

On Imperialism Today

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MUCH COMMENTARY ON the Left these days praises as “anti-imperialist” the transition from the unipolar hegemony of the U.S.-led West to a multipolar world with several centers of power. We hear the new multipolarity touted by leaders of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).

Within the Left, partisans of states challenging Western dominance contend that multipolarity will open up space for socialist development led by China and other nominally socialist states. [1] Such currents tend to see U.S.-led Western imperialism as the only imperialism in the world today.

Thus any state in conflict with the United States is viewed as being in an “anti-imperialist camp,” no matter how authoritarian, capitalist — or indeed imperialist — it may be.

For some, their stated support for multipolarity actually reduces to a bipolar concept of conflict between the reactionary camp of the imperialist West and the “progressive” Rest led by big powers China and Russia but also including authoritarian states like Syria, Iran, Eritrea, Nicaragua and North Korea. [2]

What’s sometimes called the “campist” perspective falls apart when we realize how much the opposing sides, more like “frenemies,” cooperate in the management of global capitalism and its imperialist exploitation of weaker countries. What seems underappreciated in discussions about the structure of world imperialism today is how much the imperialist and sub-imperialist countries cooperate as well as compete.

In particular, the big imperialist and sub-imperialist powers cooperatively share management of global capitalism through multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, World Bank, and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The internationalist Left focuses on supporting exploited classes and oppressed groups, rather than one constellation of states against another. It cautions that the multipolar development is leading to a renewed era of inter-imperialist rivalry, conflict, and authoritarianism among capitalist and bureaucratic states.

The emerging multipolarity is a change in the global structure of imperialist exploitation and domination, not an end to imperialism. Internationalist Left voices say that imperialism must be ended by democratic progressive movements against the capitalist and bureaucratic powers in all countries, not by the rise of new capitalist and bureaucratic states. [3]

Antagonistic Cooperation

Ruy Mauro Marini, the Brazilian economist who pioneered Marxist dependency theory and the concepts of sub-imperialism and super-exploitation, called the contradictory relationship among imperialist and sub-imperialist countries “antagonistic cooperation.” [4]

Political economist Patrick Bond uses this framework to analyze both the competitive and

cooperative actions among the imperialist and sub-imperialist powers, particularly how his home country of South Africa and the BRICS plug into the hierarchy of nations as sub-imperialist powers that have cooperated with Western imperialism more than they have contested it.

Bond provides the economic statistics and many examples of policy cooperation through multilateral institutions. In particular, China, the world's second largest economy and third largest contributor and holder of votes in the IMF, plays a large role in supporting the West's neoliberal agenda of austerity, deregulation and privatization as conditions for loans and in protecting fossil capital from decisive climate action in the annual UNFCCC-sponsored climate conferences. [5]

Alongside all their nationalist and militarist rhetoric toward each other, and sometimes armed conflict by proxy, the big imperialist and sub-imperialist powers also cooperate. Some examples:

- When Russian troops intervened in Kazakhstan in January 2022 to suppress the popular uprising instigated by oil workers against corruption and the maldistribution of oil wealth, they were protecting the property of major Western oil companies, including Chevron, Exxon, Shell, Total and Eni. The United States did not criticize Russia's intervention, even as it was warning Russia not to invade Ukraine with the troops it had amassed on Ukraine's border. [6]
- The Israeli Air Force has been bombing the military targets of Iranian militias and its proxy Hezbollah in Syria for years and with increasing frequency, at least weekly in the last year. Israel cannot do so without notifying and getting the acquiescence of both Russian and U.S. militaries, which respectively control the Western and Eastern sectors of Syrian air space. [7]
- A major reason for Israel's neutrality on the war in Ukraine is that it wants to maintain good relations with both Russia and the United States, in order to continue bombing Iranian military assets in Syria. [8]
- When U.S. helicopters fly special forces into Idlib province to take out jihadi leaders, like the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, they are flying through Russia-controlled air space with Russian assent. [9]
- "Socialist" China encourages U.S. capitalists to move production to China to take advantage of repressive labor conditions and lax environmental enforcement, but U.S. companies can only do so as joint ventures with Chinese companies from which both profit. [10]

Cooperative Climate Destruction

- Perhaps most ominously for our survival, the imperialist and sub-imperialist powers cooperate to undermine climate action through the UNFCCC, which sponsors the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) global climate summits. Patrick Bond has summed up this destructive imperialist multilateralism this way:

