

Imperialism and anti-imperialism today

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The United States remains the world's most powerful state, in possession of the biggest economy, with the dollar as the world's reserve currency, the most powerful military, the largest network of alliances, and therefore the greatest geopolitical power. But it faces imperial rivals in China and Russia and sub-imperial ones in every region of the globe.

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Capitalism produces imperialism—the competition between the great powers and their corporations for the division and redivision of the world market. This competition generates a dynamic hierarchy of states, with the most powerful at the top, middling or sub-imperial powers beneath them, and oppressed nations at the bottom.

No hierarchy is permanent. Capitalism's law of uneven and combined development, its booms and busts, its corporate competition, its interstate conflict, and its uprisings by the exploited and oppressed destabilize and restructure the state system.

As a result, the history of imperialism has had a sequence of orders. A multipolar one characterized the period from the late 19th century to 1945. It produced the great colonial empires and two world wars. It was supplanted by a bipolar order from 1945 and 1991, with the United States and Soviet Union struggling for hegemony over the newly independent states liberated from colonial rule.

With the collapse of the Soviet empire, the United States oversaw a unipolar order of neoliberal globalization, faced no superpower rival, and fought a series of wars to enforce its so-called rules based order of global capitalism from 1991 through the early 2000s. That order ended with the relative decline of the United States, the rise of China, and the resurrection of Russia, ushering in today's asymmetric multipolar order.

The United States remains the dominant power, but it is now locked in competition with China and Russia, above increasingly assertive sub-imperial states such as Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Brazil, as well as subject nations that suffer both political and economic oppression. Faced with a looming epoch of crisis, wars, and revolts, the global Left must build international solidarity from

below among workers and the oppressed in a struggle against imperialism and for socialism throughout the world.

Global capitalism's multiple crises

Global capitalism has produced multiple intersecting crises that are intensifying conflict between and within states. These [crises](#) are a global economic slump; sharpening interimperial rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia; climate change; unprecedented global migration; and pandemics, of which COVID-19 is only the most recent example. These crises have undermined the political establishment, caused political polarization in most countries of the world, opening the door to the Right and the Left, and triggering waves of explosive yet episodic struggles from below. We have not witnessed such a period of crisis, conflict, wars, political instability, and revolts in decades.

All of this is a challenge and an opportunity for an international Left and workers' movement still suffering from the consequence of several decades of defeat and retreat. It is also an opening to a new far right that offers authoritarian solutions promising to restore social order by scapegoating the oppressed at home and whipping up reactionary forms of nationalism against enemies abroad.

Once in power this [new far right](#) has failed to overcome any of global capitalism's crises and inequalities but has exacerbated them. As a result, neither the establishment nor its far right opponents offer any way out of our epoch of catastrophe.

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The asymmetric multipolar world order

Amid these metastasizing crises, the United States no longer stands atop a unipolar world order. It has suffered relative decline as a result of the long neoliberal boom, its failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Great Recession. Those developments have enabled the rise of China as a new imperial power and Russia's resurgence as a nuclear-armed petro-power. At the same time, a host of sub-imperial powers have become more assertive than in the past, playing the great powers off one another, and jockeying for advantage in their region.

All of this has created today's [asymmetric multipolar world order](#). The United States remains the world's most powerful state, in possession of the biggest economy, the dollar as the world's reserve currency, with the most powerful military, largest network of alliances, and therefore greatest geopolitical power. But it faces imperial rivals in [China](#) and [Russia](#) and sub-imperial ones in every region of the globe.

These antagonisms have not led to coherent geopolitical and economic blocs. Globalization has bound most of the economies of the world tightly together, preventing the return of blocs like the

ones during the Cold War.

Thus, the two biggest rivals, the United States and China, are also two of the most integrated in the world. Think of [Apple's iPhone](#)—designed in California, manufactured in Taiwanese-owned factories in China, and exported to vendors in the United States and throughout the world.

