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Trump's strategy to reassert U.S. dominance

30 November 2025, by [Ashley Smith](#)

The Trump administration has taken a sledgehammer to the existing domestic and international order. All the damage it has done can appear to be just a cynical smash and grab operation for Donald Trump and his fellow lumpen capitalist cronies. It is that, but it is not just that.

The rational core of Trump's project is laid out by the Heritage Foundation in its *Mandate for Leadership* and *The Prioritization Imperative: A Strategy to Defend America's Interests in a More Dangerous World*. These have provided him with a blueprint to implement an authoritarian nationalist strategy to reassert U.S. dominance in global capitalism.

Trump is abandoning Washington's post-Cold War project of superintending a neoliberal order of free trade globalization. Instead, he is trying to accomplish his oft-repeated goal of "Making America Great Again" by putting "America First" against both friends and foes. He is downgrading or abandoning multilateral institutions, imposing tariffs on scores of countries, and threatening to annex Greenland, Panama, and even Canada.

While far more coherent than Trump 1.0, Trump 2.0 is an administration still riven by conflicts best exemplified by the apocalyptic breakup of the president's bad bromance with Elon Musk over the so-called Big Beautiful Bill. It is one of many splits, including Trump's battle with the Federalist Society, which helped stack the courts

with friendly judges, over its support of the Court of International Trade's ruling against his ability to impose tariffs. Another is the enormous one between Trump and his MAGA base over releasing Jeffrey Epstein's client list of people with whom he trafficked women and girls.

Despite all the chaos, confusion, and faction fights, Trump's administration is united behind one project—escalating Washington's imperial rivalry with China.

Mandate for Leadership identifies China as "a totalitarian enemy of the United States, not a strategic partner or fair competitor." The administration is trying to extricate itself from wars in Ukraine and Gaza, compel allies to take up the burden of their own security, and thereby free itself up to prioritize its great power rivalry with Beijing.

In response, China has made clear its determination to go toe to toe against the U.S. trade war, as well as its geopolitical threats and military buildup in Asia. Faced with such opposition from Beijing, Trump has backed off his most extreme measures, relaxing, for example, restrictions on exports of Nvidia's computer chips and dialing down the unprecedented tariffs he initially imposed.

But the growing competition between the two powers will disrupt such temporary measures. With their interimperial rivalry in danger of superheating, the Left must do

everything in our power to build international solidarity to stop this conflict triggering a catastrophic war between nuclear powers.

The capitalist roots of imperial rivalry

To be clear, this rivalry is not the result of the policies of the Trump or Biden administrations nor that of Xi Jinping's regime in China. It is the product of capitalism's laws of uneven and combined development, crises, and competition between states over the division and redivision of the world market for their corporations.

This economic competition drives states toward geopolitical rivalry and war. The result of those conflicts creates a dynamic hierarchy of states—with the imperialist powers at the top, regional powers in the middle, and oppressed nations and peoples at the bottom. All these capitalist states are riven by internal class and social divisions.

No order of states is permanent. The system's booms, busts, rivalries, wars, and domestic struggles upset and reshuffle the state system, with established powers declining and new ones rising. We have witnessed a sequence of imperialist orders over the last century—the multipolar colonial period of the 19th century through World Wars I and II, the bipolar Cold War, and Washington's

unrivalled hegemony after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States hoped to maintain that unipolar order by integrating all states into its so-called “rules based order” of free trade globalization. It tried to block the rise of any potential peer competitor, to demolish any “rogue state” like Iraq, and to police states destabilized by Washington’s neoliberal policies and interventions like Haiti.

The relative decline of U.S. Imperialism

Four developments led to the relative decline of the United States and the end of the unipolar order. First and foremost, the neoliberal boom from the early 1980s up through the 2008 Great Recession led to the rise of new centers of capital accumulation, most importantly China, but also Russia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and many others.

Second, Washington’s attempt to lock in its hegemony over the Middle East and its energy reserves through its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq ended in disastrous defeat, preoccupying it in brutal occupations and counter-insurgencies. With Washington bogged down, China, Russia, and various regional powers became increasingly assertive in the state system.

