

Au Loong-Yu (Hong Kong): 'Opposing US militarisation in the Asia-Pacific should not mean remaining silent on China's emerging imperialism'

Tuesday 5 December 2023, by [AU Loong-yu](#), [FUENTES Federico](#) (Date first published: 2 December 2023).

Au Loong-Yu is a long-time Hong Kong labour rights and political activist. Author of [China's Rise: Strength and Fragility](#) and [Hong Kong in Revolt: The Protest Movement and the Future of China](#), Au now lives in exile. In this extensive interview, Au discusses China's global status and its implications for peace and solidarity activism.

One of the biggest challenges facing the left is coming to grips with China's status within the global capitalist system. China's meteoric rise has led many to ask whether China remains part of the Global South or has become an imperialist country. How should we understand China's status today?

The issue is that for the past three decades China has not been a regular Third World country. From a largely peasant-populated country 40 years ago, today it is 60% urbanised and fully industrialised. Its manufacturing rolls out both low and high end products. As a result, China has crossed the threshold to become an upper-middle income country according to the World Bank. Yet, at the same time, 600 million Chinese have a monthly income of only US\$140.

China simultaneously contains many elements, making it very unique. Simply looking at GDP per capita or monthly income might lead you to believe that China is part of the Global South. But no single metric or economic indicator can provide us with a definitive answer on China's status. Today's China still has elements of being a Third World country, but the significance of these elements has diminished over time. We can't dismiss them, but they remain just elements in defining China's status. To draw any useful conclusion on China, we have to look at the country as a whole, taking into consideration all its elements.

But if China is no longer a regular developing country, does this automatically mean we should characterise it as imperialist?

China's status is complicated and messy. There is no clear cut yes or no answer; rather the answer is yes and no. I describe China as an emerging imperialist country — a very strong regional power with a global reach. It possesses the intention and potential to dominate lesser countries but has not yet consolidated its position in the world.

Why this definition? Well, let's start with the basic criteria for imperialism. [Vladimir] Lenin's analysis needs a lot of updating, especially since the postwar decolonisation period. But if we take Lenin as our starting point, he refers to the degree of monopoly, the merger of industrial and bank capital, the formation of financial capital and the level of capital export as defining features of imperialism. If we apply these criteria to China, they are all present in a very significant manner.

For example, right now we are witnessing the Chinese property market bubble bursting once again. People often overlook the fact that it is only thanks to the privatisation of state-owned urban land (or more correctly the sale of the right of land-use) that the mega-bubble in the property market exists. The “state-owned land” regime also determines the main players in the market: municipal governments, banks (mostly state-owned) and developers. Together, they have formed an alliance of land-based financial capital to facilitate the enrichment of the bureaucracy and its crony private partners.

Whereas in other parts of the world imperialist logic is driven by private capital with support from the state, in China the state and state capital are the major players. This is despite the fact that the private sector accounts for more than half of the economy. Some might respond: “If the commanding heights of the economy are heavily monopolised by state enterprises, then they are under social ownership or public ownership, which is a feature of socialism or, at a minimum, state ownership is a bulwark against profit-seeking private capital.” This is to forget that long ago, Friedrich Engels mocked those who thought Bismarck’s state ownership schemes were a feature of socialism. In reality, state ownership and social ownership are two very different things.

China’s state is a predatory state entirely controlled by an exploiting class whose core is Chinese Communist Party (CCP) party bureaucrats. I refer to this exploiting class as a bourgeoisified state bureaucracy. This means that we have in China a kind of state capitalism, but one deserving its own name. In my view bureaucratic capitalism is the most appropriate term for China because it captures the most important feature of China’s capitalism: the central role of the bureaucracy, not only in transforming the state (from one hostile to capitalist logic — though never genuinely committed to socialism — to one thoroughly capitalist), but also in enriching itself by fusing the power of coercion and the power of money.

This fusion gave new impetus to the bureaucracy’s drive towards industrialisation and state-led investment in infrastructure. That is why China’s capitalist restoration, driven by the state and CCP, was accompanied by rapid industrialisation, in contrast to the fall of the Soviet Union. It is also why China’s state-owned enterprises are in practice controlled by the party bureaucracy. Through its grip on state power, it continuously denies the working class basic rights to organise. On the operational level, these companies are “owned” by different sections and cliques of the bureaucracy, often via highly secret arrangements.

It is worth remembering two things. First, Imperial China was also characterised by its bureaucracy, to the extent that some sociologists consider China a “bureaucratic society”. The absolutism of the empire was possible only because it successfully replaced the noble class with loyal bureaucrats administering the state. When tensions arose between the bureaucracy and the emperor, the emperor won certain battles but the bureaucracy won the war, turning the emperor into its nominal head. Second, it is also worth remembering Imperial China’s long history of state-owned and state-run enterprises. Much of the wealth generated by these enterprises went into the pockets of the bureaucrats who managed them. This bourgeoisification of a section of the bureaucracy was visible in Imperial China; it was present during the rule of the Kuomintang (KMT); and reappeared under the CCP after 1979, eventually becoming a dominant feature of Chinese capitalism.