The new sub-imperial powers are not loyal either to China or the United States, but opportunistically forge pacts with one or the other power in pursuit of their own capitalist interests. For example, while India strikes deals with China in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) alliance against the United States, it participates in Washington's QUAD alliance (United States, Australia, India, Japan) against China.

That said, the global economic slump, the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, and especially [Russia's imperialist war in Ukraine](#) and US/NATO sanctions against Moscow are beginning to pry apart globalization as we have known it. Indeed, [globalization has plateaued and begun to decline](#).

For example, through the so-called [Chip War](#), the United States and China are segregating the top end of their high tech economies. In another, Western sanctions against Russia over its imperialist war on Ukraine have excluded it from U.S. and European Union (EU) trade and investment, forcing it to turn to markets in China and Iran.

As a result, we are on a trajectory toward increasing economic division, geopolitical rivalry, and even military conflict between the United States, China, and Russia, as well between them and sub-imperial powers. At the same time, the deep economic integration of especially the United States and China, as well as the fact that each possesses nuclear weapons, counteracts the tendency toward open war, which would risk mutually assured destruction and global economic collapse.

Washington rearms for great power rivalry

Since the Obama administration, the U.S. state has been trying to develop a new strategy to counter the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia. Obama announced his so-called [Pivot to Asia](#) and Trump openly placed [great power rivalry](#) with Beijing and Moscow at the center of his National Security Strategy, but neither developed a comprehensive approach to these conflicts or others in the new asymmetric multipolar world order.

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President Barack Obama remained [preoccupied with the Middle East](#), wrapping up the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and then shoring up the region's existing order after the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. Trump proclaimed his strategy for great power rivalry, but it was incoherent in practice. It included a chaotic mix of far right nationalism, protectionism, threats to abandon historic alliances like NATO, and transactional bilateral deals with both designated rivals and traditional

allies. His erratic years of misrule led to the further relative decline of the United States.

President Joe Biden has developed [the most coherent strategy](#) to date. He hoped to co-opt class and social struggles with minor reforms, implement a new industrial policy to ensure U.S. competitiveness in high tech manufacturing, and rehabilitate Washington's alliances like NATO and expand them through launching a so-called League of Democracies against Washington's autocratic rivals.

In the end, centrist Democrats, Republicans, and the courts blocked many of his reforms designed to ameliorate social inequality. But he succeeded in implementing his industrial policy through multiple bills. Biden also has begun to refurbish and expand U.S. alliances through new pacts and economic initiatives. The goal of all this is to contain China, deter Russian expansionism in Eastern Europe, and pull as many sub-imperial powers, subordinate states, and oppressed nations back under U.S. hegemony and its preferred international order.

Biden has continued his predecessors' attempt to extract the United States from its failed occupations. He finally ended Washington's twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan in shambolic style, committing war crimes in the process and abandoning the country to the Taliban. He then tried to stabilize the Middle East by continuing Trump's Abraham Accords and further efforts to normalize Israel by establishing formal relations between the Arab regimes with Tel Aviv. Of course, this gave the greenlight to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to continue the siege on Gaza, the settler expansion in the occupied West Bank, and the deepening of apartheid within Israel, now given horrific expression in Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. In Europe, Biden recommitted the United States to NATO, sending a signal to Russia that Washington, not Moscow, would remain the predominant hegemon in the region.

But the main target of Biden's strategy for great power rivalry is [China](#). On the economic front, his industrial policy is designed to restore, protect, and expand U.S. economic supremacy against Beijing, especially in high tech. It aims to onshore or friend shore high tech manufacturing, impose a high fence of protectionism around U.S. design and engineering of computer chips, and fund U.S. high tech companies and universities in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields to lock its dominance in AI (Artificial Intelligence) and other cutting-edge tech, especially because of their military applications.

On the geopolitical front, Biden has consolidated existing alliances with Japan and expanded them to include especially those antagonized by China, including Vietnam and the Philippines. He also reiterated the One China policy that recognizes only Beijing and the policy of strategic ambiguity on [Taiwan](#), which commits the United States to arming the island nation like a "porcupine" to deter Chinese aggression but remains vague about whether it would come to the island's defense in the event of an attack or invasion.

