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Neither Washington Nor Beijing: Socialists, Inter-Imperial Rivalry, and Hong Kong

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The U.S. and Chinese states are locked in an intensifying rivalry for dominance over the world system. Conflicts have erupted over everything from trade, intellectual property rights, investment in developing economies, spheres of influence, and military hegemony in the Asia Pacific. At the same time the inequalities and oppressive structures in both nations have triggered waves of struggle for social reform, from teachers strikes in the U.S. to the mass movement for democracy in Hong Kong. In such conditions, socialists in the U.S. are compelled to answer a burning question: how do we position ourselves in this rivalry?

There are two dangerous traps for us. First, we could fall into the trap of U.S. nationalism, lining up with our rulers and state against Beijing because its authoritarianism is seen as the bigger danger, throwing out the socialist principle of anti-imperialism. Second, we could fall into another one of "campism," supporting the Chinese state as part of a supposedly progressive or anti-imperialist camp, excusing its exploitative and oppressive structures, dismissing workers movements against those as catspaws of U.S. imperialism, and thereby violating our principle of internationalism. [\[1\]](#)

Hong Kong's mass movement in 2019 is a litmus test for the new socialist movement. We should reject both nationalism and campism, and develop an alternative of internationalist anti-imperialism that opposes both states and builds solidarity from below with the progressive currents in Hong Kong and mainland China.

The Roots of the Rivalry Between the U.S. and China

The last thing the U.S. wanted was a new inter-imperial rivalry. It emerged from the Cold War as the only superpower. It possessed the world's largest economy, overwhelming military dominance, an unmatched alliance of states, and therefore unrivaled global hegemony. It aimed to lock in this position by superintending a neoliberal world order of free trade globalization, incorporate all the states into it, crush so-called "rogue states," and prevent the rise of any peer competitor.

Three developments undermined its brief dominance over a unipolar world order. First, the long neoliberal boom from the early 1980s through the first decade of the new millennium realigned the tectonic plates of global capitalism. [\[2\]](#) New centers of capital accumulation, China above all but also a host of regional economic powers, emerged and became increasingly assertive of their interests in the world system.

Second, the U.S. suffered what General William Odom called "the greatest strategic disaster in United States history" with its defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan, bogging it down in endless counter-insurgency warfare. [\[3\]](#) Third, the U.S. and Western Europe bore the brunt of the Great Recession, and while they did manage to drag their economies of the crisis, their combination of austerity and stimulus has not triggered a new expansion on the order of the neoliberal or post-World War II booms.

The combination of these developments opened space for other powers, most importantly China but also Russia and regional powers like Turkey and Iran, to advance their interests. Despite its relative decline, however, the U.S. remains the foremost imperial power in the world, but it faces an international rival in China and a host of lesser ones. It thus dominates an asymmetric multipolar world order.

China's Liberation and Developmental Impasse

Amidst these developments, China has undergone a radical transformation over the last few decades. After a century of humiliation at the hands of European, Japanese, and U.S. imperialism, it emerged as a new capitalist and imperialist power that has aspirations to challenge the U.S. for economic, political and military supremacy.

It is now the second largest economy in the world, possesses the second largest military budget, and exerts its influence in geopolitics, sometimes in concert with the U.S. but increasingly in opposition to it.

Few would have predicted its rise. The Communist Party of China (CCP) led a great national liberation struggle and founded the People's Republic in 1949, promising fundamental social changes. While it did make strides in lifting millions out of poverty, it did not establish socialism, if we understand socialism as workers' democratic control of production to meet human need. [4]

Instead, the CCP established a one-party state that subordinated workers' consumption and political democracy to economic development to catch up with the West. In that effort the regime faced the same challenge most postcolonial states did the underdevelopment of its home economy.

To overcome this problem, the state vacillated between imitating Stalin's project of state capitalist development and voluntarist attempts to defy economic gravity like the Great Leap Forward. Neither worked to overcome China's underdevelopment as it fell further and further behind the rest of the world system, especially after its split with the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. After a series of faction fights in the bureaucracy during the so-called Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao Zedong forged an alliance with the U.S. against the Soviets to overcome China's geopolitical isolation.