Does China’s state also exhibit expansionist features, which is a common characteristic of imperialist powers?

As a strong bureaucratic capitalist state, it necessarily carries a strong expansionist imperative that is not just economic but political. Consider this: China’s extensive capital export, which often takes the form of long-term investments, means Beijing necessarily requires global political leverages to protect its economic interest. This objectively encourages an imperialist logic to dominate lesser

countries and compete with leading imperialist countries.

But there is also a political expansionist logic. China's century-long "national humiliation" under colonialism between 1840-1949, led CCP ruling elites to vow to strengthen the country at all cost. [President] Xi [Jinping]'s dream for China should be interpreted in light of Mao Zedong's dream of *chaoyingganmei* (超英赶美, surpassing Britain and catching up with the United States). While the slogan should not be interpreted literally, China's ultra-nationalist rulers will not accept China remaining a second-rate power for another century. This ambition, born from China's contemporary history and the party's great Han Chinese nationalism, has led Beijing to seek global political influence. It will also, sooner or later, lead them to seek global military power — if China can consolidate its status in the coming period.

Any discussion about China and imperialism cannot just focus on economic aspects; on the contrary, it must also take into account this political side. China's contemporary rulers, from the KMT to CCP, have all wanted to restore the territory and influence that Imperial China had under the Qing Dynasty. Long before Beijing made its nine-dash line claim over the South China Sea, the KMT had already rolled out its "eleven-dash line" claim over the same area. In this sense, the CCP is following in the not-so-successful imperial footstep of the KMT — only this time it has, so far, worked out much better for them.

Focusing for a moment on the economic aspects, does this mean China offers no kind of alternative to US imperialism for Global South countries, as advocates of a multipolar world seem to suggest?

I do not agree with the notion that China is some kind of alternative for the Global South. Just look at what it did to Sri Lanka when the latter could not pay back its loan: China made Sri Lanka hand over greater control of its Hambantota port. China's corporations, including those that are state-owned, generally perform no better — or worse — than the companies of any other imperialist country.

But we need to analyse this question on two levels. China, like the US, maintains relations with most countries in the world. No sweeping generalisation is capable of explaining each and every relationship these two countries have with others. This is even more so for China because it is not yet a global empire. A general critique of Chinese expansionism should not preclude us from carrying out a concrete analysis of each relationship. Whenever we are confronted with a specific case, we should be sceptical of China's actions — and those of all great powers — but also analyse the specific relationship, paying special attention to the voices and interests of local people. Only by weighing up both the general and the specific can we, as outsiders, judge whether what China is doing is right or wrong.

Take, for example, the Belt and Road Initiative. It is possible that some of China's overseas investments via this project may benefit other countries, or at least cause more good than harm. Here, the voices of local peoples can provide us with the most relevant information we need. But this does not mean we should drop our general criticisms of the Belt and Road Initiative. Whatever good a specific project may bring, it remains the case that in general, the Belt and Road Initiative is driven by the logic of profit and the geopolitical interests of the CCP's monolithic regime. A win-win scenario might emerge in specific cases, but it is highly improbable that this will be the case for most host countries, regardless of whether the BRI ultimately ends up a success or failure for China.

Overall, China's going global strategy, which it embarked on at the start of the century, represents a clear regression in China's foreign policy: from relatively progressive Third-Worldism to prioritising Chinese companies' commercial interests and Beijing's global influence. Even if China's performance in developing countries is not as bad as that of Western countries, this qualitative

change from promoting autonomous development in the Third World (as advocated by Mao) to seeking to profit from the Third World is clearly a backwards step. Moreover, China's entrance into competition with the West for markets and resources necessarily accelerates the race to the bottom for labour rights and environmental protection.

Given all this, could you summarise your view on China's status today?

Taking all this and more into consideration, I think we can say that China is an emerging imperialist country. It is far from consolidated as an imperialist power, but it has the potential to achieve this status if left unchallenged from within and without for long enough.

In my opinion, the term emerging imperialism allows us to avoid certain errors. For example, some argue that since China and the US are not on a par, therefore China can not be imperialist, and that the label of "developing country" continues to apply. This argument fails to capture the constantly changing situation within China and globally. For example, China's spectacular rise to become an industrialised nation in less than 50 years is unprecedented in contemporary history.