On the military front, Biden doubled down on U.S. military alliances such as the QUAD and the Five Eyes (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States), and established new ones, notably the deal between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) for the deployment of nuclear submarines in Australia. Washington is in the process triggering an arms and base building race with China throughout the Asia Pacific.

Washington's imperialist rivals: China and Russia

China and Russia have implemented their own strategy to project their imperial ambitions. These three powers form [what Gilbert Achcar has called the "strategic triad" of world imperialism](#).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has aimed to [restore its standing as a great power](#) in global capitalism. It has implemented an economic strategy to leap up the value chain to compete at the highest level of design, engineering, and manufacturing. It has funded both state and private capital through programs such as China 2025, which aims to establish select corporations as national champions in high tech.

This has been highly successful with Huawei and BYD among others establishing themselves as global competitors. China is now an industry leader in whole fields such as solar energy and electric vehicles, challenging U.S., European, and Japanese capital.

With its massive economic expansion, China has tried to [export its surplus capital and capacity](#) abroad through its \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast plan for infrastructure development throughout the world, especially in the Global South. None of this is altruistic. Most of this investment is designed to construct infrastructure, rails, roads, and ports to export raw materials to China. China then exports its finished products back to those countries in a classic imperialist pattern. But a combination of its slowing economy, banking troubles, and debt crises in countries it had loaned to has led China to retreat from its grandest ambitions for BRI.

Nevertheless, China is trying parlay this investment into geopolitical influence through economic formations like the BRICS, as well as political/security pacts like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (including China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and a host of Central Asian states). It has also asserted its influence in the Middle East by encouraging normalization of diplomatic relations between its ally Iran and Saudi Arabia, which it depends on for the bulk of its oil.

To back its newfound economic clout with military might, China is modernizing its armed forces, especially its navy, specifically to challenge U.S. naval hegemony in the Pacific. As part of that, it has seized islands claimed by other states, creating antagonisms with Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and many others. It has militarized some of these, especially in the South China Sea, to project its power, protect shipping routes, and assert rights to undersea oil and natural gas reserves.

Finally, Beijing is enforcing historic claims to what it considers its national territory as part of a project of national rejuvenation. Thus, it has imposed its [dominion over Hong Kong](#) with brute force, carried out its own war on terror and [cultural genocide against Uyghurs in Xinjiang](#), and escalated threats of invasion of Taiwan, which it regards as a renegade province.

Under Vladimir Putin's rule, meanwhile, the Russian ruling class has aimed to restore its imperial power, so devastatingly undermined by the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe and its disastrous implementation of neoliberal shock therapy. It has watched the United States and European imperialism gobble up its former sphere of influence through the expansion of NATO and the EU.

Putin rebuilt Russia as a nuclear armed petro-power with the aim of [reclaiming its former empire](#) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, while imposing order domestically against any popular dissent and especially against its sometimes recalcitrant republics. It has tried to consolidate its hold over its former sphere of influence through collaboration with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

That imperialist project has led it to launch a succession of wars in Chechnya (1996, 1999), Georgia (2008), and Ukraine (2014, 2022-) as well as interventions in Syria and several African countries. Russia's imperial assertion has precipitated resistance from states and peoples it has targeted and also imperialist counter-offensives from the United States, NATO, and the EU.

Russian imperialist war on Ukraine

Three strategic flashpoints have brought these interimperial rivalries to a head—Ukraine, Gaza, and Taiwan.

Ukraine became the site of a major war in Europe for the first time since World War II. Russia invaded the country in 2014 and then again in 2022 in a clear act of [imperialist aggression](#), attempting to seize the entire country and impose a semicolonial regime on it. Putin justified this with lies about de-Nazification (hardly believable from one of the most reactionary states in the world and an ally of the far right internationally).

