

# Paths for Socialist Internationalism

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**THE BLOODY WAR in Ukraine and growing tensions around Taiwan show inter-imperial rivalries unevenly emerging amidst a general crisis of profitability among the ruling classes. While the age of unshakable U.S. imperial hegemony continues to slip away, no sides of these tensions promote better conditions for revolutionary change.**

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Quite the contrary, this inchoate state of multipolarity introduces varied permutations of state-capital collaboration, as well as conflict, that model new ways of containing working-class power. In fact, I will explore here the unprecedented level of economic interdependence we see today between the United States and its rivals — an effect of decades of neoliberal globalization.

The deafening silence from major powers on Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Armenians, and the U.S. and China's invested interest in maintaining Israeli power, show that geopolitical antagonisms today express no straightforward rivalry.

Parts of the antiwar left, as represented for example by groups like CodePink, have no framework to account for these shifts. They see their sole responsibility as combating U.S. imperialism — which means that they have little to say when other imperialists and oppressing nations threaten the autonomy of small nations.

Worse, such groups' failure to understand the shifting contours of the imperialist world system today actually renders their well-meaning struggle against U.S. imperialism less effective, by failing to recognize U.S. imperialism's interdependence with other states — even those with which it is in tension.

## Entangled Imperialisms Today

The best framework to understand the rivalries amidst interdependence that shape global imperialism today is "antagonistic cooperation." First coined by German Marxist August Thalheimer and later elaborated by Brazilian Marxists from Política Operária (POLOP) in the 1960s, antagonistic cooperation, as POLOP's 1967 program illustrates, "a cooperation aimed at the conservation of the system and which has its basis in the very process of centralization of capital, and which does not eliminate the antagonisms inherent in the imperialist world."

In our present period, the concept can help explain how intense geopolitical rivalries between imperialist and sub-imperialist states — even those across rival geopolitical blocs — can exist without interrupting capital accumulation on a global scale, albeit in uneven forms. This is not to

downplay the existence and dangers of inter-imperialist rivalries, but to establish that such antagonisms emerge through the register of cooperation.

To be clear, this emphasis on inter-imperialist cooperation is not what Karl Kautsky envisioned as “ultra-imperialism,” a fantasy that imperialists would peacefully lay down arms and co-exist to share profits. World War I dramatically disrupted this pipe dream, and still today, imperialists are clearly not peacefully co-existing. New sites of tension are turning into hot wars.

Nonetheless, despite these rivalries, globalization only seems to continue. All the talk of “de-risking” is one manifestation of globalization adapting to new conditions of geopolitical tension. What we see today is that full-scale decoupling between different imperialists is much less straightforward or inevitable than in World War I.

Economic interdependence between empires did not prevent full-scale war during the 1910s. But even the main scholars looking at economic interdependence during WWI, mainly study interdependence among the Allies and with overseas colonies, not across warring blocs. Jamie Martin, “Globalizing the History of the First World War: Economic Approaches,” *The Historical Journal* vol. 65, no. 3 (June 2022): 838-55.

Today’s U.S.-China tensions can emerge even as bilateral trade between the two countries hits an all-time high. Financialization has grown to monstrous heights unthinkable during the First World War. In other words, we need to consider how the persistence of these economic ties limits and shapes the terms of inter-imperialist antagonisms that inevitably emerge — in ways that Lenin, Hilferding, Bukharin, and other early theorists of imperialism did not fully predict.

The integration of the capitalist class through multilateral institutions, like the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization (WTO), comes into direct tension with the world system’s current tendency toward renewed and rising economic and industrial nationalisms in the United States and China. The “decoupling” of certain industries, exemplified by the growing rivalries in tech industries, faces resistance from other dominant sectors of capital.

A few examples will illustrate my point. Despite reports that the growth of the Chinese plane manufacturer Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC) is freezing out Western competitors in China, COMAC and Boeing just signed a new agreement to deepen collaboration at a joint research center in late 2022.

Even as Microsoft is relocating some staff away from its Chinese offices, the tech giant is still pursuing major joint ventures with Chinese firms, from Kuberay to Avanade. U.S. tariffs negatively impact Chinese imports, but Chinese exports continue to boom for items from electric vehicles to batteries.