China's Rise as a Capitalist and Imperialist Power

After another intra-bureaucratic battle, Deng Xiaoping's victorious faction reoriented China's economic development strategy from state capitalism to state-guided participation in the world capitalist market. [5] The CCP maintained the one-party state and state ownership of key sectors of the economy, and at the same time privatized inefficient state firms, encouraged Chinese private capitalists to set up operations and opened up the economy to multinational capital investment. But the state's developmentalist strategy crucially required multinationals to share and transfer technologies, for example in the form of joint-ventures with Chinese state-owned companies, as the condition for exploiting the vast new working class drawn from the peasantry and accessing the Chinese market.

After the state crushed the student and worker's uprising in Tiananmen, the development project was suspended temporarily. [6] But soon international investment poured back into the country, with multinationals eager to drive up their profits by exploiting its cheap labor force to manufacture products for sale in the markets of the U.S., Japan and Europe. China further opened up its market for investment in the 1990s, and its strategy took off especially in the 2000s after its accession to the WTO in 2001.

China became the new workshop of the world. Its percentage of global GDP rocketed up from about two percent in the early 1990s to over 16 percent today. Tony Norfield, who wrote [The City: London and the Global Power of Finance](#) and runs a valuable blog about imperialism, ranks China as the second most powerful state in the world system. [7] But, because of an inability to see that state ownership and state command of the economy are fully compatible with capitalism as it was for much of the twentieth century, he and others do not see China as capitalist or

imperialist.

In truth, whatever its occasional rhetorical invocations of socialism, the Chinese state and economy are thoroughly capitalist. Just ask one of the country's more than 800 billionaires, many of whom are, if you can believe it, card-carrying members of the Communist Party. [8] China's state owned, state backed, and private capitalist corporations exploit workers and are just as subject to the competitive logic of capitalism as those in the U.S., Japan, and the EU. And far from being just a giant maquiladora for advanced capitalist economies, its state-owned and private corporations are rapidly climbing up the value chain to challenge the multinationals it invited in long ago.

China Proclaims itself a Great Power

Based on China's newfound economic might, the state under Xi Jinping has explicitly set its sights on completing the country's national rejuvenation and establishing itself as a great power. Xi initiated the Made in China 2025 program to create private capitalist national champions in high tech to compete with U.S., Japanese and European multinationals. [9] The telecommunications company Huawei is the standard bearer of its success as it leads the world in 5G technology.

Xi also launched the \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that promises to build infrastructure in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean to recenter the world economy around China. [10] Its aims are unmistakably imperialist, as it wants to export its vast surplus capacity, secure raw materials for its booming economy, and find new markets for its products. And its impact on whole countries has been to lock them into dependent development, deindustrializing some countries like Brazil and reducing all to serving the needs of Chinese capitalism. [11]

To back up this economic power, China has engaged in a vast military modernization program specifically designed to neutralize U.S. attempts to contain its rise. [12] And it has projected its military power against lesser states in the Asia Pacific, seizing islands in the South and East China Seas, building military bases on them, and patrolling the area with its increasingly powerful navy. Based on its economic and military weight, it has also become more assertive in geopolitics, vetoing U.S.-backed UN resolutions and objecting to U.S. aggression against various regional powers outside the U.S. orbit like Iran.

Of course, China's development into an imperial power is not without the contradictions that plague all capitalist states and economies. It faces enormous problems with state and corporate debt, overcapacity and overproduction, speculative investment, wage pressure on profitability, and a slowing economy. These conditions will spark discontent and resistance from its exploited working classes and oppressed populations.

Imperial Rivalry Between the U.S. and China

The relative decline of the U.S. combined with the rise of China has triggered the enormous inter-imperial rivalry between the two states and their affiliated capitalist corporations. In the U.S. there is a growing consensus in the ruling class that China is a growing threat to its economic, political, and military supremacy. The U.S. has therefore abandoned its earlier policy of "conengagement," which combined engagement with containment, and adopted a more confrontational posture.

Since the 1970s, successive U.S. governments emphasized one pole or the other of conengagement with the aim of using carrots and sticks to coax China into accepting U.S. supremacy over the neoliberal world order. But faced with

its relative decline and China's rise, the U.S. under President Obama began to shift decisively toward containment beginning with his "Pivot to Asia." [13] He aimed to economically integrate the region under U.S. neoliberal rules through the Transpacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), shore up and expand long standing political relationships with Asian states, and redeploy the U.S. Navy to the Asia Pacific to deter China.