Of course, its aggression was in part in response to [U.S., NATO, and EU expansion](#), but that does not make its war any less imperialist in nature. It aimed to use the conquest of Ukraine as a stepping stone to reclaim its former sphere of influence in the rest of Eastern Europe.

The Ukrainian state, military, and people rose up against the invasion in a fight for national self-determination.

Biden has supplied Ukraine with economic and military aid for Washington's own imperial reasons. It is no ally of national liberation struggles, as its [long history of imperialist wars](#) from the Philippines to Vietnam and Iraq attests. [Washington has aimed to weaken Russia](#), prevent its encroachment on its expanded sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and wield its NATO allies together against, not only Moscow, but also China, which NATO has designated as a strategic focus for the first time in its history.

The United States and its NATO allies imposed the most severe sanctions in history on Russia and pressured Western Europe to wean itself off Russian energy supplies and instead rely on U.S. natural gas exports. Russia in reaction has become increasingly dependent on China for trade and tech, as well as North Korea and Iran for missiles, drones, and other military hardware.

Washington also tried to use Russia's aggression to gather the Global South under its rubric. But it has not had much luck with the governments of those states, [despite popular identification](#) of most of these formerly colonized countries with Ukraine's struggle for self-determination. Nonetheless, Biden used Ukraine to shore up Washington's global alliances and soft power as it postured as the defender of self-determination and its so-called rules based order against Russian imperialism.

Israel's U.S.-backed genocidal war in Gaza

Israel's genocidal war in Gaza has upset Washington's imperial plans for the entire Middle East and precipitated its biggest geopolitical crisis since Vietnam. Faced with slow strangulation by the total siege in Gaza, Hamas led a [desperate jailbreak on October 7](#), seized hostages, and killed large numbers of soldiers and civilians.

Its attack exposed the weaknesses of Israeli intelligence and border control over its apartheid wall. In response, Israel launched its biggest military incursion into Gaza with the stated aim of retrieving the hostages and destroying Hamas. It has succeeded in neither. Instead, it has laid waste to Gaza in a war of collective punishment, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. The Biden administration has supported this every step of the way, funding it, providing it political cover with vetoes in the United Nations, and arming it to the teeth.

But there is a schism between the United States and Israel. While Washington supports Israel's goal

of destroying the Palestinian resistance, it has tried to cajole Israel into shifting its strategy from carpet bombing Gaza and killing civilians to special operations to target Hamas. The Biden administration's strategic disagreement with Israel has come to a head over its assault on Rafah with the US pausing shipments of some of its most destructive bombs.

The U.S. government also does not approve of Israel's widening attacks in the region, which include the bombing of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. Washington has not openly opposed these strikes but has instead tried to pressure the targeted regimes from responding.

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The United States has been unable to restrain Netanyahu, who is captive to fascists in his coalition government who are calling for genocide and regional war, especially against Iran. Netanyahu has followed their lead to preserve his coalition government, because if it falls, he will likely be jailed on corruption charges.

Thus, Israel's genocidal war and regional aggression could trigger a wider war. Already, it provoked the Houthis in Yemen to stage attacks on oil and commercial ships, threatening the world economy, and leading the United States to pull together a coalition to protect their vessels and threaten the Houthis.

But the sharpest and most dangerous of all the conflicts [Israel has staged is with Iran](#). It bombed Tehran's embassy in Damascus, killing one of the leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard. Washington went into overdrive to pressure Iran from striking Israel and thereby triggering a full-scale war.

In the event, Iran carried out a largely symbolic attack on Israel. It telegraphed its plans to the United States and Arab nations, enabling Israel and its allies to shoot down almost all the drones and missiles. The United States then leaned on Israel to limit its counter-attack. But Tel Aviv nevertheless sent an ominous message with a limited strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. In response, Tehran will move forward with plans to develop nuclear weapons and Israel will respond with military strikes to protect its regional nuclear monopoly, threatening [Armageddon in the region](#).

Amid this spiraling conflict, Israel's barbarity has triggered mass protest throughout the Middle East and North Africa and globally, exposing and isolating both it and the United States as architects and perpetrators of genocide. South Africa brought a case against Israel to the International Court of Justice, charging it with genocide, a case that the Court ruled as plausible.

