

Choo Chon Kai (Socialist Party of Malaysia): 'Peace in the Asia-Pacific requires movements capable of taking power'

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Choo Chon Kai is a Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia, PSM) leader and coordinator of its International Bureau. In this interview with Federico Fuentes for *LINKS International Journal of Socialist*, Choo discusses rising US-China tensions, the struggle for peace in Southeast Asia and challenges for building solidarity amid an increasingly multipolar world.

Following the Cold War's end, global politics seemed dominated by wars seeking to reinforce US imperialism's dominance. More recently, a shift appears to be taking place. While the US has been forced to withdraw from Afghanistan, we have seen China's economic rise, Russia invade Ukraine, and smaller nations, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, flexing military power beyond their borders. In general terms, how do you understand the current dynamics at play within the global imperialist system?

We are entering a [new phase of global capitalism](#) in which the US-dominated post-Cold War unipolar world order is crumbling. The old powers are in decline but the new powers have yet to fully develop their strength.

US imperialist hegemony is clearly in decline, both in political and socio-economic terms. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US was the world's sole superpower. It had the economic and military strength, and weight within global institutions, to force other countries to implement neoliberal economic policies. But its military strength has been overstretched by its catastrophic military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the 2008 economic crisis has deeply impacted its economy. These factors have contributed to its declining influence. And the disastrous effects of US-promoted neoliberal economic policies in many countries has led to the US losing credibility, which in turn has made it harder for the US to enforce its economic policies abroad.

Meanwhile, we have the rising influence of emerging powers, such as China, who are seeking to challenge US imperialism's dominance at the global level. We also have US allies, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, establishing closer relations with countries that the US deems as not-friendly in order to help pursue their own geopolitical ambitions. This was evident, for example, with Turkey's actions in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over [Nagorno-Karabakh](#). While these smaller emerging powers might not be challenging US imperialism at the global level, they are advancing their own geopolitical interests at the regional level, in some cases seeking to revive dreams of past empires, such as the [Ottoman empire in Turkey's case](#).

How have these global dynamics impacted politics and struggles in Malaysia?

In recent decades, Malaysia has been very close to the US and very strongly influenced by its

policies and economic thinking. But more recently, due to the US' decline and closer economic relationships with China — which has overtaken the US as our biggest trading partner — Malaysia has started drifting away from US influence. It is evident that the government is moving closer to other countries, even if the US still has some influence in Malaysia.

Growing tensions between the US and China in the region are of great concern. What, in your opinion, is behind US military strategy in the region? How do you view China's role and actions towards the US and regional neighbours?

The US is trying to maintain its economic, political and military superiority in the region, primarily by seeking to contain its main rival, China. We can see this through the trade partnerships it pursues, the military alliances it has formed (for example with [South Korea](#)), and the new military bases it has opened in [the Philippines](#).

In terms of China's role in the Southeast Asian region, this is quite complex. With the exception of Vietnam, which China invaded four decades ago, most countries in the region have peacefully coexisted with China. More recently, however, China has triggered disputes in Southeast Asian waters by building artificial islands and sending Chinese military vessels to patrol disputed areas. This has created certain tensions and anxieties among governments in Southeast Asia over whether China poses a threat to their country.

As for Malaysia, when disputes have emerged, for example in the South China Sea, the government has not adopted an aggressive stand towards China. While protesting the fact that Chinese vessels have crossed into Malaysian waters, it has refrained from beating the war drum. There are tensions, but not to the extent that they threaten regional military conflict.

Has there been debates among the Malaysian left over how to respond to the current tensions over China?

On this issue there is no consensus within the Malaysian left, which remains very small. My observation is that, generally speaking, the left — especially the older generation — view China in a more positive light. When it comes to US-China rivalry, they still see China as a positive counter-hegemon to the US. Few are concerned by China's rise and any threat this might pose to neighbouring countries. There are also still a lot of debates over how to characterise China: is China socialist or not, is China imperialist or not.

From my point of view, as socialists, we should seek to better understand China's complex history and its current state, politically and economically. This is important because China has become a major power. We can no longer ignore these discussions — it is not like 20 years ago, where such discussions seemed less important. At the same time, we should be careful not to quickly jump to conclusions. For example, some say China is not imperialist purely because of its recent historical past. Others say it is imperialist because it is building military bases in the region or has threatened to take Taiwan. The left, not just in Malaysia but internationally, faces a big challenge reconciling these views and reaching a consensus.

How are the conflicts over Ukraine and Taiwan generally viewed in your country?

In Malaysia, these two issues are viewed quite differently. In the case of Ukraine, I would say the general public and the government lean towards a neutral stance and support a ceasefire and peace given the war's global impacts, especially on food and fuel prices. Generally, such far away issues do not really connect with Malaysians on the same scale as, for example, Palestine, which generates strong sentiments among the Muslim community, or the Tamil issue, given the size of the local Tamil

community. Compared to these situations, Ukraine is seen as a European or Western issue. That is why people prefer the government to remain neutral and support negotiations.

Regarding Taiwan, this depends which community we are talking about. Among the Chinese community, there are strong views and divisions: there is a minority that is very pro-Taiwan and — based on my observation — a majority who support China and its ambition for unification. Among the non-Chinese communities, you will not find such strong views. Most largely support the government's position, and that of other ASEAN countries, calling for dialogue to avoid a military confrontation over Taiwan.

What stance has the PSM taken towards these two conflicts?