Third, the Great Recession brought an end to the neoliberal boom, ushering a global slump of alternating recessions and weak recoveries. Sluggish growth and declining rates of profit have driven states to protect their own corporations, slowing global trade and exacerbating geopolitical rivalry.

Finally, the pandemic, its disruption of global supply chains, and the accompanying recession exposed Washington’s relative decline, as well as its dependence on China. Together these developments ushered in today’s asymmetric multipolar order.

The United States still stands atop the system with the largest economy and military, as well as unparalleled geopolitical influence, but it now faces

imperialist rivals; most importantly China, but also Russia. In addition to these, there are a host of regional powers that jockey for position between the biggest powers over oppressed nations and peoples.

With none of the imperialist powers able to overcome the global slump, the ruling elites of each have turned to austerity and authoritarian repression of resistance at home and beggar thy neighbor policies like dumping and protectionism abroad.

In this new order, the key rivalry is between the United States and China. They had been strategic partners with increasingly integrated economies in the heyday of neoliberal globalization under Bill Clinton’s administration. But no longer.

Today, China is the world’s largest capitalist manufacturer, exercises growing geopolitical influence, and has the ability to enforce its will with the second largest military. Washington now views China as a potential peer competitor it must contain. As a result, the two powers are at loggerheads on everything from economics to geopolitics and military expansion, particularly in the Asia Pacific region.

The new Washington Consensus

In this asymmetric multipolar world order, successive U.S. administrations abandoned the old strategy of superintending global capitalism to adopt the new Washington Consensus of great power conflict with China. Up until the last decade, the United States had pursued a strategy of “con-gagement” with Beijing, a combination of containment and engagement. The Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia was its last gasp.

The first Trump administration decisively shifted U.S. grand strategy to rivalry with China and Russia. It aimed to downgrade multilateral alliances in favor of unilateral assertions of U.S. power, banning high tech exports to China, imposing tariffs

to reindustrialize the United States, boosting the U.S. military budget, and reorienting U.S. armed forces towards Asia.

But Trump’s erratic swings, his administration’s deep internal divisions, and opposition from the state bureaucracy hampered the implementation of the new approach. In the end, he accelerated Washington’s relative decline and, in the words of two Obama administration officials, managed to “embolden China, distress Europe and leave all American allies and foes wondering about the durability of our commitments and the credibility of our threats.”

The Biden administration retained Trump’s focus on great power rivalry with China and Russia but replaced its predecessor’s America First approach with muscular multilateralism. It aimed to refurbish U.S. capitalism by implementing a new industrial policy in high tech, to maintain Trump’s tariff regime with a high fence around a small yard of strategic technology to block China’s progress, especially in advanced microchips, and to rebuild and expand Washington’s alliances, turning them against Beijing and Moscow.

After a shambolic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Biden administration exploited Russia’s imperialist invasion of Ukraine to rally its allies, not only against Moscow, but also against Beijing. It convinced NATO to declare China a global security challenge.

But Biden fundamentally undermined his moralistic claims that the United States was defending its so-called rules-based international order with his support for Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza. That enabled China and Russia to expose Washington’s hypocrisy and rally other states around them under the banner of “multipolarity.”

Nonetheless, no one should be under any illusions that Beijing or Moscow are allies of Palestinian liberation. In the case of China, despite its rhetorical opposition to Israel’s genocide, it is the second largest trade partner with Israel, its state-owned

Shanghai International Port Group built and operates Haifa's \$1.7 billion port, one of its other companies is building Tel Aviv's light rail system, and another, Hikvision, sells surveillance technology to Israel to police Palestinians in the West Bank.

Xi makes China great again

Faced with Washington's new great power strategy to contain China's rise, Beijing had no choice but to respond with aggressive countermeasures of its own. Xi Jinping broke with his predecessors' cautious foreign policy, promising to carry out a "national rejuvenation" to fulfill "the Chinese Dream" of reclaiming the country's status as a great power.

