

Disentangling Imperialisms

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Promise L's [Entangled Imperialisms: Paths for Socialist Internationalism Today](#) takes Solidarity's preconvention discussion into quite interesting analytic territory. I like the title, which echoes my article [Entangled Rivalry: the United States and China](#), written in October-November 2021 and published in the January-February 2022 issue of *Against the Current*, just before the February 24 Russian invasion of Ukraine upended relations among the imperialist powers.

Promise's text identifies key developments in the international situation: the end of US imperialism's unipolar moment; the rise of Chinese imperialism; the new, multipolar world order; the opportunity for not only the various imperialist powers, but also the various regional powers, to pursue their own interests more freely; the development of global networks and interdependency; the economic entanglement of the imperialist and regional powers; the power of supranational institutions; the constraints on state actors; the collaboration among the imperialists; and so on.

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.” The situation is closer to what Marxist theorists August Thalheimer and Ruy Mauro Marini call “antagonistic cooperation” of the imperialist world system. 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 sites of inter-imperialist collaboration that can provide important targets for a socialist strategy on internationalist work.

I think Promise bends the stick too far in his analysis. To be sure, the collapse of the Soviet Union, capitalist restoration in Russia and China, and the end of US imperialism's unipolar moment have created a more pronounced multipolarity. But from its inception, imperialism has had two tendencies. It is driven toward multipolarity by competition among nation-states, and driven toward bipolarity by the need for alliances.

During World War I, the Triple Entente fought the Triple Alliance. During World War II, the Allies fought the Axis. During the Cold War, the imperialists grouped together in NATO and the Pacific alliance to counter the Soviet Union and China.

To be sure, the imperialist powers are economically entangled. But that, too, is nothing new. The European powers were entangled on the eve of World War I and World War II. The US and Japan were entangled on the eve of World War II.

Disentangling can happen quite rapidly. In 2022 the European Union disentangled from Russia in less than a year.

The US, Europe, and Japan are disentangling from China right now. How far that will go remains to be seen. I think it will go quite far — unless China's internal contradictions slow its growth enough so that it ceases to be a threat to the other imperialists, as Japan ceased to be a threat after the 1970s.

In all this, Lenin seems to me a better guide than Bukharin, Thalheimer, or Marini.

I don't see that the development of multipolarity required that revolutionary socialists "reframe our strategies for internationalism," and I don't see that the regression toward bipolarity requires it.

Russia and China will, presumably, be more aggressive, so the balance between anti-imperialism directed against the US and its allies and anti-imperialism directed against Russia and China will shift. But this involves no change of strategy.

I'd expect that problem of anti-US campism to diminish, as Russia and China show themselves to be no better than the US. But the problem of pro-US campism won't diminish and may even grow.

If the US and its allies disentangle from China, there may be fewer opportunities to influence events in China by targeting Apple and other companies in the US. But consumer boycotts of Chinese products have never been very effective.

There may be fewer opportunities to push diaspora communities to the left, if they don't see the US and China collaborating as much. But the US will continue to commit more than its share of crimes at home and abroad.

Time will tell, but it seems to me that we live in a more polarized and bipolarized world today than two years ago, and that trend seems likely to continue.