But Obama's pivot collapsed in failure. His TPP went down in flames when President Trump entered the White House. Traditional U.S. allies now doubt the U.S. commitment to the region and have opted to balance between the U.S. and China, while the U.S. military remains bogged down in policing the Middle East. Trump has tried to overcome the relative decline of U.S. imperialism through economic nationalism. He has shifted from superintending global capitalism to putting America first, establishing a transactional relationship with both allies and antagonists, with the aim of strengthening U.S. economic, military and geopolitical power against all. [14]

He has reoriented U.S. imperial strategy away from the so-called War on Terror toward great power rivalry, specifically naming China as Washington's principal adversary. He has launched a trade war with Beijing, pressured multinationals to shift their supply chains out of China, banned Huawei from building 5G in the U.S. and pressured allies to do the same, and began yet another U.S. military buildup specifically designed to counter China. [15]

But like his predecessors, Trump remains caught in the contradictions of confronting a state with whom U.S. multinationals are economically integrated. China holds over \$1 trillion in U.S. Treasury bonds. And no iPhones could be sold in the world without Foxconn's enormous factories in China. That's why Hillary Clinton famously complained "how do you get tough on your banker?" [16]

As a result, Trump's strategy vacillates between threats of decoupling the two economies something that would upset the entire structure of world capitalism and demands that China further open up its market to U.S. multinationals. Nevertheless, faced with China's increased economic, military and geopolitical power, the trajectory toward ever increasing rivalry is clear. Indeed with Trump's deranged Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, raving that China's ruling Communist Party is the "central threat of our times," it seems as if we are on the verge of a new cold war. [17]

But this will not be a rerun of previous inter-imperial rivalries that ended in World War I and World War II, because each state will likely back away because of their deep economic integration and their possession of nuclear weapons, which would mean any conflict would end in mutual annihilation. The rivalry will therefore tend to be deflected into geo-economic competition. But with both states arming themselves to the teeth and the world economy stumbling toward an inevitable new crisis, no one should trust that economic integration and a military balance of terror completely rules out war.

Resistance from Below Against Both States

While these two great powers are locked in ever growing rivalry, their ruling classes' exploitation of workers and oppression of groups, nations, and national minorities have fueled a new flowering of class struggle and popular movement in both countries. This is part of the growing global revolt against the system and its states that opens the possibility and necessity of international solidarity from below. In the U.S., decades of neoliberal policies, the Great Recession, and a long recovery that failed to improve conditions for the vast majority have detonated a wave of struggle, political radicalization, and polarization both to the left toward socialism and to the right toward white supremacist nationalism. [18]

On the Left, Occupy Wall Street signaled the first expression of working-class radicalization. Our period has been shaped by slogans like "We Are the 99 Percent" and "The Banks Got Bailed Out, We Got Sold Out" and naming the

"One Percent" as our class enemy. That dovetailed with the emergence of a new resistance against oppression from Black Lives Matter to Me Too, among many other struggles.

These opened the space for openly socialist campaigns by Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others within the Democratic Party, further raising consciousness and encouraging class struggle especially among teachers, who have borne the brunt of austerity in the public sector for decades. They staged an exceptional wave of strikes beginning with the initially isolated Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012 and exploding in a "Red State Revolt" that swept the nation over the last few years. [19] All of this has in turn enabled Sanders to run an even stronger campaign in 2020 with better political positions on racial oppression and other issues.

In China, the last three decades have also witnessed a wave of social struggles. These have included strikes in both state and private capitalist sectors for better wages, benefits, and working conditions, to mass urban environmental protests against pollution, peasant riots against land grabs, and the emergence of a vocal feminist movement exposing gender inequality and harassment. [20] But most dramatically, China's increasingly authoritarian measures have detonated the struggle in Hong Kong in defense of the city's democratic rights from the Umbrella Movement of 2014 to the Anti-Extradition Protest of 2019. [21]

At the same time, however, the persistence of low economic growth has provided space for reactionary answers from the establishment and the Right in each country. Trump galvanized an electoral base mainly in the middle class on the basis of his bigoted nationalism. And Xi has turned to authoritarian nationalism as well, using it to justify increased surveillance and a crackdown on labor organizing, the feminist movement, the Uighur population in Xinjiang in China's own so-called War on Terror. [22] Perhaps most importantly, his government has backed Hong Kong's repressive response to the democratic movement there.

The Traps of Nationalism and Campism

Amidst this wave of struggle in both imperial powers, democratic socialists must avoid two traps if we want to build genuine international solidarity between the workers and oppressed of the world the founding principle and strategy of our movement. One trap is nationalism, the social patriotic identification with the U.S., its state and ruling class against China. It is being used not only by the Trumpist new right but also the Democratic Party establishment and even its liberal dissidents.

