

Against Multipolar Imperialism

Toward Socialist Multipolarity

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Contents

State Capitalist Multipolarity	4
Uneven Authoritarianisms and Anti-Authoritarianisms	6
A New Internationalism	9

As the late Samir Amin wrote in 2006, “the challenges with which the construction of a real multipolar world is confronted are more serious than many ‘alterglobalists’ think.” Sixteen years later, Amin’s call for nations to “delink” from the Western-led economic order appears more ignored by state elites in the global South now than ever before. Earlier this 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 at its center.” And Russia’s assaults on Syria and Ukraine, financially supported by its plunders in regions like Sudan, serve as a reminder that the rise of national powers supposedly challenging US hegemony provides no guarantee that conditions will be more favorable to the international left. Thus, as Aziz Rana recently noted, the left needs an internationalist framework that “universally and effectively joins anti-imperial and anti-authoritarian ethics,” and refuses both “an old, broken Pax Americana” and “a new multipolar order dictated by competing capitalist authoritarianisms.”

But praxis can only emerge from a precise theoretical understanding of the objective conditions of imperialism today. What characterizes this new multipolar order and the nature of inter-capitalist competition? As a whole, this emerging multipolar world of bourgeois states does not create better conditions to challenge global imperialism, but merely preserves and even heightens these capitalist dynamics. Martín Arboleda cautions against “fetishizing” the role of the state in facilitating imperialism today at the expense of accounting for the role of international actors, and so conversely, we must also not overstate the capacity of the state—even developmentalist ones—in resisting imperialism.¹ The decline of US imperial power and the rise of multiple “poles” on the global stage only reshuffles which states are mediating the existing global relations of production, without reorganizing the latter differently, and without fundamentally empowering independent movements in each region. Identifying the most effective strategy for the global left to build power requires understanding how this new expression of imperialism works. Rather than seeing multipolarity as opening up space for revolutionary struggles against imperialism, I contend that contemporary multipolarity functions as a new stage of the global imperialist system, a departure from unipolar US hegemony without neatly falling back into the traditional mode of inter-imperialist rivalry as described by Vladimir Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin commenting on the last century.

Today’s multipolar imperialism represents an *intensification* of the world-system sketched out by Bukharin, which sees the internationalization of finance capital and the development of national capitalist groups as two aspects of the same process. While national economic blocs have been increasingly sidelined in favor of multinational institutions by neoliberal globalization, nonetheless we see the strengthening of the power of nation-states to help facilitate financial capital in further containing the working class. A Marxist theory of imperialism today must thus not overstate the dynamic of inter-imperialist rivalry without endorsing a perspective that capitalist states are now entering a stage of peaceful co-existence enabled by financial interdependence, or what Karl Kautsky called “ultra-imperialism.” This deeper intertwining of state and capital enables new and more complex dynamics between ruling elites. Even as value transfer from peripheries to core remains intact, we can now witness *multiple geographies* of inter-imperial relations, with different cycles and layers of collaboration and competition between different

¹ Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 27.

sectors of the ruling class. Now joined by an often invisible class of institutional investors, state elites draw from more sophisticated technologies of repression and control across geopolitical blocs, leading to an uneven development of global authoritarianisms to counter independent and popular movements. This widespread erosion of political democracy, as it takes diverse forms, is thus a central policy of imperialism today.

All this would not be surprising to Amin and other left-wing advocates of multipolarity. But we need conceptions of world revolution that creatively expand on what Amin calls “national, popular, democratic front[s].”² This entails leaving behind a conception of geopolitics that sees multipolarity *as it exists* as a necessary prerequisite for global decolonization and democratization. A genuinely democratic alternative to imperialism requires building new relationships among various anti-authoritarian movements that may not be readily seen as commensurable, from Indigenous struggles against transnational corporations to the left-wing of pro-democracy movements. Struggles from below must work toward institutionalization and international cooperation in some form, but we must also understand how a new “Bandung” of the 21st century must move beyond the limits of *national* liberation. Revolutionary socialist democracy can emerge from an organized plurality of different anti-authoritarian forces across regions that promotes democratic assembly and governance to force the global imperialist system to its limits—be it a unipolar or multipolar world of imperial states.

State Capitalist Multipolarity

Left-wing defense of multipolarity has become the implicit political framework for most Western anti-war organizations. Most are under no illusion that multipolarity in itself would produce the right conditions for global socialism. Rather, they believe that multipolarity would open up more space for independent struggles for sovereignty and self-determination. As Ignatz Maria describes it, “multipolarity has allowed for an intensified responsiveness to local conditions on the ground,” with multipolarity treated as a kind of “positive neutrality” allowing space for popular movements to blossom. This perspective tends to cite postwar decolonization movements as historical precedents for such a logic.