But Xi confronts innumerable challenges of his own. China's economy has slowed from around 10 percent annual growth in the 2000s to now about 5 percent, and it's plagued with overproduction, a burst real estate bubble, massive debt, corruption, an aging and shrinking workforce, and high youth unemployment. China's regime has also faced waves of class and social struggle from strikes and mass protests in the 2000s to the democratic uprising in Hong Kong, Uyghur resistance to Han settler colonialism in Xinjiang, and insurrectionary job actions and mass marches against its brutal Zero-Covid lockdowns.

To maintain his rule against bureaucratic rivals and resistance from below, Xi has turned to authoritarian repression. He has purged dissident and corrupt bureaucrats, banned labor NGOs, carried out cultural genocide and mass incarceration of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, crushed the movement in Hong Kong, and ramped up the oppression of women and LGBTQ people as part of the regime's pronatalist drive to raise the birth rate and replenish its labor force.

Xi paired that repression with massive new investment in the economy, with two goals in mind—shoring up domestic support with the promise of

a better life and fending off Washington's attempt to block China's rise. The regime enacted an enormous stimulus plan to sustain economic growth after the Great Recession and amid the global slump.

In 2015, Xi inaugurated Made in China 2025, a state-funded industrial policy to develop the country's high tech companies, ensure they're self-sufficient, and position them to outcompete their multinational rivals. By any measure it has been a smashing success. China now boasts world class chip design and manufacturing companies like HiSilicon and SMIC, the world's largest EV company, BYD, the world's leading battery maker, CATL, the dominant manufacturer of solar panels, JinkoSolar, pathbreaking AI innovators like DeepSeek, robotics makers that have automated factory labor at a higher rate than Europe and the United States, and a near monopoly on rare earth processing plants and magnet manufacturers that supply the world's high tech industry.

China has started not only to catch up, but in some cases surpass U.S. high tech industries. As two influential economists argue,

According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, an independent think tank funded by the Australian Department of Defense, the United States led China in 60 of 64 frontier technologies, such as A.I. and cryptography, between 2003 and 2007, while China led the United States in just three. In the most recent report, covering 2019 through 2023, the rankings were flipped on their head. China led in 57 of 64 key technologies, and the United States held the lead in only seven.

In reality, Washington's bans on tech exports to China backfired, driving Chinese corporations to develop their own capacity that is now challenging, and in some cases surpassing, those of its rivals in the advanced capitalist world. That led Nvidia CEO Jensen

Huang to declare Washington's tech bans on China a "failure" that "only strengthens foreign rivals" and "weakens America's position." Competing for markets

All this government stimulus has not saved China from capitalism's global slump. It has instead produced a crisis of overinvestment, cut throat competition between state and private capitalist corporations, declining profitability, deflation, and overcapacity.

This in turn led capital to flow into speculative investment in housing, creating a giant bubble that popped with the collapse of the world's largest real estate corporation, Evergrande. That exacerbated the country's debt crisis, hammered the household wealth of the country's middle class, and undercut consumer demand.

Even after China partially stabilized this crisis, it has not solved its problem of overproduction. In fact, the regime exacerbated it with a new stimulus package to drag its economy out of the pandemic recession. As a result, China produces more of everything—from concrete to steel, solar panels, and EVs—than it can sell domestically at high enough profits.

The Chinese ruling class had hoped that its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, could help China export its excess industrial capacity. BRI was planned as a \$1 trillion infrastructure development project that builds roads, railway networks, and ports mainly in the Global South.

Participating states have taken out loans from Chinese banks to pay for the construction, making China the world's largest debt collector. And, in a classic imperialist pattern, the transport systems built through BRI are more often than not designed to deliver raw materials from developing countries' extractivist industries to China for its manufacturing system.

China has also ramped up exports, triggering protectionist responses from capitalist states, not just the U.S., but also the European Union and various states in the Global South. They have all started to complain about China dumping its surplus in

their markets and undercutting their less competitive corporations.

The export splurge has had a negative impact on Beijing's nominal allies. For example, it has exacerbated the deindustrialization of Brazil, increasingly reducing its economy to the export of raw materials and agricultural produce to China, a classic dependency trap.