That is why we must be able to grasp both the universal and the particularities when it comes to China. Its potential to develop into an imperialist power is immense. It is also the first emerging imperialist country to have previously been a semi-colonial country. On top of this, China has to confront the issue of its backwardness. These factors may have in part contributed to its rise, but certain aspects also continue to cripple its capacity to develop efficiently enough and, more importantly, in a more balanced way.

The CCP will have to overcome some fundamental obstacles before it can consolidate China as a stable and sustainable imperialist country. Xi's clique knows that before China can achieve its imperial ambition it has to overcome the burden of colonial legacy and China's backwardness. That is why Beijing sees "taking back" Taiwan as strategic to its national security. The fact that Taiwan has remained separated from mainland China ever since Japan took it in 1895 haunts the CCP.

Here, once again, sweeping generalisations do not help us when dealing with China's "colonial legacy". Instead we need concrete analysis. Not all of China's colonial legacy is a burden for its development. Take the case of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's autonomy allows the city to preserve its British legal system, which is no doubt a colonial legacy. China is attacking the city's legal system in the name of maintaining national security and "patriotism". Yet from the people's point of view, no matter how flawed the British legal system is, it is still much better than China's. Furthermore, smashing it would harm the collective interest of bureaucratic capitalism. It is precisely this colonial legacy that allowed the city to evolve into the financial centre that China depends on even today — half of China's foreign direct investment goes through the city. Xi can not achieve his dream for China without Hong Kong's autonomous capitalism, at least for the coming period.

This brings us to the most glaring contradiction in China today. Xi wants China to take a great leap forward in terms of modernisation. But he simply does not have the knowledge or enough pragmatism to turn his dream into coherent and feasible plans that can be implemented. The foolish act of shooting one's own foot when it comes to Hong Kong reflects the party's cultural backwardness; its failure to establish a stable succession of power is another example. If we factor in the party's failure to modernise its political culture of personal loyalty and cult leaders, we can see why China's ability to consolidate its position at the table of imperialist powers faces difficulties.

What can you tell us about China's actions in the South China Sea and how, if at all, they have contributed to rising tensions and militarisation in the Asia Pacific?

China's nine-dash line claim over the South China Sea was a fundamental turning point, because it represented the start of China's overseas expansion, politically and militarily. First, because its claim is entirely illegitimate. China, for example, also claims the Senkaku Island, which Japan disputes. There you can at least say China has a stronger case for its claim while Japan has no basis, either under so-called international law or from a leftist point of view. It is simply an imperialist claim by Japan, in alliance with the US. By contrast, China has never effectively ruled the whole area of the nine-dash line its claim (excepting some islands, such as the Paracel Island). Its claim over most of the South China Sea is not only not justified, it is a pronouncement of its hegemonic ambitions in Asia, which run parallel with its global economic ambitions represented by the BRI.

Some would respond that China's actions in the South China Sea are largely defensive and aimed at creating a buffer against US militarisation in the region. How legitimate is this argument?

I think that was true of China's actions prior to its nine-dash line claim. Even if we accept that China continues to act defensively and is simply responding to US aggression, you do not do this by invading huge territories that never belonged to China and which surrounding countries have claims over — including some who were victims of Imperial China's aggression for hundreds of years. This is an invasion of the maritime economic zones of several countries in Southeast Asia. It can no longer be deemed to be defensive.

It is also worth noting that there is no Great Wall separating defensive from offensive actions, especially when we consider how rapidly the context has changed in China and internationally. Today, Beijing has both the intention and capacity to kick start a global contest with the US. From the point of view of the collective interest of the bureaucracy, it is clear that Xi prematurely dropped Deng Xiaoping's advice of "keep a low profile and bide one's time".

Of course, we must continue to oppose US imperialism and militarisation in the region, but this should not mean supporting or remaining silent about China's emerging imperialism. Just how close or far China is to being on a par with the US empire is not the decisive issue in this regard.

How does Taiwan fit into US-China tensions?

The fundamental issue here is that China's claim over Taiwan has never factored in the wishes of the Taiwanese people. This is the most important point. There is also the secondary issue of US-China tensions. But these tensions have no direct bearing on the fundamental issue.

Taiwanese people have a historic right to self-determination. The reason is simple: due to their distinct history, Taiwanese people are very different from those of mainland China. Ethnically speaking, most Taiwanese are Chinese. But there are ethnic minorities, known as Austronesian peoples, who have inhabited large parts of Southeast Asia including Taiwan for thousands of years. The CCP never mentions this fact; it pretends that Taiwan was always Chinese-occupied. This is not true: indigenous peoples have existed in Taiwan for much longer and their rights must be respected.