"Future generations will look back to confirm that the UNFCCC was the most decisive multilateral site for China, Russia, other BRICS and similar fossil-dependent sub-imperial powers to agree to Western demands that there be no binding processes on greenhouse gas emissions reductions, no reparations for climate-related 'loss and damage', no counting of military-related (or shipping or air) emissions, no insistence on fossil fuel firms leaving 'unburnable carbon' resources as stranded assets, the confirmation of carbon markets and offsets so as to privatize the world's atmosphere, and full power to intellectual property rights for delimiting the spread of solar, wind and other vital technologies to those importers willing to pay the market price.

“In Glasgow [the Nov. 2021 COP climate summit], collaboration by India, the U.S. and China was essential in order to change language regarding coal extraction and combustion, from ‘phase out’ to ‘phase down.’

“This sub-imperial collaboration with imperial powers within the UNFCCC — which took such an explicit form in the imposition of the Copenhagen Accord of December 2009 — really is the story of our times, isn’t it: the main reason capitalism will drive society and environment into what may truly be a terminal catastrophe.” [11]

In late July 2023 this imperial resistance to positive climate action continued amidst a deadly weeks-long record-shattering heat wave in the world’s oceans and atmosphere, when a G20 meeting proposal to triple renewable energy development by 2030 was defeated by China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. [12]

The Socialist Internationalist Alternative

The alliances of fossil capital with imperialist states has immediate relevance for the war in Ukraine, where currents on the Left are in sharp conflict. Responding to a statement by German campists, internationalist leftists from Ukraine, Russia, Poland and Germany issued an “anti-imperialist ecosocialist” statement called “Support Ukrainian Resistance and Disempower Fossil Capital.”

Criticizing the claim that Russia’s invasion was a defensive response to NATO expansion and the demand that NATO countries stop arming Ukraine’s resistance, the statement drew attention to the West’s reluctant, late and limited support for Ukraine’s military resistance.

It warned that the common interests of both Western and Russian capital, particularly fossil capital, are situated in restoring business as usual in the much larger Russian market, in exploiting the fossil resources of both Russia and Ukraine, and in exploiting labor under repressive and neoliberal economic regimes in both countries.

The internationalists warned that Western imperialist elites, from the oil and gas barons to Henry Kissinger and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, were saying that “peace” will require Ukraine to cede territory to Russia. The conflict might be resolved by an inter-imperialist deal to carve-up Ukraine between them and jointly enforce its subordinate position to the benefit of both Western and Russian capitalists. [13]

In contrast to supporting one set of capitalist states against another, socialist internationalism looks to develop campaigns against all imperialisms in practical solidarity with democratic, progressive and socialist movements in all countries.

As the Ukrainian socialist Denys Pilash notes for Ukraine, they are struggling against both “Russian tanks and Western banks.” [14]

In addition to appealing for weapons for the Ukrainian resistance, the Ukrainian Left is also calling on the Western Left to campaign for the cancellation of Ukraine’s massive foreign debts owed to the IMF and Western banks, so that its resources can be devoted to defeating Russia’s aggression, meeting Ukraine’s social needs, and rebuilding the country after the war. [15]

If the campists were consistent in their opposition to Western imperialism, they would join the campaign to cancel Ukraine’s foreign debt.

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P.S.

Against The Current

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc227/on-imperialism-today/>

Footnotes

[1] International Manifesto Group, "Through Pluripolarity to Socialism: A Manifesto," Sept. 2021, <https://internationalmanifesto.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/through-pluripolarity-to-socialism-a-manifesto-final.pdf>; Vijay Prashad et al., "Eight Contradictions in the Imperialist 'Rules-Based Order'," Tricontinental, March 2023, https://thetricontinental.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/20230308_Eight-Contraditions_EN_Web.pdf.

[2] For example, the March 18, 2023 march and teach-in in Washington, D.C. initiated by the ANSWER Coalition, CodePink, and the People's Forum with the lead demand of "Peace in Ukraine - Negotiations not escalation!" had speakers supporting governments of Russia, China, Syria, Eritrea, and North Korea. Calls: https://www.answercoalition.org/protest_march_18_19_peace_in_ukraine_say_no_to_endless_u_s_wars, <https://www.codepink.org/march18>, <https://peoplesforum.org/events/peace-in-ukraine-say-no-to-endless-u-s-wars/>. Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcL8-5YrND8>.