Beijing's diversification of its export markets is also intended to insulate its economy from Washington's increasing tariffs and bans. As part of that effort, it has decreased its holding of U.S. treasuries and increasingly conducted trade with other countries like Russia in its own currency.

But there is no way China can replace the U.S. market entirely. So, to evade U.S. tariffs, it relocated plants to countries like Vietnam and Mexico to use them as export processing platforms.

At the same time, the regime realized that it had to develop its own internal market. To accomplish this goal, it launched its dual circulation strategy, which invests in state-owned enterprises producing for its domestic market while maintaining a parallel export-oriented economy.

As part of that strategy, Xi has repeatedly promised to raise domestic demand by increasing workers income, bolstering the state's minimal safety net, and stabilizing the real estate market. But such proposals for "common prosperity" have died on the vine in the past.

Why? Because China's economic growth has been entirely premised on exploitation of cheap, migrant labor. It therefore refrains from increasing these workers wages and its social spending. That's why Xi has opposed "egalitarianism" and "welfarism" that reward "the lazy." As a result, China still remains dependent on its export economy.

Forging alliances in a multipolar

world

To maintain and expand its access to the world market, China has forged multilateral and bilateral political pacts. It established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which brings together Eurasian as well as Middle Eastern states, most importantly China and Russia, in an economic, political, and security alliance.

Even more importantly, China set up the BRICS alliance, made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, as well as a growing list of other countries, but in which Beijing is by far the dominant player. China has used this alliance to advance political and economic initiatives, including The New Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, establish economic relations with countries in the Global South, and attempt to lead them in a challenge to Washington's unipolar order in order to establish a multipolar one.

China doubled down on its most important geopolitical alliance with Russia when Xi and Vladimir Putin inked their "friendship without limits" at the Beijing Olympics in 2022, right on the eve of Russia's imperialist invasion of Ukraine. As the dominant player, China has increased exports to Moscow—including so-called dual-use technology for its military industry, to prevent Russia from collapsing under U.S. and EU sanctions—and inked deals with Russia to import oil, natural gas, and coal.

But these powers do not form a coherent bloc of states, nor are they forging an "Axis of Upheaval" against the United States. They are internally divided by their distinct and sometimes competing interests.

There are countless examples of their schisms. India, for example, is in the BRICS alliance with China, but is also in the QUAD along with the United States, Australia, and Japan against China. India and China just recently clashed over disputed border claims. And Russia and China abandoned Iran, another member of the BRICS, when it was attacked by the United States and Israel.

Nor are Beijing's pacts breaking from the neoliberal order the United States has established. For instance, the BRICS' New Development Bank declared support for "the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization (WTO) at its core." In fact, China has used its alliances to advance its interests within the neoliberal order of free trade globalization that the United States built.

Flexing military power

To back up its economic and geopolitical assertion of power, China has modernized its military. It has increased annual military spending for thirty years in the row to a whopping \$296 billion in 2023, the second largest in the world but still just a third of what the U.S. spent at over \$916 billion in 2023.

It has developed a blue water navy boasting more ships than any other power, including three aircraft carriers, with a fourth now under construction. And it is expanding its air force, nuclear arsenal, and battery of intercontinental ballistic and hypersonic missiles at a rapid pace. [China] has increased annual military spending for thirty years in the row to a whopping \$296 billion in 2023, the second largest in the world but still just a third of what the U.S. spent...

China has flexed its military might in the South China Sea. It has deployed its navy to protect shipping lanes, asserted control over fisheries, and staked claims to undersea oil and natural gas reserves. That has brought it into conflict with several countries in the region over rival claims to islands, including the Philippines and Japan and behind them the United States, Asia's overlord.

Most importantly, China has deployed its military in increasingly aggressive exercises around Taiwan, which it considers a renegade province that it aims to assimilate by force if necessary. The United States has armed the island nation and maintained "strategic ambiguity" as to whether it would defend it in the case

of a Chinese invasion.

The stakes of the standoff are not only geopolitical, but also economic. Taiwan produces 90 percent of the world's most advanced microchips, which are essential to everything from computers to high tech fighter bombers like Lockheed Martin's F-35. The United States and China are at odds over Taiwan, each using it as a pawn in their rivalry while overriding the nation's right to self-determination in the process.