Last year in a speech at Davos, Xi Jinping reaffirmed that “China will continue to let the market play a decisive role in resource allocation” while “uphold[ing] the multilateral trading system with the WTO at its center” — a sentiment recommitted by Vice-Premier Liu He in the same venue this past January.

Indeed, the supposed steep drop in Chinese imports to the United States in 2023 is more complicated than what it looks like at face value: most of these commodities are simply being rerouted through countries like Vietnam and Mexico. Even the CEO of Raytheon came out in the fall of 2023 to say that decoupling is simply not feasible, given the importance of rare minerals in China needed for production in the United States.

In a different but related vein, the tragic developments in Nagorno-Karabakh further testify to the

reality that things aren't as straightforward as traditional inter-imperialist rivalry. While the West has been looking to build links with Azerbaijan in an attempt to tap into its oil resources as an energy alternative to Russia since the war in Ukraine started, Azerbaijan has been deepening links with Russia to import its gas to keep up with this demand.

NATO member Turkey, which fueled the Azeri ethnic cleansing campaign, also hopes to become a new "gas hub" to launder Russian gas to the West as "Turkish gas." Despite the Western sanctions on Russia, Chevron has not budged from its participation in the Russian-led Caspian Pipeline. We simply do not see these kinds of entanglements persisting through bloody war during World War I.

Growing industrial nationalism in different countries does not wholly impede their ruling classes' commitment to neoliberal globalization. These suggest divisions within each national capitalist class — those for accelerating the "new Cold War" against those who oppose it.

Financial institutions dictate the terms of the imperialist world order more than ever before, notably in the form of asset managers like Blackrock and Vanguard, the latter now one of the largest shareholder blocs in both Exxon and the Chinese state-owned Sinopec.

Political economist Patrick Bond observes that different states, especially those touted by some as a multipolar alternative to Western capitalism, are helping to deepen and expand the accumulation of capital, as Rosa Luxemburg began to describe a century earlier. Bond writes:

"First, amplified global capitalist crisis tendencies are emanating from centrifugal BRICS economies. Second, multipolarity is amplifying the neoliberal character of multilateral institutions, especially in the spheres of finance, trade and climate politics, as the BRICS gain a seat at the table. Third, in a subimperial manner, BRICS-based corporations are vital forces in super-exploitative accumulation within their respective regions and beyond." [1]

In other words, the major players in this "New Cold War" are not the only protagonists. Mid-sized and other regional states also find new forms of agency in this picture. They co-steer this continuation of capital accumulation structured by other hegemonies, while finding room to boost their own political might, aided by the expansion of an important financial sector.

Champions of multipolarity from Lula to Xi, to quote Bond again, talk left and walk right: they speak in anti-imperialist registers to distract from endogenous problems in their countries that cannot be fully reduced to U.S. sanctions, while continuing to defend globalization even more faithfully than the United States.

Old U.S. allies like the Saudis are "diversifying their portfolios," so to speak, partly turning to China and various forms of neoliberal public-private partnerships for development. And same with Israel — whose trade with China skyrocketed in recent years just as the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign has taken off.

Even upon Israel's genocidal leveling of Gaza in October, China criticizes Israel for going too far, but reaffirms the two-state solution. As Israel has looked to diversify its political and economic allies, China balances its deep commitments to both Israeli and various Arab bourgeoisies by endorsing a highly compromised vision of Palestinian sovereignty.

## **Practical Demands**

What should socialists take from this chaotic period of transformation in the imperialist world

system? The key lesson today is that the central contradiction of inter-imperialist rivalry today — that is, the persistence of deep interdependence that structures the rivalry — distinguishes it from U.S. unipolarity, traditional inter-imperialist rivalry as in World War I, or what Karl Kautsky imagined as a peaceful “federation of the strongest, who renounce their arms race.”

We must not mistake the decoupling of certain industries as a straightforward undoing of the interdependence of the imperialist world system. This brings me to my key point: to do so would risk overlooking the many sites of inter-imperialist collaboration that can provide important targets for a socialist strategy on internationalist work.

How then to reframe our strategies for internationalism according to this analysis? First, we must recognize the persuasive appeal of a politics that insists that we can only focus on U.S. crimes to many new and young radicals today while remaining silent on the oppression of other states.