There is a deep history of the labor movement falling for such nationalism, particularly against Asian states and peoples, from the American Federation of Labor's endorsement of the Chinese Exclusion Act, to the auto workers supporting protectionist policies against Japanese companies in the 1980s, to the temptation to back Trump's trade war with China today. Socialists should oppose such nationalism for two obvious reasons.

First, as Dana Frank argued in her classic book *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism*, states and bosses never enact protectionism to protect workers' jobs. [23] They do so to gain space to restructure their industry, bust unions, lay off workers and squeeze more productivity out of those that remain on the job, all to increase their profits and competitiveness against foreign competition.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, such nationalism breaks the bonds of solidarity between workers and oppressed people in both countries, making it easier for the rulers in each country to pit us against one another in a global race to the bottom. [24] In reality, workers in the U.S. and China have a common interest in uniting, in many cases against common exploiters like Apple, Google, and GM.

The other main trap is campism, an orientation born during the Cold War when many socialists in the U.S. sided with the Soviet bloc against Washington. At least then, however wrongly, one could at least claim that they were supporting an alternative to capitalism. One can't make that claim today. It simply leads to the disastrous logic of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" and support for capitalist states outside the U.S. orbit no matter how reactionary, exploitative, and oppressive those may be. This in turn gives rise to a tendency to indict any oppositional movement within those states as a reactionary tool of U.S. imperialism in a supposed plot for regime change.

The Internationalist Alternative

The alternative to nationalism, campism, and abstention is internationalist anti-imperialism.

Socialists in the U.S. must first and foremost oppose Washington's imperialism. It remains the dominant state power, principle enforcer of the so-called rules of global capitalism, and is, as Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "the greatest purveyor of violence in our world today." [25] From its rise as a world power with its conquest of Philippines and Puerto Rico in the Spanish American War to its wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. has proved itself the enemy of struggles for liberation and democracy.

Therefore, socialists must adopt the famous slogan of the German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht who declared in inter-imperial conflicts between great powers, "the main enemy is at home" our own ruling class and its state. [26] That means we must oppose all U.S. military, economic, and political interventions. We also must campaign against anti-Chinese racism used to justify such policies, dramatically exemplified by the Trump administration's weaponization of the corona virus and bigotry against Chinese people to pressure corporations to redirect their supply chains out of China. [27]

But, as Liebknecht knew well, that does not mean our main enemy is our only one; we should, as he did, oppose rival imperialist states. So today, while we stand up against U.S. imperialism, we must not support old powers like those in Europe as well new ones like China. While these are less powerful, they are no less imperialist, exploitative and oppressive.

Socialists should therefore reject the logic of lesser evilism and oppose all of them. We should instead organize the class struggle for socialism in our country and extend solidarity to struggles for democracy, social revolution and national liberation in other countries.

This approach is crucial for our moment of mass revolts from below in countries throughout the global capitalist system. We should support the right of oppressed people to fight for their liberation whether these struggles are inside the U.S. sphere of influence, like the Egyptia uprising during the Arab Spring, or inside another power's sphere like Hong Kong right now. They are all part of what we are fighting for a movement for international socialism.

But that does not mean we should support movements uncritically. In any mass movement, there will be multiple tendencies, some progressive and others with mistaken and even reactionary ideas and strategies. We should criticize the latter, showing how they hamper the movement's chances for success, and support the progressive forces.

Solidarity with Hong Kong's Democratic Movement

Such internationalist anti-imperialism should guide our approach to the movement for democracy in Hong Kong. Socialists should take an unequivocal and at the same time critical stand in solidarity with the movement. [28]

This struggle is rooted in the economy and politics of Hong Kong. It is a continuation and culmination of prior protest movements and deeply felt discontent against social inequality and the government's attempts to introduce patriotic education in schools and a repressive national security bill. [29] It is fighting for universal suffrage in the election of its leader who is widely seen as under the control of the Chinese government.

The most recent protests in 2019 exploded over an amendment to the Extradition Bill, which the Hong Kong government tried to rush through the Legislative Council, and if passed would have allowed Hong Kong authorities to extradite criminal suspects to mainland China. This led ordinary Hong Kong citizens to fear that they would be subject to arbitrary, non-transparent legal proceedings that characterize the Chinese legal system.