“Making America Great Again” again

To fend off China's challenge to U.S. hegemony, Trump is carrying out a radical break with Washington's post-Cold War grand strategy of superintending global capitalism through multilateral economic, political, and military alliances. In place of that, he is implementing the Heritage Foundation's authoritarian nationalist strategy.

At home, Trump has launched a neoliberal class war. He hopes that austerity, tax cuts, and deregulation will stimulate capitalist investment in manufacturing, restore U.S. economic independence, and bolster competitiveness in general and specifically against China.

He is carrying this assault in authoritarian fashion, using executive orders, overriding and in some cases smashing the federal bureaucracy, and testing the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution. He has dismantled whole sections of the so-called deep state that obstructed him in his first term, shredded the welfare state, and fired federal workers. To divide and conquer working class resistance, he has scapegoated migrants, trans people, people of color, and Palestine solidarity activists.

Abroad, Trump is implementing “America First” unilateralism. It is not isolationist, despite mainstream commentators' repeated and mistaken claims. He is determined to intervene economically, politically, and militarily throughout the world to advance U.S. interests at the cost of both allies and

adversaries, especially China.

His bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities proves this. The attack was intended to send a message to powers throughout the world, especially China, that the administration is more than willing to use its powerful arsenal of destruction to pursue its aims.

Nor is his strategy to forge a new “Concert of Great Powers,” dividing global capitalism up into spheres of influence overseen by the United States, China, Russia, and other great powers. Whatever deals he has offered to Putin and Xi, their potential spheres of influence overlap and contradict one another.

The United States, for example, will not relinquish Asia to China, nor will it abandon Europe to Russia. No Yalta 2.0 is in the offing. Trump is asserting U.S. dominance throughout the entire world against both allies and antagonists.

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Part 2

Amid all his regime's chaos, Donald Trump is implementing the unilateralist strategy laid out bluntly in *The Prioritization Imperative* of focusing on Washington's great power rivalry with China. First, the administration declared it will no longer be the global policeman, backing up allies against external and internal opposition.

Trump has attempted to extricate the United States from the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, if unsuccessfully. Despite his failures, he seems determined to shift attention from these crises and convince U.S. allies to shoulder the burden of managing them.

In the case of Europe, Vice President J. D. Vance warned allies even before his election that “the United States has to focus more on east Asia. That is going to be the future of U.S. foreign policy for the next 40 years, and Europe has to wake up to that fact.”

In keeping with that, Trump has secured an agreement with NATO members to increase their defense

spending to 5 percent of their GDP to deter Russian imperialism, triggering an arms race in Europe. Germany went so far as to suspend its constitutional restrictions on deficit spending to plow money into rearmament, while slashing social welfare spending, and to assert itself as an imperialist power in its own right.

Putting China first

By trying to clear Washington's portfolio, Trump attempted to prioritize Washington's conflict with China. He imposed new tariffs on Beijing, escalated the chip war with new bans on semiconductors and software sales, suspended the sale of tech and software essential to China's manufacture of jet engines, and threatened to subject all Chinese foreign students' visa applications to heightened scrutiny and deny visas to members of the Communist Party.

Trump has backed this economic assault with geopolitical pressure on Beijing. He dispatched Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth throughout Asia to shore up alliances against China. At Singapore's Shangri-La Dialogue, Hegseth told allies that China's threat “is real, and it could be imminent” to all of them, particularly Taiwan.

He promised to support them on the condition that they raise their defense expenditures. That pressure, combined with conflicts between various Asian states and China, is fueling a new arms race unlike anything in the region since World War II. Secretary of State Marc Rubio reinforced that message in his own follow-up trip to Asia.

Finally, the administration is jacking up its own military budget. Trump has increased the Pentagon's budget to \$1 trillion, with its top priority being, in the words of Hegseth, “deterring aggression by Communist China.”

The U.S. is backing up this rhetoric with increasingly aggressive demonstrations of military power in the Asia-Pacific, most recently with the U.S.-led 19-nation biennial exercise named *Talisman Saber*, the

largest one yet, specifically designed to rehearse war with China.

