

Entangled Imperialisms: Paths for Socialist Internationalism Today

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The bloody conflict in Ukraine and growing tensions around Taiwan show that the age of unshakable US imperial hegemony is slipping away. Inter-imperial rivalries are unevenly emerging amidst a general crisis of profitability among the ruling classes. No sides of these tensions promote better conditions for revolutionary change; on the contrary, this inchoate state of multipolarity introduces varied permutations of state-capital collaboration that model new ways of containing working-class power. The anti-war left, represented by groups like CODEPINK, has no framework to account for these shifts, instead centering on combatting US imperialism *at the expense* of dispossessed communities that are urgently facing the threat of other regional imperialisms. Worse yet, these groups' failure to understand the shifting contours of the imperialist world system today actually renders their well-meaning struggle against US imperialism less effective, by failing to recognize US imperialism's interdependence with other states—even those with whom it is in tension.

Imperialism today

The unprecedented level of economic interdependence we see today between the US and its supposed rivals is an effect of decades of neoliberal globalization. This integration of the capitalist class through multilateral institutions like the IMF and WTO comes into direct tension with the world system's current tendency toward renewed and rising economic and industrial nationalisms in the US and China. This means that the push for decoupling, spearheaded by its likeliest beneficiary in the form of the military-industrial complex, faces resistance from other dominant sectors of capital. Here are a few examples that illustrate my point. Despite reports that the growth of the Chinese planemaker 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. US tariffs negatively impact Chinese imports, but Chinese exports continue to boom for items from electric vehicles to batteries. Bilateral trade between the US and China just reached an all-time high. 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 World Trade Organization (WTO) at its center”—a sentiment re-committed by Vice-Premier Liu He in the same venue this January. Growing industrial nationalism in different countries does not wholly impede the ruling class's commitment to neoliberal globalization. These suggest divisions within the capitalist class—those for accelerating the ‘new Cold War’ against those who oppose it—and it is too early to tell which side would prevail.

Today's multipolar imperialism represents an intensification of the contradictions of the world system sketched out by Nikolai Bukharin, who saw the internationalization of finance capital

and the development of national capitalist groups as two aspects of the same process. Though his theory of imperialism overstates the extent to which domestic industries would forego competition to form a stable national economic bloc, he is right to recognize that the dual growth of internationalization and nationalization of capital reinforces one another in some manner: “together with the internationalization of economy and the internationalization of capital, there is going on a process of "national" intertwining of capital, a process of "nationalizing" capital, fraught with the greatest consequences.”¹ Indeed, national economic blocs are consolidating as multinational institutions gain power. New players are emerging in the ruling class, notably asset managers like Blackrock and Vanguard, the latter now being one of the largest shareholder blocs in both Exxon and the Chinese state-owned Sinopec. Political economist Patrick Bond observes that different states, especially the ones that campists tout 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. He writes that

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.²

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 co-steering this continuation of capital accumulation structured by the two hegemons, while finding room to boost their own political might with the help of financialization. Iran’s geopolitical success in checking US influence in the Middle East is one example of this. 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 US sanctions, while continuing to defend globalization even more faithfully than the US. Old US 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.

What should socialists take from this chaotic period of transformation in the imperialist world system? The key lesson today is that the unique contradiction of inter-imperialist rivalry today—that is, *the persistence of deep interdependence that structures the rivalry*—distinguishes it from US unipolarity, traditional inter-imperialist rivalry a la World War I, or what Karl Kautsky describes as a peaceful period of “a 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*

¹ Nikolai Bukharin, “Imperialism and World Economy, in *Imperialism and War: Classic Writings by V. I. Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin*, Phil Gasper, ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 401-2.

² Patrick Bond, “The BRICS’ Centrifugal Geopolitical Economy,” *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 18, no. 3 (2018): 536.

sites of inter-imperialist collaboration that can provide important targets for a socialist strategy on internationalist work.

What is to be done?