China and Russia have taken advantage of the crisis to posture as an ally of Palestine, despite their deep economic and diplomatic relations with Israel and their support for stabilization of the status quo in the region. The oppressors of Xinjiang and Ukraine have no grounds to say they support national self-determination.

Nevertheless, the United States has suffered an enormous setback. Its soft power has been fundamentally undermined. No one can scarcely believe its claims to support "a rules based order" or "self-determination" or even "democracy."

Plans for the normalization of Israel through the Abraham Accords have been disrupted for the moment. With their populations out in the streets and at least expressing sympathy with

Palestinians, no Arab regime will publicly cut a deal with Israel, despite their increasing economic integration with the apartheid state, though a number are still advancing those plans behind closed doors

None of these regimes or Iran can be considered allies of the Palestinian struggle. Except for the Houthis, all of them have restricted military responses against Israel. None have cut off oil shipments to the great powers.

There is no real "[axis of resistance](#)." All these states are posturing to keep a lid on popular solidarity with Palestine from tipping over into opposition to their own despotic rule. And when faced with any domestic resistance, all, from Egypt to Iran, have repressed it with brute force. They are all [counter-revolutionary capitalist regimes](#).

Israel's genocidal war has, however, fundamentally undermined Washington's attempt to woo sub-imperial states and countries in the region and throughout the Global South. These states and their peoples' memories of their own liberation struggle leads them to identify with Palestine and to oppose both the United States and Israel. This has produced an unprecedented global wave of popular protest in solidarity with Palestine. Meanwhile, the Biden administration's lockstep support of Israel has triggered relentless protest for the last six months, culminating in a student rebellion on campuses across the country. Further undermining Washington's claims to be a model of democracy, both political parties in collaboration with liberal and conservative university administrations have repressed that student rebellion with the utmost brutality.

Israel has thus undone all the geopolitical advances the United States made through its posturing around Ukraine, thrown U.S. imperialism into crisis, and put [Biden's reelection in jeopardy](#). It has also given great space for Washington's global and regional rivals to become increasingly assertive of their own interests, escalating conflicts throughout the world.

Taiwan: epicenter of the US-China rivalry

Taiwan has become the epicenter of the rivalry between the United States and China. China has set reunification, that is the seizure of Taiwan, as one of its core [imperialist objectives](#). While Biden has promised to maintain its One China Policy and strategic ambiguity, he has repeatedly promised to come to the defense of Taiwan in the event of a war.

To prepare for such a conflagration, he is trying to overcome historic antagonism between regional allies Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam, and others to unite them in various multilateral and bilateral pacts against China. All of this is ratcheting up conflict over Taiwan.

At the same time, the economic integration of the United States, China, and Taiwan dampens the drift toward war. One of Taiwan's multinationals, Foxconn, manufactures Apple's iPhone in giant factories in China for export throughout the world, including the United States. Taiwan's TSMC is also the manufacturer of 90 percent of the world's most advanced microchips, which are used in everything from toaster ovens to high tech military weapons and fighter bombers such as the F-35.

Despite this integration, the conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan has intensified throughout Biden's tenure, with U.S. representatives ratcheting it up even further with provocative visits. For example, [Nancy Pelosi](#) staged a diplomatic trip promising U.S. support for Taiwan, prompting China to respond with threatening military exercises. For its part, China has also engaged in provocations to impact Taiwanese politics and send a message to Washington.

In reality, neither great power respects Taiwan's right to self-determination. China wants to annex it and Washington only uses Taipei as part of its imperial offensive against Beijing. While war is unlikely, because it could trigger nuclear conflagration and wreck the world economy by interrupting the production and trade of microchips, commodities that are just as important as oil to the functioning of global capitalism today, given the sharpening imperialist conflict, it cannot be ruled out.

Slump intensifying interimperial rivalry

[Capitalism's global slump](#) is intensifying the rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia over everything from trade to geopolitics and these strategic flashpoints. The global slump is also exacerbating inequality within and between nations throughout the world.