But there was never any guarantee that the progression of history toward a multipolar world necessarily expanded the room for struggle for democratic movements: most of the Third World states of the past have failed to endure, while modern-day multipolarity by and large fails to express the diversity that the anti-colonial states of the last century embodied. One cannot create simple parallels between the opportunities afforded to working-class movements from the latest pink tide in Latin America and the political developments within regimes across Asia championing anti-Western rhetoric. Some left-wing pundits uphold the likes of China and Vietnam as models for public health management in those regimes’ handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, but the relatively successful management of the pandemic was by no means exclusive to members of an anti-Western coalition.

The refusal to actively resist the authoritarian tendencies of regimes like China, Russia, Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Iran structurally prohibits us from organizing against imperialism as a global system.

² Samir Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony? Assessing the Prospects for a Multipolar World*. Translated by Patrick Camiller (London: Zed Books, 2004), 106.

In fact, countries that have openly decried US unipolarity align far more with its global imperial order than any supposed multipolarity. States from different geopolitical blocs have designed policies modeled after the US-led “War on Terror.” Some countries are establishing relations of domination toward racialized minorities within the boundaries of the state, or what Pablo Gonzalez Casanova calls “internal colonialism.” Ethiopia, for one, has closely supported the US during its Iraq War operations, now rebranding “War on Terror” rhetoric in a genocidal offense against Tigrayans. It does so by peddling anti-Western rhetoric out of one corner of its mouth while demanding more debt restructuring from the World Bank from the other. Meanwhile, China is incorporating former Blackwater associates into Xinjiang security centers while adopting Israeli counter-insurgency methods to police Uyghur and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The technologies that emerged from China’s brand of “War on Terror” are also now used by the Malaysian government to surveil undocumented Muslim migrants.

These regimes are often seen as part of an anti-imperialist bloc opposed to the US, but as Salar Mohandesi remarks, “it is precisely because the state is so thoroughly riddled with contradictions that imperialism often takes such contradictory forms.” But while Mohandesi cautions against assuming that imperialism can be reducible to traditional forms of capital accumulation, his case may be overstated. Much more than ever, we see new, intertwining relationships between state and capital, which should call for us to update how and where we can locate expressions of imperialism in these new configurations. For one, China’s desire to entrench itself in the global neoliberal system drives the country closer to international multilateral institutions (a reality that Amin predicted), which comes into tension with China’s fiery rhetoric against the US and the West. Touted pro-global South programs like the New Development Bank co-finances most of its projects with the financial entities that it purports to challenge, while promoting corrupt loan deals while systematically neglecting to consult populations in need. The World Bank-led Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) has been one of China’s main solutions for African countries like Zambia and Angola that are heavily indebted to it since the pandemic: merely offering debt suspension, not relief. And while the debt relief China recently promised to African countries is welcome, the fundamental structure of financial extraction of African countries for global capital accumulation remains untouched. The details of Chinese loans have always been obscured as they often go toward funding developmental projects with minimal environmental or labor standards. As Beijing now courts such countries like Saudi Arabia to join BRICS, any coherent conceptions of progressive multipolarity – even by the lowest standards, as political economist Patrick Bond describes – threaten to crumble into “an ideological and functional member-mishmash beyond any logical comprehension.”

Not only has a more equitable multipolar world failed to emerge, but this new configuration of global imperialism is also innovating techniques centered on the managing power of “infrastructure-led development,” from China to various regional and mid-sized states. In other words, not only is the state form—including in the Third World—failing to serve as a vehicle to develop anti-colonial sovereignty of oppressed peoples, but is actively being pulled to facilitate new forces of global capital accumulation. As Ilias Alami, Adam Dixon, and Emma Mawdsley observe (building on what Daniela Gabor labels “the Wall Street Consensus”), the “global dynamics of capital accumulation” have pushed the state further “as promoter, supervisor, and owner of capital,” in the form of “modernising state-capital hybrids ... that mimic the practices and organisational goals of comparable private-sector entities, adopt the techniques of liberal governance, and are broadly market-confirming.” This attempt to “preserve and further enshrine the centrality

of market regulation in Development in an age of rising state capitalism and turbulent geopolitical reordering [require] the uneven and combined development of more muscular forms of statism and the expansion of state-capital hybrids.” And so, what we see is the increased role of sub-imperial actors in helping to bolster the functions of capital in the name of public-private partnerships and other developmental innovations.

