy of British colonialism, the longstanding liberal horizon of the pro-democracy opposition, and the CCP’s betrayal of socialist principles. US-China tensions have only exacerbated this problem, limiting people’s political horizons and forcing them toward one or the other hegemon as the political solution to their ills.

Furthermore, the jingoism both countries are fuelling as an effect of this geopolitical rivalry dangerously energises both states’ capacity to weaponise suspicion of “foreign interference” to suppress domestic movements. [Anti-China](#) rhetoric and policies in the US establishment grant further power to the state to limit civil liberties and discriminate against Chinese and other Asian American communities. This is only a mirror image of how China has enormously extended its [attacks](#) on people’s democratic rights in Hong Kong. It uses national security laws to accuse and detain many more activists and everyday people beyond those with actual links to the US state —

without proper evidence or due process. Thus, both regimes are furthering imperialist aims under the guise of nobler causes, with one weaponising the discourse of freedom and democracy and the other anti-imperialism and peace.

Military tensions between the US and China are undoubtedly threatening the livelihoods of people everywhere. Socialists must work to combat rising geopolitical tensions, but the ultimate solution is also not the fantasy that both regimes can be brought together to cooperate on solving the urgent issues of our times: climate change, rising authoritarianisms, economic precarity, etc. The last time the US and Chinese regimes peacefully cooperated marked the mass proletarianisation and exploitation of hundreds of millions of Chinese workers for the consumer markets of the global North. We must strengthen — and, in the case of China, rebuild — independent movements everywhere to posit a political challenge to these nation-states, instead of hoping for, as [Luxemburg](#) once said, “the utopia of a historical compromise between proletariat and bourgeoisie to ‘moderate’ the imperialist contradictions between capitalist states.” In doing so, the left must focus on building links between those resisting US and Chinese imperialisms, countering the internecine narrative of civilisational rivalry that liberals and the ruling elites have forced upon us.

You have criticised the limitations of the “No New Cold War” campaign promoted by sections of the peace movement and left. Why is this the case? What kind of peace initiatives should the left promote? Do you envisage any possibilities of promoting a common security policy/architecture that both fosters a more peaceful and cooperative order while prioritising the needs of small nations over larger powers?

Last year, for the Democratic Socialists of America’s [Socialist Forum](#), I highlighted the limitations of the “No New Cold War” framework because the slogan not only offers no concrete solutions for those facing the threat of China’s surveillance and repression, but also because this framework does not allow us to identify that economic interdependence continues to structure the relations between the US and China, despite the geopolitical tensions. I am not saying that the discourse of the Cold War completely obscures the dynamics today: Gilbert Achcar’s [definition](#) of the New Cold War as the readiness for war among different major powers is useful to understanding the political and economic decisions of key sections of the ruling classes, especially the military-industrial complex. But the dynamics of global imperialism go beyond that. The interests of other key sectors of capital also go beyond that. As Thomas Fazi [puts](#) it, “the greatest resistance to the new Cold War isn’t coming from a global peace movement, but from the boardrooms of Western corporations.”

So the real question is, what can an anti-war and peace movement look like that can posit a clearly anti-capitalist perspective, without throwing different movements under the bus? There have been useful attempts to talk about reforms to current global security frameworks such as the United Nations (UN) from [Taras Bilous](#) and [Trent Trepanier](#), among others. But a genuine security policy that fosters peace and protects the right to self-determination can only emerge after a revolutionary break with capitalism across the world. For such an enormous task, the most urgent ingredient right now is not calculating an exact program or blueprint for this security architecture, but maximising spaces for independent movements to grow, mobilise, and develop political solutions collectively. In this sense, I am inspired by Argentinian feminist Verónica Gago’s impulse to ground her conception of a “feminist international” on “the feminist strike.” Instead of prioritising a new institutional framework for security and accountability in the current system, especially in relation to femicides in Latin America, Gago [understands](#) that “a strategy of organisation and self-defence” emerges from empowering the masses to develop “a collective practice that seeks to understand the relations of subordination and exploitation” on their own terms. Such a perspective “rejects the institutional responses that reinforce the isolation of the problem and that seek to resolve it through a new government agency or program.”

Movements in the past year have shown us that the best “security” for working people begins not from a new institutional framework that accommodates the capitalist system on different terms, but by troubling the very legitimacy of existing institutions that falsely claim to guarantee our safety. Zhengzhou workers at the Foxconn factory protected themselves against rising COVID-19 infection rates and poor habitability conditions, forced onto them by corporations working with the approval of local government to lock them in their workplaces under the guise of pandemic control, by revolting. In 2018, Indigenous activists [resisted](#) the Ecuadorian government’s attempt — in collaboration with Chinese mining corporations and US firms — to violate the sovereignty of their lands in the Amazon by marching on Quito.