The PSM released a [statement](#) on Ukraine and presented a [memorandum](#) to the Russian embassy and EU delegation calling for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations for a lasting peace based on mutual respect among all parties. We respect the Ukrainian people's democratic right to self-determination, including those in the Donbas region. They should have the democratic right to decide their future without intervention from the West or Russia. We are also against NATO's expansion.

On Taiwan, the PSM is continuing to have internal discussions due to differing views. But, in general, we are against any escalation of the Cross-Strait conflict into a war. We believe the Taiwan question should be resolved through peaceful negotiations based on mutual respect. We respect the right of self-determination for Taiwanese people. We are not advocating for unification or Taiwan independence — we are supporting their right to self-determination, just as we do for all peoples. For example, we support self-determination for West Papua and we support self-determination for Palestine — in that case, for us, two states or one state is not the main issue; the main issue is self-determination for the people living there.

We have seen a range of local struggles emerge that do not necessarily have the US as their principal enemies: in Ukraine and Taiwan, but also Myanmar and Hong Kong. At the same time, there continue to be important local struggles against US and Western imperialism — Palestine being the most obvious example. Do you see any possibilities to build solidarity with, and bridges between, these struggles, given that in some cases these movements might not only seek support but even military aid from rivalling competing powers?

This is, of course, quite a challenging issue. In situations like that in Myanmar or Hong Kong, the left is very weak. In Hong Kong, for example, the local movement is dominated by right-wing forces that are clearly pro-Western imperialism. This is used by leftists in other countries, including Malaysia, to say that the protests are simply the work of pro-imperialist forces. This makes it very difficult for some leftists to link up with, or even sympathise with, these struggles. But the problem is that when the left fails to build solidarity with these protests, the protesters — including even those from the left — see the left's failure to provide solidarity and turn to the right and imperialism for support.

This is a very challenging issue and I don't think I have the answer for how to go about this. I do think that the first thing the left should do is seek to understand the dynamics, history and content of struggles in different places. Only then can we develop empathy and build solidarity. I think it is important to connect with the left in those struggles and better understand their issues. I believe that is the only way we can build solidarity and challenge the right-wing narratives that drown out more or less progressive voices.

As the PSM, we have held sessions with the purpose of [establishing dialogues](#) with people directly

involved in such struggles, so that more people can better understand and connect with them. We have sought to amplify the voices of the left involved in these struggles in order for them to be heard.

A [statement](#) released in June 2022 by a group of Southeast Asian left parties, including the PSM, raised the need to “promote and advance progressive regional peace initiatives”. What kind of peace initiatives do you think the left in the region could focus on?

The joint statement was initiated by comrades from the Philippines and we, as the PSM, fully support it. The statement lists certain peace initiatives, including the closure of all US military bases in the Asia-Pacific, which we see as a main factor contributing to escalating tensions in the region. It also demands, among other things, the dismantlement of all imperialist intelligence infrastructure, upholding the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty and expanding the nuclear weapon-free zone treaty to the entire Asia-Pacific region.

But another important peace initiative we need to take is bolstering working class solidarity and internationalism from below. We can not just rely on governments — the movements, the grassroots, need to promote solidarity against military escalation in the region, wherever this is happening.

What could this look like in practice?

For example, transnational grassroots movements could bring together different forces for joint actions on certain issues. If there is a conflict between countries — for example, there have at times been tensions between Malaysia and Indonesia — we could get the left in both countries to demonstrate together to help defuse tensions. Such actions could be very important. But, more importantly, we need to organise movements at home capable of capturing political power. This would give us more space to promote peace and avoid conflicts among countries in the region.

While the erosion of US dominance is something to be welcomed, the space being left open in this emerging “multipolar world” is often being filled by right-wing authoritarian regimes. How should the left view prospects for a multipolar world? And what should genuine left-wing internationalism look like in this context?

The left should be under no illusions that the emerging so-called multipolar world will help our struggles. Our struggles will always depend on on-the-ground organising and our ability to build movements capable of challenging the capitalist order. A multipolar world will not do this for us. Of course, a multipolar world provides us with a new situation, new openings, new opportunities and new challenges when it comes to organising struggles. We need to understand these new dynamics that a multipolar world unleashes. But we should be under no illusions that a multipolar world is good for the left.

The left, whether in government or opposition, should push Global South governments to uphold a position of non-alignment in the face of geopolitical rivalries among major powers, such as the US, Russia and China, and refuse to support particular camps or be dragged into endless conflicts. That is not the way forward for the left. At the same time, non-alignment and non-interference in domestic affairs should not stop the left and progressives from building peoples-to-peoples movement and solidarity between struggles.

As the left, we need to build solidarity while building a movement with a progressive program for international peace that is capable of taking power. We should have no illusions in right-wing governments or governments that only seek a better foothold within a multipolar world. It is meaningless to the working class to have a multipolar world if the same repressive regimes are in

power.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

These issues are very difficult; there are still a lot of discussions to be had. Here, in Malaysia, we are holding [conferences](#) and events to discuss and debate these issues. How to deal with these new situations is a dilemma for the left. A lot of people have preconceived positions on issues such as the US-China rivalry. But what we need is further discussion and a greater understanding of, for example, China's rise, the new challenges we face internationally and its impacts on struggles domestically. We need more debates and discussions to enhance our understanding of the situation, and develop more concrete and useful strategies for advancing our struggles.

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