Rather than reversing the global structures of inequality, these developments signal new technologies of exploitation to the working-class. Alami and Dixon note how what they term “uneven and combined state capitalist development” has become an increasingly preferred mode for nation-states to help expand the operations of capital. More precisely, many states are increasingly willing to assume financial risks to bolster the power of institutional investors directly within national development projects to manage and contain labor power. In recent years, the central levers of global capital accumulation have shifted from shareholders into a few 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. Not only do infrastructural development projects like the Belt and Road Initiative fail to challenge global imperialism, but they also represent new forms of financial capital that work hand in hand with various nation-states and their state banks (such as public-private partnerships). The even larger implication is that the left’s opposition to multipolar imperialism should not only address the role of the Great Powers, but also mid-sized and regional powers as key facilitators of global imperialism.

Uneven Authoritarianisms and Anti-Authoritarianisms

What Alami, Dixon, and Mawdsley see as growing but unevenly “muscular forms of statism” points to a fundamental motor of imperialism that Amin and many others have observed but failed to rigorously address: authoritarianism. While Amin recognizes democratization as fundamental for socialist multipolarity, his political recommendations focus purely on economic policy adjustments. However, he correctly notes that “authoritarian structures here favour comprador fractions whose interests are bound up with the expansion of global imperialist capitalism.”³ Indeed, this perspective has been consistently downplayed in many contemporary Marxist discussions of imperialism, especially among those who are keen on maintaining the traditionally imperialist transfer of value from the peripheries to core. Instead, we must recognize how growing authoritarianisms around the world are a symptom of inter-imperialist competition between nation-states. In order to maintain their positions in an imperialist world-system, each of these nations are compelled to exploit workers, at times strengthen austerity measures, and contain their independent movements to benefit from the developing global dynamics of capital accumulation.

The refusal to actively resist the authoritarian tendencies of regimes like China, Russia, Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Iran structurally prohibits us from organizing against imperialism as a global system. Focusing on only certain aspects of US influence at the expense of addressing the complicity of other states in the global economy—working alongside the US’s *other* aspects of dominance—only *selectively* critiques global imperialism. Indeed, the mainstays of the anti-war left are forced into a position that centers only on dismantling US militarism while unable to offer positive support to democratic movements in other regimes as they grow closer to capitalist eco-

³ Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony*, 107.

conomic integration. Holding onto an analysis of “delinking” from the global economy without an understanding of political democracy would fail to check the growing forces of authoritarianism that make it difficult to promote a more democratic multipolar world. For one, the autocratic Eritrean state, which had been militarily assisting Ethiopia’s genocidal campaign against Tigrayans, has received praise from some pro-state overseas Eritreans. “Anti-war” outlets like Black Agenda Report and Black Alliance for Peace praise Eritrea as one of the few African countries to reject the US and other forms of Western aid and influence, lauding its “anti-imperialist” stance. Their failure to account for the Eritrean regime’s gross autocratic excesses demonstrates the limits of such anti-imperialism that remains silent on this regime’s containment of independent working-class power.

Where can we locate the freest site for the movements to act and expand their power and capacity—under the least coercive conditions—in each precise historical conjuncture?

Since, to cite Mohandesi again, imperial relations are “always conditioned and propelled by a plurality of other, often contradictory, forces,” and thus “many nation-states trying to free themselves from imperialism often found themselves exhibiting behavior that came dangerously close to the very imperialism they sought to abolish.” Such a regime is unsustainable as its political legitimacy derives solely from its head of state—in the case of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki. And with independent organizations and civil society nearly completely neutralized by the state, the likeliest political future for Eritrea after Afwerki’s reign would be the same neoliberal playbook dictated by the IMF and other global financial actors.

Our alternative is not subscribing to the Western establishment’s line of demarcating Western liberal “democracies” from the “authoritarian” regimes of the global South. Instead, we must recognize the uneven adoption and development of authoritarian strategies of governance across geopolitical milieus—much as the incorporation of “War on Terror” counter-insurgency across diverse national contexts shows. Recognizing this unevenness is important because different kinds of authoritarianism require different movements and strategies to combat them. Building on Alami, Dixon, and Mawdsley’s analysis of the development of statism in the global capitalist economy, a genuine anti-imperialist praxis should take into account how states learn from each other and develop their own repressive regimes of control. China’s wholesale attack on civil liberties structures the state’s relationship to capital in its own way that differs only in degree and method from the US’s targeted and unstable disenfranchisement of minorities. Both find a common denominator, to borrow from Trotsky, in “frustrat[ing] the independent crystallization of the proletariat.” This containment of mass movements from both sides helps stabilize global capitalism. However, each customizes its methods of control according to a complex confluence of factors at a given time: their particular relationship to global supply chains, the strength of domestic or local independent mass organizations, and the scale and expression of unrest among its people.