How should we reframe our strategies for internationalism according to this analysis? First, we must recognize the persuasive force of campism to many new and young radicals today: it provides socialists in the imperial core with the illusory but compelling promise of practical action. And 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 difficulties of supporting independent movements that face multiple challenges beyond one imperialist force. Furthermore, the particular alignment of subjective and objective conditions today means that the new generation of the US left in the DSA is accustomed to winning concrete victories, however reformist or limited. This mindset fuels the allure of social-democratic reformism, settling for solutions that would ultimately impede the growth of revolutionary gains. Campism extends this mindset to the international front: it is far simpler to have faith that the victorious parties of the Third World are already paving the way for revolutionary conditions than to grapple with messy contradictions and legacies in the left there.

For these reasons, various forms of campism have become intractably dominant in the US socialist left. We need persuasive strategies to undo them, which means abstract calls for ‘supporting independent workers everywhere’ that do not lead to practical campaigns that relate to US or Western imperialism in some way will not win over masses of socialists and workers. 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 a number of forms. For example, the call demanding multilateral financial institutions to abolish Ukraine’s debt concretely assists the self-determination struggle and reconstruction efforts against Zelensky’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’ 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 US-Chinese collaboration (e.g. Apple and Tesla stores) as an alternative to the US establishment’s hawkish militarist solutions, merging ‘bread-and-butter’ demands with internationalist ones. We can build on past efforts, including but limited to:

- The UK-based Uyghur Solidarity Campaign [protest](#) of Zara’s links to forced Uyghur labor
- DSA Muslim’s 30 Day [Pledge](#) to #BoycottGenocide against Western companies complicit in forced Uyghur labor
- Overseas Chinese labor activists’ [protest](#) of Apple stores calling out Apple and Foxconn’s mistreatment of Chinese workers
- US’s Apple Retail Union rank-and-file workers’ [statement](#) of solidarity with Chinese Foxconn workers

This framework also enables us to push diaspora communities to the left. 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 build mass organizations. These groups are commonly pigeonholed by campists as irredeemably right-wing and anti-communist, like the Cuban diaspora, but the reality is far more complex. Indeed, speaking from personal experience about Hong Kong diaspora circles, these spaces can be exceedingly pro-US, liberal, and self-fashionably ‘non-ideological’. But many are often readily responsive to *any* tactics as long as it helps combat their home regimes. In this sense, for example, designing opportunities to organize different dissident diaspora communities against China into the broad BDS campaign can be salient. This idea can encourage these communities to recognize the intersections of US and Chinese power in their mutual economic support of Israel’s apartheid state, while bolstering the ranks of the Palestinian solidarity struggle in the US.

And so, 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, to stop short of critiquing the other imperialist means that one is merely selectively critiquing one imperialist or only engaging in selective anti-imperialism. So-called anti-imperialist governments often appropriate and build on traditional colonial infrastructures of oppression, as 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.” 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 against Palestinians. Calling for the end of U.S. imperialism should mean more than selectively critiquing its vehicles and, instead, addressing its entanglements with other ‘rival’ states.

Sometimes certain intersections between Western and other imperial forces are not the most salient sites to resolve an immediate conflict. Abolishing Ukraine’s debt, for one, does not give direct relief to Ukrainians facing Russian attack—weapons do. But hyper-focusing on a pitched battle against campists on the question of arms shipments may not be the best use of our energy, if the goal is to win more undecided socialists to our side. Instead, we must stake our ground more persuasively on organizing people into coalitional efforts like the Ukraine Solidarity Network 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, etc. This approach does not abandon our support of Ukrainian self-defense, but centers a practical platform of international solidarity *as a mirror image* to campist opposition to Ukrainians demanding aid. The best tactic against the campist attacks on our stance on Ukraine’s self-determination is not to fight them head-on on their terms but to reframe the terms of the debate itself. Our core argument should be: if socialists really want the best for Ukrainians, they would be actively fighting with us on practical demands we suggest, not the campists’ merely negative and oppositional platform that promotes no concrete avenues for solidarity.

Such a framework would at least give us a starting point to encourage socialists to think about the violence of other capitalist states and imperialisms. Campists fault us for not being committed enough against US imperialism. Our response should be that, in fact, they are the ones who stop short of *thoroughly* combatting US imperialism—by withholding action against other imperialisms with which it is entangled.