As for those who are ethnically Chinese, we are really dealing with two distinct groups. About 15%, an absolute minority, only moved to Taiwan in 1949 after the Chinese revolution. The majority have descendants who have been living in Taiwan for up to 400 years. This is very different to Hong Kong, where a big chunk of the population is composed of mainland Chinese who have relatives in mainland China and still view mainland Chinese as their homeland. In Taiwan, most Chinese have no such connection to mainland China — any such connections were broken hundreds of years ago. Taiwan has been a separate nation for many years. It therefore has a historic right to self-determination.

The situation is not entirely comparable, but I would also say that the same applies for Hong Kong. We should not forget that for 150 years, Hong Kong's historical trajectory was also very different to that of mainland China: no one can deny that, or our right to self-determination. Any Western leftist who denies this is either uninformed or their claim to being a socialist is quite debatable.

Of course, it is true that all this is now entangled with US-China tensions. In this sense it is similar to the Ukrainian situation. In that case too, there are those who support Russia or hold a neutral position. In my opinion, they are wrong. There is no doubt that the US is a global empire that pursues its agenda everywhere. I understand that some Western leftists do not want to be seen as aligning with their own imperialist governments. But our support for smaller nations' right to self-determination — as long as we conduct it independently — has nothing to do with the US, or China for that matter.

We support these struggles based on our principle of opposing national oppression. Our principles should not be compromised just because our stand may occasionally coincide with the US' agenda. Opposing your own ruling class should not mean prioritising your hatred of it over peoples' resistance to foreign oppression in other parts of the world. To see politics this way largely reflects one's arrogance and, at the same time, sense of helplessness in relation to their own ruling class.

What kind of solidarity campaigns should the left focus on when it comes to Taiwan or the South China Sea?

Any solidarity campaigning on these two areas — to which I would add Hong Kong — should consist of at least three points: respecting the Taiwanese and Hong Kong peoples' right to self-determination; accepting that China's nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea has no basis; and acknowledging that agency for opposing China's stance lies, first and foremost, with the peoples of these three areas and surrounding countries. As far as the US is concerned, we should remain sceptical of its motivations but, again, when it comes to particular issues we have to weigh up all the pros and cons in a concrete way, and especially take into consideration the wishes of the people.

For example, the issue of Taiwan buying arms from the US: we need to be aware that all war games scenarios suggest that Taiwan would not be able to resist a Chinese invasion for more than a week and, in worst case scenarios, for more than a few days. It is obvious that Taiwan needs to buy arms from the US. None of this means that we support US rights over Taiwan. Agency must lie with those directly affected — the people in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in and around the South China Sea.

As part of their war drive on China, Western leaders have sought to stoke nationalism and anti-Chinese racism. In response, some on the left have sought to mute their criticisms of China in order to not contribute to their government's reactionary campaign. What are your thoughts on how the left in Western countries can oppose their own government's propaganda without becoming uncritical supporters of China?

The crux of the matter is that the campist notion of "anti-imperialism" is not only half-hearted, in that they only target old imperialisms while overlooking emerging imperialisms, but also state-centred. Their concerns are always about this or that state. They forget that we should never prioritise states over working people, where agency must lie — and this extends even to "worker states".

Genuine socialists should be people-centred. If someone refuses to see how the CCP treats Chinese working people, and is content with repeating Beijing's propaganda or refuses to listen to the voices of working people, then I would say they are not genuinely socialists. They just look up to certain states, viewing them as some kind of bulwark against their own imperialist government. Their

powerlessness leads them to applaud any foreign state at odds with their ruling class and to abandon those facing repression, simply to fulfil their own psychological yearnings.

But you will never defeat your own nationalism by supporting or tolerating Han Chinese nationalism. We can support, within certain boundaries, the nationalism of oppressed nations. But, today, Han Chinese are not oppressed by any foreign nation; on the contrary, they are oppressed by their own government. Hence Han Chinese nationalism has no progressive value.

Furthermore, the CCP's version of "patriotism" is a kind of ethno-nationalism, which makes it even more reactionary. It seeks a kind of dayitong (大同great unification) not dissimilar to that practised by fascism, in which people's thoughts must be brought under the control of the government and books not promoting official values banned. To be silent on this version of Han Chinese nationalism is to forget the immense tragedy of the Han Chinese — now oppressed by their own rulers to the point that they mock themselves as being little more than "Chinese leeks" waiting to be harvested by the party on a regular bases — and the brutal repression of minorities.

By supporting or refraining from criticising a totalitarian state such as China, we are digging our own graves. It is a betrayal of basic internationalism and discredits the left. Internationalism is, first and foremost, solidarity with working people of different nations, not with states, and it is on this basis that we should judge relationships between states, not vice versa.

Federico Fuentes

Au Loong-yu

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Links

<https://links.org.au/au-loong-yu-hong-kong-opposing-us-militarisation-asia-pacific-should-not-mean-remaining-silent>