

Is Multipolarity the central feature of the international situation today?

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Our pre-convention international discussion aims at developing an understanding of the current international situation and our tasks of international solidarity. Much of this involves as David wrote, the “need to develop a much deeper understanding of very real and growing new imperialist rivalries, especially between the United States and China along with Beijing’s dependent client Russia, both in the military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region and the neo-imperial scrambles for Africa and Latin America.” More broadly, we need an updated general Marxist analysis of imperialism today. Our analysis should identify both the uniqueness of the current moment and its continuity with previous periods. Here I offer some thoughts on the question of multipolar imperialism.

Promises’ contribution to our international discussion argues that the international situation is characterized by multipolarity, seen in particular in the Chinese and Russian examples. Promise goes further and states that “the age of unshakable US imperial hegemony is slipping away.” I argue here that while the first proposition—the existence of a multipolar world of multiple imperialist states is correct—the second proposition, that of a fading dominant position of the US is not. On the contrary, US imperialism remains the dominant economic and military power in the world. It faces competition from other imperialist powers, most accurately from new emerging imperial powers particularly China and Russia which is why it is true that we live in a world of multiple and overlapping imperialisms, but the US nonetheless remains the dominant power on the planet.

As I argue below, multipolarity is nothing new. What is new, is the particular configuration of contemporary multipolar imperialism, the most obvious being the rise of the new imperialist powers of Russia and China. The contemporary state of international capitalism is also characterized by shifting relations between the capitalist class and their states. Some of this is reflected in the rise of regional blocs of capital (UE, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, ASEAN, etc.). Promise’s document offers good descriptions of some of these that should be further developed.

Nothing new under the Sun or New Wine, Old Bottles

The world of international relations particularly between states has long been one of multipolarity. In fact, one can say that between the fall of the Roman Empire (which controlled at one point a full 25% of the world’s population and surface) in the 5th century, and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, virtually the entire history of the world can be seen as a multipolar struggle for economic, military, and political dominance between states involving ever shifting alliances and power relations.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French states with varying degrees of relationships to emerging capitalist classes in those countries, colonized huge swaths of the world with naval and other violent force. They used military might

against both indigenous, non-European peoples and each other, creating sharp inter-colonial rivalries resulting in a multipolar world. These colonial powers both recognized each other's spheres of interest and as thieves without honor, broke those same treaties and arrangements, and fought each other for dominance. The British and French colonialists for example, fought wars for control of North America and fought those wars on colonized North American soil. There were spheres of influence, shifting alliances, dramatic reversals, such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 as each power jockeyed for dominance. Moments of peace, that is the absence of war between them were rare.

In the nineteenth century a second paroxysm of European capitalist expansion, competition and conflict occurred. European states colonized virtually every inch of Africa. By now older colonial powers, such as the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch were fading and others like the English, Belgian, and French were on the ascent.

During both periods, there was never an undisputed main power that dominated all others. The international situation was therefore, one of multipolarity. Both World Wars and all the preceding alliances between Imperial powers reflected multipolarity. The post war period of conflict and tension between the US and the USSR reflected something different: a bipolar world which came to characterize the international situation. This represented a departure somewhat from the multipolarity of the past. But even then, other powers within remained independent imperial powers complete for a few more decades with colonial control over much of the global south or "third world" as it was called at the time. The USSR and the US were challenged by bourgeois nationalist regimes such as that of Nasser in Egypt and Nehru in India. Some of these were arguably minor imperial powers themselves.

US Hegemony in a Multipolar world

But since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, we have lived in a period where US economic and military power is hegemonic. This does not mean that US dominance is not unchallenged. It is, even by its allies, but it towers over all other competitors and allies.

Russia invaded a border country and China has formidable military capabilities. China's economic activities in Africa such as providing and running oil refineries in Nigeria smacks of classic imperialist exploitation replete reportedly, with Jim Crow style labor and housing policies. According to Democracy Now! "China has about eight foreign military bases — one in Djibouti and some on human-made islands in the South China Sea. . . compared to the 750 U.S. military bases outside the 50 states and Washington, D.C." They are ready to defend the interests of the US capitalist class and its state throughout the world. No other country or alliance in the world has anything close to this. The US also usually gets its way in international arenas like the UN, World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and NATO. Here too, the US gets challenged by both independent allies (France, both an imperial ally and competitor to the US remained outside of the imperialist NATO for decades) and as seen in the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle occasionally by dominated and exploited countries.

Promise suggests that the IMF and World Bank are sites where dissolving nation-based capitalist classes are being reconstituted as supra-national blocs of capital and capitalist classes. It seems to me however, that the IMF and the World Bank are more accurately seen as vehicles by which US banks and sections of the US bourgeoisie extract resources from the global south primarily through indebtedness.

A Marxist analysis of the international situation today must therefore recognize both the rise of new capitalist imperialist powers and the continued dominance of the US. This is key for revolutionary socialists to understand, especially those of us in the belly of the beast.

July 18, 2023