The most effective peace initiative can only be conducted by strengthening domestic movements against their ruling bourgeoisie, from the US to China, not by seeing anti-war and peace work as simply a matter of improving global security institutions or opposing one warmonger at the expense of others. At some point, the left needs a unified and coherent political program that movements can rally behind and identify a global security framework beyond the rule of capital. In the meantime, we need to restore the political consciousness of people across the world before we can meaningfully speak of programmatic unity on these grounds.

Do you see any possibilities for building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles internationally, taking into consideration that local movements have different Great Powers as their principal enemy and might therefore seek support (even military aid) from different imperialist countries? Can the left advance a position of non-alignment with blocs (neutrality) without abandoning solidarity? In sum, what should 21st-century socialist anti-imperialism look like?

Absolutely — the reason why I am keen to emphasise the persistence of inter-imperial or inter-capitalist interdependence in the global imperialist system, despite the rise of geopolitical rivalries, is that this analysis directly provides us with concrete paths for left-wing international solidarity. Understanding the world economy as an antagonistic unity allows movements to discover sites where different imperialist powers or institutions remain inextricably connected. By designing campaigns to target these sites, movements can provide an alternative to militaristic solutions that US, Chinese, Russian and other ruling elites promote. For example, a broad anti-globalisation movement against multilateral neoliberal institutions would be key for a 21st-century socialist anti-imperialism. The IMF has both the US and China among two out of three of its highest voting members, where they regularly collaborate, just as China has quietly [approved](#) US-led decisions on climate, trade and other policies on international bodies. A genuine campaign against these institutions would be antithetical to campism, which posits a false binary between the Western bloc and champions of multipolarity — all of which collude together.

Joint campaigns against the IMF, BlackRock and Vanguard can provide new grounds to break the impasse between different anti-imperialist movements often pitted against each other too, while offering a clear alternative to liberal forms of advocacy. Calls for the IMF to abolish Ukrainian debt, or to resist Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky’s neoliberal deals with BlackRock for Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction, are compatible with similar campaigns for other regions in the global South, such as Sri Lanka. In another example, we should also recognise that China’s economic stability is partly grounded on its vast import market to Israel and, in turn, Israel heavily relies on Chinese imports for infrastructural development. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in solidarity with Palestinian resistance would actually benefit from support from those resisting the Chinese state abroad. On the other hand, deepening relationships between both movements, which currently have few overlaps, can provide concrete ways for Chinese, Hongkonger and other dissident diaspora communities to resist the Chinese state, but beyond the solutions

offered by the hawkish right. Cultivating solidarity between campaigns, often seen as distinct, practically strengthens each other. It can provide real alternatives beyond Western militarism without downplaying the threats from other imperialists such as China and Russia. The key impulse behind these suggestions is that the left must articulate practical demands and campaigns that can move the masses toward a revolutionary horizon distinct from the liberals. Abstract slogans of “international working-class solidarity from below” will not cut it. We should not dismiss the possibility of broad coalitions on certain issues with other groups beyond the left, but must centre on building campaigns that can strengthen the political independence of the left.

Socialists should defend the right of national liberation movements against foreign forces to demand arms from wherever they can, just as socialists did when Spanish republicans asked for arms from capitalist states against fascist rule during the Spanish Civil War. At the same time, we must recognise that Western countries are weaponising Ukraine and Taiwan, for example, to massively expand their imperialist military budgets. No matter what one’s position on Ukrainians receiving arms from the West is, it should be clear that the issue of weapons should not be the be-all and end-all horizon for international solidarity on the left. Hawkish liberals are calling for increasing arms supply to Ukraine, and the left needs to think about how our organising can distinguish ourselves from them, not just tail the liberals and uncritically lobby for more. We can support the right of Ukrainians to demand arms, just as we oppose every effort by Western imperialists to use defensive and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine as an excuse to increase military budgets and infrastructure. On the other hand, those who focus all their efforts on opposing arms shipments, without putting in concrete work to support Ukraine’s fight for self-defence and bridge it to other liberation struggles, are not conducting anti-imperialism. Karl Liebknecht’s slogan “the main enemy is at home” does not mean disavowing the core socialist responsibility of international solidarity with oppressed peoples struggling against other enemies abroad. It is the responsibility of the left to both oppose imperialist military budgets at home *and* discover alternative ways to extend solidarity abroad.

P.S.

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