From this analysis of authoritarianism and imperialism, we can imagine what a genuinely socialist “multipolarity” can look like: assembling anti-authoritarian movements together to strengthen democratic institutions from the global to the local. This goal demands more than simply statist forms of sovereignty or relying on the reshuffling of power between nation-states against the backdrop of declining US hegemony. It is imperative to build alliances between

movements struggling against different forms of rising authoritarianism. At the same time, we must understand that for movements acting within illiberal, authoritarian states, the latter becomes nearly impossible without the basic freedoms afforded by bourgeois democracy. In such cases, like in Russia or Hong Kong under the national security laws, those in the global North with more resources and freedoms can develop more meaningful forms of support with those movements beyond a gestural slogan or statement of solidarity.

And just as we do not hold onto a rigid definition of authoritarianism, such an assembly of anti-authoritarian movements should not be conceptualized in utopian terms. As Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests, Myanmar's anti-junta mass resistance, Ukraine's military self-defense against Russia, and Sri Lanka's movement against the Rajapaksas all reveal, ethnic tensions and political prejudices have plagued such movements from the start. Efforts by the US empire to assert influence, from NATO military support to National Endowment for Democracy grants, have continued unabated. How then do we locate independent forces to support? In such cases, we must define independence not as a zero-sum space (since none can exist in geopolitics), but as a spectrum. Where can we locate the freest site for the movements to act and expand their power and capacity—under the *least coercive* conditions—in each precise historical conjuncture? One cannot answer this question preemptively, especially when different reactionary forces are present on different sides of the conflict; and should instead critically discern relations of force on their own terms.

A brief survey of some more recent uprisings demonstrates that no one model of struggle can be generalized. Under the state apparatus controlled by the Myanmar military junta or Hong Kong government, there is minimal flexibility for movements to maneuver. Recent mass struggles in China and Iran compelled their regimes to entertain some reforms, but it remains difficult for such movements to be sustained in any legal or institutional level as key activists have been swiftly incapacitated. The current insurgency in Sudan has given rise to politically diverse resistance committees with the future of the movement still being determined. While some like the committees in Mayurnu advocate for building autonomous revolutionary governance outside of the state, others call for institutionalizing new democratic infrastructures by rebuilding the existing state. In all instances, the left should focus on cultivating forces as independent as possible from the political leadership of bourgeois or national liberation movements, differentiating between what Hal Draper calls “military support” from “political support” of movements with prominent bourgeois elements asserting control. At every turn, we must try to out-organize reactionary components of social movements, from right-wing national chauvinists to US imperialist affiliates, without abandoning the mass movement completely.

And thus, we must strengthen alliances between forces resisting authoritarian challenges to liberal democracies and those resisting authoritarian regimes from the outside. As described above, the current objective trend of global imperialism compels states across the board to further consolidate their anti-democratic power in service of financial capital. In addition, the last historical instantiation of the multipolarity of bourgeois states generated a landscape of inter-imperial rivalry that resulted in an extraordinary human cost. To advocate for similar conditions—even as a transitional stage—would only be intransigent accelerationism that would crush, not empower, what is left of independent movements in some regions. Positive developments for movements in select regions of Latin America do not signal a similar fate in other regions under this developing world of multipolarity, as struggling dissident movements in regions like China and Iran can bear witness. Even Amin admits that “necessary economic options and political instruments [for

socialist multipolarity] will have to be developed in accordance with a coherent plan; they will not arise spontaneously within the current models influenced by capitalist, neoliberal dogma.”⁴

Self-determination against global imperialism entails creating platforms for democratic assembly and deliberation for independent movements.

Furthermore, the development of new authoritarian state capitalisms should make us even more skeptical of uncritically relying on state-led development as an antidote to capitalism today. As Iraqi socialist Muhammed Ja’far writes in a critique of Amin in 1979, “it is only possible to understand national formation as the social counterpart of the capitalist mode of economic production.” Alami updates and nuances this analysis further, explaining that for the state to “secure its own reproduction as well as that of money, it is forced to ... channel [financial] flows and manipulate their class content for the purpose of managing class relations ... in ways compatible with global capital accumulation.”⁵ This is not to rule out engagement within any states wholesale, but to recognize that in the last instance, the infrastructure of the nation-state today necessarily serves the interests of global capital accumulation. Even movements operating in the terrain of the state must understand that they are only present there because it *contingently* offers the most room to thrive only in very specific political conditions that can transform quickly. On the other hand, movements pushed outside of the state through authoritarian repression can find themselves in more favorable conditions vis à vis the state as quickly as they were isolated from it.