Some say that those in the imperial core have no right to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, especially those under U.S. threat, and that our internationalist duty is limited to what U.S. imperialism does. This offers activists in the imperial core an illusory but compelling promise of practical action.

This promise is a powerful one: it allows socialists in the West to feel like they can adequately account for their privileges of being in the imperial core, and meaningfully support their counterparts abroad — without actually having to work through the immense challenges of supporting independent movements abroad amidst the pressures of global imperialism and their own national ruling class.

[Bracketing away these struggles offers the easy path out, settling for solutions that limit the growth of revolutionary gains. As intellectual historian Barnaby Raine says, this type of politics is fundamentally pessimistic, “grounded in the reality that it’s difficult to conceive of bigger historical transformations.” \[2\]](#)

The pervasiveness of this pessimism means that it would be challenging to persuade masses of socialists to concrete action for movements under attack by oppressors other than the United States. We need to explain that these struggles are connected, and prioritize organizing solutions that can bridge these struggles, not isolate them from each other.

More precisely, we must be wary of solutions that blur socialists’ political independence in relation to liberals in broad democratic struggles. As Lenin once said in *What Is To Be Done?*, socialists’ conditional alliance with bourgeois democrats only makes sense “insofar as its democratic tasks ... are concerned,” and we must beware of actions that threaten to reduce “the nascent working-class movement into an appendage of the liberals.”

For one, it is ineffective and quite out-of-step with many socialists, anti-imperialists and other movement activists, for example, to call for them to actively lobby for more arms to Ukraine, as most are rightly horrified by what has now become the largest military budget in U.S. history.

Of course, 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 recognize that Western powers are weaponizing Ukraine and Taiwan, for example, to massively expand their own military budgets. Hawkish liberals are calling for increasing arms supply to Ukraine, and the left needs to think about how our organizing can distinguish ourselves from them, rather than tailing the liberals and uncritically lobbying for more.

We can support the right of Ukrainians to demand arms, while we oppose every effort by Western imperialists to use defensive and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine as an excuse to increase military budgets and infrastructure.

Beyond this issue, we need more than abstract, moralistic calls to “support workers’ movements and self-determination everywhere” untethered to practical campaigns. We need to organize around positive solutions that distinguish us from the liberals, while drawing from the power of different local struggles to target sites of inter-imperial collaboration or interdependence.

This can take different forms. For example, the call demanding that multilateral financial institutions cancel Ukraine’s debt concretely assists both Ukraine’s self-determination struggle and reconstruction alternatives to the Zelensky government’s neoliberal policies, while giving us practical targets (like the IMF) to organize against in the West.

Such concrete calls can be situated in transitional demands on a global scale, connecting to other ongoing grassroots campaigns against these institutions’ expansive debt regimes and “structural adjustment” austerity schemes in parts of the global South, like Sri Lanka.

On the issue of China, we should be organizing socialists and workers in strategic industries of U.S.-Chinese collaboration (e.g. Apple and Tesla stores), merging “bread-and-butter” demands with internationalist ones. By identifying the interdependence of U.S. corporations and Chinese capital as a concrete site of organizing, we can provide a practical alternative for many overseas dissidents who see the U.S. establishment’s hawkish militarist solutions against China as a main avenue of internationalism.

We can build on past efforts, including but not limited to these examples:

- The UK-based Uyghur Solidarity Campaign protest of Zara’s links to forced Uyghur labor. [3]
- DSA Muslim’s 30 Day Pledge to #BoycottGenocide against Western companies complicit in forced Uyghur labor. [4]
- Overseas Chinese labor activists’ protest of Apple stores calling out Apple and Foxconn’s mistreatment of Chinese workers. [5]
- U.S. Apple Retail Union rank-and-file workers’ 2012 “Day of Solidarity” with Chinese Foxconn workers. [6]

## **Building An Internationalist Left**

This framework also enables us to push diaspora communities leftward. For communities barred from expressing dissent in their home countries, movement spaces in liberal democracies in the imperial core often serve as the strategic site to raise demands as an independent opposition and to build mass organizations.

These groups are commonly pigeonholed as irredeemably right-wing and anti-communist, like the Cuban diaspora, but the reality is far more complex. Certainly, speaking from personal experience about Hong Kong diaspora circles, these spaces can be exceedingly pro-U.S., liberal and self-fashionably “non-ideological.” But many are often readily responsive to any tactics as long as this helps combat their home regimes.