In addition, the administration has promised to spend upwards of half a trillion dollars on its Golden Dome defense system to intercept advanced missiles developed by China. Such a system, if it gets built and if it actually works, would enable the United States to strike without facing retaliation, undermining the deterrent of mutually assured destruction, predisposing both Washington and Beijing to strike first and ask questions later, thereby jeopardizing all life on earth.

Obstacles to prioritization

The Trump administration faces both objective and subjective obstacles to implementing its prioritization strategy. Most obviously, as world history's largest informal empire, with vested economic interests, geopolitical alliances, and 800 military bases in every corner of the earth, it will find it objectively difficult to extricate itself from its role as global cop to focus on Beijing.

On top of that, the administration's subjective problems—its internal conflicts, incoherence, and MAGA-driven idiocy—compromise its prioritization strategy. These will further weaken U.S. capitalism and undercut its imperial dominance.

Trump is being pulled in different directions. Protectionists like trade advisor Peter Navarro and MAGA leader Steve Bannon advocate total decoupling with China. Treasury Secretary Steve Bessent and the chair of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers, Stephen Mirran, oppose that and simply want a better deal—a Mar-a-Lago Accord—to rebalance trade within the current neoliberal capitalist order. And the tech capitalists like Nvidia's Jensen Huang and Elon Musk support free trade, including with China.

The ever transactional and mercurial Trump balances between these factions. Their conflict exploded over economic policy, with Navarro pushing the most extreme reciprocal

tariffs, Musk opposing them and denouncing Navarro as “a moron” and “dumber than a sack of bricks,” Bessent dialing them all back in the hopes of reaching bilateral pacts with dozens of countries, and Trump boasting that all of this chaos was an example of his “art of the deal.”

These conflicts have created contradictions in the regime's offensive against China, most obviously in its new tariff policies. After indulging the China hawks and playing hardball with record tariffs, he then backed off in a concession to pro-free traders like Nvidia's Huang, allowing the sale of the company's chips to Beijing.

Huang has argued for a different strategy for the United States to maintain dominance in high tech and specifically Artificial Intelligence (AI). He contends that Washington should keep China dependent on Nvidia's less powerful chips to prevent it from developing its own. That way Washington can both protect its monopoly on the most advanced chips and prevent Beijing from creating its own competing AI infrastructure that could supplant that of the United States. But that strategy is unlikely to succeed, given that China is determined to build exactly such an infrastructure.

The administration's China hawks have also warned that Beijing having access to even the less advanced chips will enable it to copy them and accelerate its own program. The outcome of this strategic debate remains unclear, but neither is likely to succeed in stopping China's rapid development of its own chips, high-tech companies, and AI programs.

TACO Don's confusing messages

Similar contradictions have emerged in Trump's treatment of Washington's allies and vassals. Trump is jacking up levies to discipline all states in the world to bow to U.S. interests and against China. For instance, his new accord with Vietnam blocks its use by

China as a base for transshipping goods to the United States to avoid tariffs.

But such bullying alienates the very states Trump needs to form a bloc against China. It made little sense to start a tariff war with Washington's semi-colony, Mexico and its junior imperialist partner, Canada, which are both utterly integrated with the U.S. economy.

It made even less sense to impose blanket tariffs on foes, allies, and economically insignificant islands inhabited only by penguins and seals. All that did was drive allies to put their interests before those of the United States, disrupting the formation of a bloc of imperialist states to confront and contain China.

Trump added more confusion in his tariff policy by giving multinationals like Apple carve-outs, and then drawing down all of the reciprocal tariffs to 10 percent—still a level without precedent in recent years—and promising further reductions in bilateral negotiations with countries all around the world. That earned the president the insulting moniker, TACO, short for “Trump Always Chickens Out.”

His brief spiraling tariff war with China was equally ham-fisted and counterproductive. When the United States imposed 145 percent levies on Chinese exports, China countered with 125 percent ones, disrupting supply chains, slowing both economies, and leading to shortages at factories and retail shelves in the United States. Yet again, TACO Don backed down, cutting a “gentleman's agreement” in Geneva to lower tariffs on China to 30 percent, while Beijing dropped theirs to 20 percent.