And thus, the way to resist this new instantiation of multipolar imperialism is to objectively analyze where and in what forms independent mass movements emerge today, and to find new ways to institutionalize solidarity beyond models that privilege state elites. For one, inter-imperial rivalry in the last century in itself did not determine the gains for independent movements for decolonization in a vacuum—we must not overlook the subjective role of the latter in changing the course of history. While some of those movements can serve as inspiration today, we must not be dogmatically nostalgic about their historical expressions. New forms of working-class and popular mass organization are required as the same imperialist division of global labor becomes mediated by different states—a change only in form, but not in content.

A New Internationalism

A truly emancipatory form of multipolarity would provide an infrastructure to a highly variegated terrain of independent movements, with each developing to maximize its fullest power to act to democratize its capacity for self-determination. These movements can assume a number of forms, from resistance committees and trade unions to mass socialist parties. Each embodies different levels of political consciousness, but can be stimulated in different ways to militate against different aspects of the global capitalist system, though success or failure can never be pre-determined. In this sense, self-determination against global imperialism entails creating platforms for democratic assembly and deliberation for independent movements. These spaces can

⁴ Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony*, 26.

⁵ Ilias Alami, *Money Power and Financial Capital in Emerging Markets: Facing the Liquidity Tsunami* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 64.

advance revolutionary demands that are incompatible with current regimes, but in the meantime, can build power by exposing the limits of the degenerate forms of governance today from bourgeois parliamentarism to illiberal authoritarianism. This difficult balancing act, as Devaka Gunawardena puts it, means both refusing to accept that bourgeois democracy is “sufficient” and being open to “draw on elements of actually existing socialist states to critique it—but that pushing the boundaries of democracy as it currently exists requires engaging seriously with its own internal contradictions and limitations.”

How does this exactly change our strategy around international solidarity as socialists? We must rethink what “the main enemy is at home” means in practice. Of course, this is not to abandon the struggle against imperialism in the West, but to expand our horizons to target sites where different states intersect with each other and international institutions. Here are some examples of opportunities for solidarity. Ukrainian socialists from Sotsialnyi Rukh’s demand the “democratisation of the international security order” to safeguard minority and oppressed peoples can be connected to other struggles against colonialism like in West Papua. BRICS from Below and other grassroots initiatives can continue to be strengthened with local movements to pressure against debt and financial institutions. The current situation in Ethiopia shows that rival countries from Iran to Israel work side by side to fund Ethiopia’s war on Tigrayans, calling for the need for globally-coordinated campaigns against “War on Terror” policies by different regimes. These can build from active campaigns for abolition by Black and Muslim organizers, like the work of Muslim Abolitionist Futures. We can also help bridge movements fighting the intersections of different national capitals, from the Tagaeri and Taromenane peoples struggling against the Ecuadorian government and Chinese companies’ encroachment on their self-isolated existence to anti-gentrification struggles in Flushing, New York, where major US corporate developments are bankrolled with the aid of Chinese bank capital. Socialist parties and organizations can help to formalize these bridges while respecting the autonomous existence of each struggle, building power *pluralistically* without subsuming them all under the former’s ranks. More so than ever, reflecting on the socialist left’s failures in the 20th century should further vindicate Ernest Mandel’s principle today: that socialist vanguards should not “subordinate the interests of the class as a whole to the interests of any sect, any chapel, any separate organization.”

While Amin believed that “social forces and projects [must] first take shape at the national level as a vehicle for the necessary reforms,” the idea of distinct national levels of struggle and development becomes more and more difficult to isolate with imperialism’s shifting face.⁶ With the ever-increasing threat of climate disaster in the midst of a failing economic system that provides no solutions, we must continue to build mass organizations to fight for democratic institutions with programmatic clarity wherever possible. But placing our faith in the reshuffling of the US hegemon’s power to a multipolarity of national elites to unlock better conditions of struggle would be idealism in its own right. Revolutionary anti-imperialist struggles must remain vigilantly pluralist and anti-authoritarian, and see multipolarity without socialist democracy as merely another expression of imperialism, rather than its death knell.

⁶ Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony*, 156.

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