Hong Kong's social movement activists in particular organized against the bill. Many of these are progressive internationalists who have taken advantage of their city's greater freedoms to support social and labor movements in China. They fear that the bill opens the door to the severe repression the Chinese state has meted out against movements throughout on the mainland to be used against them. [30]

There are ominous precedents of this happening. For example, Beijing pressured Hong Kong to arrest booksellers for selling books critical of Beijing. If the Extradition Bill was allowed to pass, the Chinese state could use trumped up criminal charges to extradite and jail Hong Kong activists in China. That would set back democratic rights in Hong Kong and progressive movements in the mainland.

The movement also erupted for other reasons, very similar to those that triggered Occupy and many other youth-led social movements around the world massive social inequality, injustice, corruption, and precarious economic prospects. As a paradise of free market capitalism, Hong Kong's inequality has skyrocketed in the last half century. [31] The government has put real estate and finance capital first, and workers and the poor last. [32]

The Extradition Bill was the spark that lit the fire of protest. Since June 2019, the movement has staged unprecedented mass demonstrations of as many as two million people, school boycotts, and strikes that have continued even after the amendment to the Extradition Bill was withdrawn. Activists have united behind five demands: 1) full withdrawal of the anti-extradition bill; 2) withdrawal of the "riot" characterization of a June protest; 3) full amnesty for arrested protestors; 4) an independent investigation of police conduct; 5) real universal suffrage.

The movement has already begun to score victories beginning with the withdrawal of the Extradition Bill. Flush with confidence after that, the masses of people turned out at the polls to give a stunning victory to candidates supportive of the movement in November's district elections. That result should leave no doubt about the overwhelming popular base of the movement and its essential democratic and progressive character.

Support Progressive Currents

Most of the mass protests have been organized by the Civil Human Rights Front, a center-left coalition of political parties, human rights organizations, unions and community groups, which have united as an important force in the movement. [33] But, just as Occupy included a vast array of ideas and currents, Hong Kong's movement has a diversity of force and ideas. Overall, it is not united by coherent ideology beyond an instinct to fight for democracy against the intransigence of the government and police brutality, but it contains the seeds of anti-capitalist movement.

[34]

There are small currents of socialists trying to cultivate those seeds. They put forward an internationalist and anti-imperialist viewpoint, attempt to organize the working class including Southeast Asian migrants in Hong Kong in new unions, and see workers in mainland China as allies in a common struggle. But there are many other political groupings like left localists that prioritize independence as a demand.

There are also right-wing elements that are racist toward mainland Chinese people, a position that has been widely condemned by many activists in the movement. Other currents, often out of desperation, have tried to appeal to the U.S. and UK governments to stand with them against repression by the Hong Kong and the Chinese governments. This current is a small minority, but it has been blown out of all proportion by the U.S. media and politicians eager to whip up illusions in Washington.

Socialists in the U.S. should adopt a clear position of critical solidarity with this mass movement. Only on this basis can we criticize its right wing and counter mistaken calls for the U.S. government to stand with their struggle. [35] At best the U.S. will use any support for their own reactionary aims of great power rivalry with China and at worst and most likely betray any and all promises to aid the struggle like they did for the desperate people in Syria. [36]

We should provide all possible political and material assistance to the movement's progressive and working-class current that is arguing for an internationalist position of working class unity across state divisions. Only by building bonds with this current in Hong Kong and similar ones in China can we advance the struggle for international solidarity, weaken the hold of reactionary nationalism, and build a concrete alternative from below to the intensifying rivalry between the U.S. and China.

Twenty-First Century Socialism Must Be Internationalist and Anti-Imperialist

This is how we can avoid the mistakes so many socialists made in the twentieth century when they aligned themselves with either the U.S. or the Soviets and their various satellites in the Cold War. Some fell into the disastrous stance of nationalism, backing the supposedly democratic Washington bloc, and others into campism, supporting the supposedly socialist Moscow. Each opted to support oppressive states rather than the mass movements that rose up for national liberation, democracy and socialism.

The last thing we should do today is to recapitulate these mistakes. Instead of siding with either power in today's central inter-imperialist rivalry, we should orient ourselves with the slogan "Neither Washington Nor Beijing, But International Socialism." The way we build the influence of socialists is by solidarizing with all revolts from Iran to Chile, Lebanon, and Hong Kong and forging organizational connections with their most progressive forces.

Only by doing this can our new current of socialists help a global movement of workers and oppressed peoples to replace capitalism's inter-imperial rivalries, class exploitation, systemic oppression, and the increasingly apocalyptic consequences of climate change with socialism.

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