In this sense, for example, designing opportunities to organize different dissident diaspora

communities resisting Chinese oppression into the broad pro-Palestinian BDS campaign can be salient. This idea can encourage these communities to recognize the intersections of U.S. and Chinese power in their mutual economic support of Israel's apartheid state, while bolstering the ranks of the pro-Palestinian solidarity struggle.

Thus the collective expertise of movements fighting against different imperialisms can effectively target sites of inter-imperial collaboration that persist despite geopolitical tensions, especially when one sovereign's economic and political power derives in part from another.

So-called anti-imperialist governments often appropriate and build on traditional colonial infrastructures of oppression. Tibetan writer Kalden Dhatsenpa observes that Canadian mining companies' "technical knowledge and capital has helped hasten [the] pace and scale [of] the Chinese dispossession of Tibet." [7]

Pan Yue, the current head of China's Ethnic Affairs Commission, openly proclaims that China should learn from the U.S., Russia, and Israel's colonial methods to introduce Han settlers to its Western frontier.

The same goes for the imperialist resources that the Chinese state has long recruited to build the Chinese surveillance state in Xinjiang, like the Chinese state-run police academies' adoption of Israeli counterinsurgency tactics. [8] Opposing U.S. imperialism should go beyond selectively critiquing its vehicles, instead addressing its entanglements with other "rival" states.

We must support all movements for self-determination against oppressors, but the precise form in which this solidarity takes can be different depending on larger geopolitical dynamics and other specific conditions. [9] In the case of Ukraine, which has the backing of Western imperialists, we must stake our ground more persuasively on organizing people into coalitional efforts toward a positive set of campaign work: abolish Ukraine's debt alongside other debts of the global South, build solidarity with Ukrainian trade unions and uplift their demands.

This approach does not abandon support of Ukrainian self-defense, but centers a practical platform of international solidarity *as a mirror image* of those focused on opposing Ukrainians demanding aid. The best tactic against the attacks on our stance on Ukraine's self-determination is not to fight these critics simply on their own terms, but to reframe the terms of the debate.

Our core argument should be: if socialists really want the best for Ukrainians, they would be actively fighting with us on the practical demands we suggest, not a merely negative and oppositional platform (e.g. opposing arms to Ukraine without doing anything else) that promotes no concrete avenues for solidarity to a movement for self-determination.

On the other hand, such kinds of intransigent oppositional campaigns are essential in instances when "our own" war machine is pitched against these movements for self-determination. Building a broad front to oppose U.S. arms to Israel with a diversity of tactics is immediately effective. The antagonistic cooperation of imperialists from the United States to China to maintain Israel's settler-colonial state means that we can bring in other movements to oppose all kinds of investments in Israel, from American to Chinese firms.

Such a framework at least gives us a starting point to encourage socialists to think about the violence of other capitalist states and imperialisms. Our response to those who fault us for not being committed against U.S. imperialism should be that they, in fact, stop short of thoroughly combating U.S. imperialism — by withholding action against the other imperialisms with which it is entangled.

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Against The Current

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc227/paths-for-socialist-internationalism/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Patrick Bond, "The BRICS' Centrifugal Geopolitical Economy," Vestnik RUDN. International Relations 18, no. 3 (2018): 536.

[2] Barnaby Raine, "Is The Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?" The Breach, October 22, 2021, <https://breachmedia.ca/is-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-my-friend/>.

[3] <https://uyghursolidarityuk.org/2021/12/07/11-dec-protest-zaras-forced-uyghur-labour/>

[4] <https://actionnetwork.org/forms/30-day-pledge-to-boycottgenocide/>

[5] <https://labornotes.org/blogs/2022/11/after-workers-flee-chinas-largest-iphone-factory-activists-demand-accountability-apple>

[6] <https://www.cnet.com/tech/tech-industry/apple-unions-day-of-solidarity-to-protest-working-conditions/>

[7] <https://breachmedia.ca/canada-birther-a-mining-industry-in-chinese-occupied-tibet/>

[8] <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/israel-analysis/>

[9] <https://links.org.au/us-china-rivalry-antagonistic-cooperation-and-anti-imperialism-21st-century-interview-promise-li>