As the dominant imperialist power in control of the world reserve currency (the dollar), the United States has [recovered more successfully](#) than its rivals from the pandemic recession. It is the exception, not the norm in the advanced capitalist world. Despite this, inflation has hammered working-class people and intensified social and class divisions.

Europe and Japan teeter between recession and slow growth, with deepening class inequality. China continues to grow but at a much reduced rate. Russia has implemented a [war economy](#) to escape the worst impact of sanctions and maintain growth rates, but that is unsustainable. In both countries, inequality is growing.

The global slump is having similar effects among sub-imperial powers, many of which rely on diminished export markets in the advanced capitalist world. And a severe [sovereign debt crisis](#) has exploded in the oppressed and indebted countries of the Global South. The combination of slow growth, weak export markets, inflation, and hiked interest rates has made them unable to repay their loans. While private capitalist lenders as well as the International Monetary Fund/World Bank and China's state-owned or controlled banks have agreed to partial deals with the indebted countries, they still want their loans repaid and have imposed various conditions to secure repayment. All this exacerbates class and social divisions, in some cases causing the growth of extreme poverty, which had shrunk during the neoliberal boom.

Polarization, revolt, and revolution

The fact that the capitalist establishment, whether in liberal democracies or autocracies, is unable to overcome this slump, will drive greater and greater political polarization, providing an opening to both the Left and the Right.

Given the weaknesses of the far left and the organizations of class and social struggle, various forms of reformism have been the main expression of an alternative on the Left. But predictably reformists in government have been constrained by the capitalist state bureaucracy and their sluggish and crisis ridden economies, leading them to either fail to deliver on their promises or betray them and adopt traditional capitalist policies.

The failures of the capitalist establishment, as well as their reformist opponents, are opening the

door globally to the electoral far right and incipient fascist forces.

The paradigmatic example is [Syriza in Greece](#). It betrayed its promise to stand up to the EU and international creditors and capitulated to their austerity program, leading it to being voted out of office in favor of a right-wing neoliberal government.

The failures of the capitalist establishment, as well as their reformist opponents, are opening the door globally to the electoral far right and incipient fascist forces. However ethnonationalist, authoritarian, and reactionary, most of this [new right is not fascist](#). They are not building mass movements to topple bourgeois democracy, impose dictatorship, and crush struggles by workers and the oppressed. They are instead trying to win elections within bourgeois democracy and use the state to reimpose social order through law and order policies against various scapegoats, especially migrants fleeing poverty, political crises, and climate change.

In the United States, Europe, India, China, Russia, and other states, the far right is particularly obsessed with attacking Muslims. Almost without exception, the right promises to restore social order by enforcing “family values” against feminists, trans people, and LGBTQ activists.

The right has already made historic gains in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. And in 2024, with elections in [50 countries involving 2 billion people](#), right-wing parties are well positioned to make more advances.

Perhaps the most consequential of these for world politics is in the United States, where Biden is running on consolidating U.S. imperialism’s alliances and projects abroad and supposedly defending democracy at home. Trump threatens to abandon U.S. imperialism’s project of superintending global capitalism, withdraw from its multilateral alliances, impose more economic nationalist policies, and scapegoat the oppressed at home and abroad to get away with it. In doing so, he would accelerate Washington’s relative decline, intensify domestic inequality, and exacerbate interimperial and interstate antagonisms.

Neither Trump nor the far right anywhere offer the exploited and oppressed any solutions to the crises in their lives. As a result, their victories will not lead to stable regimes, opening the door for the reelection of the establishment parties.

The combination of crises and the failure of governments of any kind to solve them has driven workers and the oppressed into waves of struggle since the Great Recession. Indeed, the last 15 years have included some of the largest revolts since the 1960s.

Almost every country in the world has experienced some form of mass struggle from below, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. All these have been hampered by the [defeats and retreats](#) of the last few decades, which have weakened class and social organization and shattered the revolutionary left.