[3] Kavita Krishnan, "Multipolarity, the Mantra of Authoritarianism," The India Forum, December 20, 2022, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/politics/multipolarity-mantra-authoritarianism>; Promise Li, "Against Multipolar Imperialism: Toward Socialist Multipolarity," Against the Current, January 6, 2023, <https://againstthecurrent.org/against-multipolar-imperialism-toward-socialist-multipolarity/>; William Robinson, "The Unbearable Manicheanism of the 'Anti-Imperialist' Left," The Philosophical Salon, Aug. 7, 2023, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-unbearable-manicheanism-of-the-anti-imperialist-left/>.

[4] Ruy Mauro Marini, The Dialectics of Dependency (Monthly Review Press, 2022).

[5] Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia (eds.), BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique (Pluto Press, 2015); Patrick Bond, "Towards a Broader Theory of Imperialism," Review of African Political Economy, April 18, 2018, <https://roape.net/2018/04/18/towards-a-broader-theory-of-imperialism/>; Patrick Bond, "China's role in amplifying Southern Africa's extreme uneven development," Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt, June 30, 2021, <https://www.cadtm.org/China-s-role-in-amplifying-Southern-Africa-s-extreme-uneven-development>. See also Patrick Bond, "After Johannesburg: BRICS+ Humbled as Sub- (not Anti- or Inter-) Imperialists," CounterPunch, August 31, 2023, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/08/31/after-johannesburg-brics-humbled-as-sub-not-anti-or-in>

[ter-imperialists/](#)

[6] “The Biden administration is closely monitoring — but not criticizing — Moscow’s intervention,” New York Times, Jan. 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/06/world/kazakhstan-protests/the-biden-administration-is-closely-monitoring-but-not-criticizing-moscows-intervention>.

[7] Sean Mathews, “Russia ‘tolerates’ Israeli strikes in Syria, but has little appetite to restrain Iran,” Middle East Eye, > Dec. 31, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-russia-tolerates-israel-air-raids-little-appetite-restrain-iran>; Micheal R. Gordon, “U.S. Secretly Reviews Israel’s Plans for Strikes Against Iranian Targets in Syria,” Wall Street Journal, June 16, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-secretly-reviews-israels-plans-for-strikes-against-iranian-targets-in-syria-11655405162>.

[8] Jacob Magid, “Russia says military coordination with Israel in Syria will continue as usual,” Times of Israel, Feb. 27, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-says-military-coordination-with-israel-in-syria-will-continue-as-usual/>.

[9] BBC, “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: IS leader ‘dead after US raid’ in Syria,” Oct. 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50200339>.

[10] Gerard Greenfield, “Transnational Capital and the State in China: Partners in Exploitation,” Against the Current, March/April 1998, <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc073/p1855/>; Richard Smith, China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse (Pluto Press, 2020).

[11] Patrick Bond, “Re: or sub-imperialism? Re: [marxmail] Essay on Russian Imperialism and Its Monopolies,” Marxmail, Feb. 6, 2022, <https://groups.io/g/marxmail/message/14226?reply=1>.

[12] Kristoffer Tigue, “In an Ominous Sign for COP28, G20 Nations Once Again Failed to Reach a Deal to Phase Down Fossil Fuels,” Inside Climate News, July 25, 2023, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/25072023/g20-deals-phase-down-fossil-fuels-boost-clean-energy-fail-cop28/>.

[13] Ilya Budraitskis et al., “Support Ukrainian Resistance and Disempower Fossil Capital,” <https://againstthecurrent.org/support-ukrainian-resistance-and-disempower-fossil-capital/>.

[14] Denys Pilash Interview, “Ukraine’s Left Fights for a Future Free from Domination by Russian Tanks & Western Banks,” Democracy Now, May 25, 2023, https://www.democracynow.org/2023/5/25/is_russia_ukraine_war_expanding.

[15] Oleksandr Kravchuk, “To Help Ukraine, Cancel Its Foreign Debt,” Jacobin, March 8, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/03/ukraine-cancel-foreign-debt-imf-economic-conditions>; Yuliya Yurchenko, “Credit won’t work: Why Ukraine’s state debt must be cancelled,” Commons, April 28, 2023, <https://commons.com.ua/en/why-ukraine-needs-change-debt-policy/>.