As a result, even the most powerful revolts have not been able to carry out successful political or social revolutions. That has left an opening for the ruling class and its political representatives to maintain their hegemony, often with the backing of this or that imperial or sub-imperial power.

For example, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah [saved Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime](#) from revolution. And in another, the U.S. strategy of regime preservation helped Egypt’s ruling class reimpose a

brutal dictatorship under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. But these regimes have in no way stabilized their societies. The persistent crises and grotesque level of inequality and oppression keep stoking resistance from below throughout the world.

Three traps for anti-imperialism

The new asymmetric multipolar world order with its growing interimperial rivalries, interstate conflicts, and waves of revolt within societies have challenged the international left with questions it is ill-prepared to answer. In the belly of the beast, the United States, the Left has mainly adopted three mistaken positions, all of which undermine building international solidarity from below against imperialism and global capitalism.

First, those with an orientation on the Democratic Party have fallen into the trap of social patriotic support for the United States against its rivals. They have supported Biden's call for countries to form a "league of democracies" against China and Russia. This is especially prominent among followers of [Bernie Sanders](#), who, however critical of this or that "mistaken" U.S. policy, see Washington as a force for good in the world.

In reality, as Biden's support of Israel's genocidal war proves, the United States is one of the principal enemies of national liberation and social revolution throughout the world. It is the main hegemon that aims to enforce a wretched status quo and is therefore an opponent, not an ally, of collective liberation internationally.

Second, other sections of the Left made the opposite mistake of treating "my enemy's enemy as my friend." Various called [vulgar anti-imperialism](#), faux anti-imperialism, or campism, this position backs Washington's imperial rivals as a so-called axis of resistance. Some of its advocates go even further claiming that obviously [capitalist states like China](#) represent some kind of socialist alternative (even as, for example, Xi Jinping [praises far right Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán](#) and touts China and Hungary's "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership for the new era"). Thus, they support rising great powers, sub-imperial states, and various dictatorships in subordinate countries.

In the process, they ignore the imperialist nature of states like China and Russia and the counter-revolutionary nature of regimes like those in Iran and Syria, no matter how repressive they are to workers and the oppressed. And they oppose solidarity with popular struggles from below within them, dismissing them as faux "color revolutions" orchestrated by U.S. imperialism.

They also provide alibis for, and in some cases openly support, Russia's war on Ukraine and China's crushing of the democratic uprising in Hong Kong. In the end, they position themselves on the side of other imperialist and capitalist states, going through mental gymnastics to deny their capitalist, exploitative, and oppressive character.

Finally, some on the Left have adopted a position of geopolitical reductionism. They recognize the predatory nature of the various imperialist states and do not support any of them. But when these powers come into conflict over oppressed nations, instead of defending those nations' right to self-determination, including their right to secure arms to win their liberation, they reduce such situations to the sole axis of interimperial rivalry. In the process they deny the agency of the oppressed nations.

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Of course, imperialist powers can manipulate struggles for national liberation to such an extent that they become nothing more than proxy wars. But geopolitical reductionists use that possibility to deny support to legitimate struggles for liberation today.

This has been the position of many on the Left regarding Russia’s imperialist war on Ukraine, [reducing it to a mere proxy war](#) between Moscow and Washington. But as Ukrainian polls and its national resistance demonstrate, Ukrainians are [fighting for their own liberation](#), not as some cat’s paw of U.S. imperialism.

Based on their mistaken assessment of war, the geopolitical reductionists have opposed Ukraine’s right to secure arms for its liberation from Russia imperialism and opposed shipments, with some going so far as to celebrate actions to block them. A successful blockade of such arms would lead to a victory for Russian imperialism, something that would be a disaster for the Ukrainian people, dooming them to the fate of those massacred in [Bucha](#) and [Mariupol](#).

None of these three positions provide the international left a guide to address the questions posed by the new asymmetric multipolar world order.

Internationalist anti-imperialism

A far better approach is internationalist anti-imperialism. In place of siding with this or that imperialist or capitalist state, advocates of this position oppose all imperialisms as well as less powerful capitalist regimes, even if we oppose imperialist interventions against them. We build solidarity with all popular struggles for liberation, reform, and revolution throughout the world and without exception.

In cases of national liberation, we [unconditionally but critically side with the oppressed](#) in their struggle for freedom. In those struggles, however, we do not confuse national liberation with socialism, [rejecting the temptation to paint such battles with a red brush](#).

Instead, we adopt an independent approach of building solidarity with the workers and the oppressed within those struggles and cultivating political relationships with their progressive and revolutionary forces to turn struggles for national liberation into ones for socialism.

That leads us to take distinct positions compared with much of the Left on the three strategic flashpoints in today’s imperial order.

First, in the case of Ukraine, we [support its liberation struggle](#) and defend its right to secure arms, even from the United States and NATO, but we do not support Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s neoliberal government. We also oppose Western imperialism’s use of Ukraine to advance its own predatory ambitions to open the country and region to its banks and corporations.

Instead, we cultivate relations with the Ukrainian left and the country's trade union movement. We raise their demands against neoliberalism, debt driven reconstruction, and the opening of Ukraine's economy to multinational capital. We support their call for a popular reconstruction of the country based on public sector investment with all labor paid livable wages and done by unionized workers.

[In the case of Palestine](#), we oppose U.S. imperialism's support for Israel's genocidal war in Gaza and support the Palestinian resistance unconditionally. But that does not mean we support its existing political leadership or its strategy and tactics. We adopt a critical position toward its bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties, whether that is the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or its Islamic fundamentalist alternative Hamas.

The PLO's main leadership, Fatah, abandoned armed struggle for the illusion of a diplomatically crafted two-state solution. Three decades of such diplomacy has failed, leaving the West Bank occupied, Gaza under siege, and Israel ruling through apartheid over Palestinians within its 1948 borders.

Hamas filled the vacuum in the resistance left by Fatah's capitulation. It, however, did not develop an alternative strategy, instead [continuing Fatah's old strategy](#) of relying on supposedly friendly Arab and Iranian allies to aid its military struggle against Israel. There is no reason to think that that strategy, which failed when pursued by the PLO, will succeed today.

Backed by U.S. imperialism and buttressed by alliances with most of the Arab regimes, Israel will not be defeated militarily alone. Only a [strategy](#) that combines Palestinian resistance against Israel, revolutionary struggle against all the region's regimes, and anti-imperialist movements in all the great powers can free Palestinians from Israeli apartheid and establish a secular, democratic state from the river to the sea with equal rights for all, including the right of Palestinians to return to their stolen homes and land.

Finally, in the case of [Taiwan](#), we oppose China's threat to annex the island and defend Taiwan's right to self-determination, including armed self-defense, and at the same time oppose Washington's attempt to weaponize the country in its imperial rivalry with China.

Internationalist anti-imperialism offers a strategy to build solidarity from below among workers and the oppressed against all the great powers and all the world's capitalists states. We have an enormous opportunity and responsibility to advocate this approach among a new generation of activists.

We do not support any of the bourgeois parties contending for the leadership of Taiwan, but instead build solidarity with the country's emergent left, popular organizations, and trade unions. Only they have an interest and the power to challenge both imperial powers and Taiwan's capitalist class and build solidarity with workers and the oppressed in China, the region, and the United States.

Thus, internationalist anti-imperialism offers a strategy to build solidarity from below among workers and the oppressed against all the great powers and all the world's capitalists states. We have an enormous opportunity and responsibility to advocate this approach among a new generation of activists who are instinctively opposed to U.S. imperialism and suspicious of other great powers

and oppressive states.

We can only prove the superiority of these ideas in practice, in the living struggles—from domestic class and social struggles, to ones in solidarity with Palestine, Ukraine, and other oppressed nations. In doing so, we can help forge a new international left committed to building solidarity from below in the fight against global capitalism and for international socialism.

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P.S.

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