Trump's erratic tariff war with China has alienated U.S. capitalists who depend on China's supply chain and sell in its market. The Business Roundtable, Chamber of Commerce, big multinationals like Apple, and scores of small businesses all lobbied Trump for carve-outs and decreased levies.

On top of that, the stock and bond markets registered their opposition.

Stocks dropped while investors sold off bonds, driving up yields and with them long-term interest rates. That left Trump no choice but to relent, making “Tariff Man’s” bark look far worse than his bite.

His new round of tariff increases is shot through with the same contradiction. On the one hand, he has written stern letters to countries, again both friend and foe, threatening new levies, but on the other, he has extended the deadline for trade deals to August 1.

Making Stagflation Great Again

Trump’s so-called Big Beautiful Bill will compound U.S. capitalism’s problems, undermining his attempt to reassert its dominance. Despite brutal austerity measures against the working class, it will drive up spending overall with big increases in border enforcement and defense, while cutting taxes on the rich and corporations. This will drive up the deficit and debt.

Musk denounced the bill as “a disgusting abomination,” staged a social media war with TACO Don, and then launched a third party to unseat Republicans who voted for it. Moody’s agreed with Musk, downgrading Washington’s credit rating, increasing the likelihood of increased interest rates for loans for everyone from capitalists to small business owners, professionals, and workers.

Trump’s assault on migrants will further exacerbate the U.S. economy’s problems. His bill includes a \$170 billion increase in immigration enforcement to bring ICE’s annual spending to almost \$40 billion—a sum that would make it the 16th largest military budget in the world. He has already shut down the border and started raids throughout the country, triggering resistance in Los Angeles and across the country.

Trump responded to this opposition by deploying 4,000 National Guard troops, along with 700 Marines, to join

the Los Angeles Police Department in protecting ICE’s reign of terror against migrants. But the workers he’s targeting for deportation are essential to the U.S. economy in everything from meatpacking to construction and agriculture.

Any decrease in participation of these vital sections of the workforce will drive up wages, causing shortages, increasing prices, and hiking up inflation. In a sign of desperation, Agricultural Secretary Brooke Rollins floated a sadistic, boondoggle proposal to use new workfare requirements to force Medicaid recipients to replace millions of deported workers.

Faced with the threat of losing its workforce, agribusiness, hotel barons, construction companies, and other capitalists lobbied Trump to back down, which he did, promising to dial back workplace raids and focus on “criminals.” But then, under pressure from his far-right major domo, Stephen Miller, he promised to continue the raids, despite a majority of people now opposing them and 79 percent viewing immigration as a “good thing.”

Economists are worried that Trump’s policies will weaken U.S. growth, if not trigger a recession. Instead of fueling new manufacturing in the United States, Trump’s erratic tariff policy and ugly bill have led to a contraction in investment and freeze in hiring, slowing an already stagnant economy amid persistent and, because of his disruption of Chinese supply chains, potentially higher inflation. That has renewed fears of another cycle of the 1970s nightmare of stagflation, weakening U.S. capitalism.

MAGA idiocy

Trump’s ideologically driven war on the state bureaucracy, social institutions, and agencies of imperial soft power will further compromise U.S. dominance. He’s eliminating, cutting, and purging key ministries from the FBI to the CIA, military brass, and State Department to get rid of any guardrails that block his authoritarian rule.

In the process, he is incapacitating key parts of the state that enforce and win consent for U.S. dominance. For example, he gutted the Voice of America, a key media outlet the United States has historically used to spread propaganda against its opponents and seduce their domestic opposition to mistakenly see Washington as an ally in their struggles.

China and Russia have celebrated. The former editor of China’s Global Times declared it “really gratifying,” while the editor of Russia’s RT called it an “awesome decision.” Beijing and Moscow are pumping more money to fill the vacuum and win greater global influence.

Trump’s all-out assault on higher education, especially elite institutions like Harvard, will also undermine U.S. supremacy. He and especially Vance, who infamously gave a speech entitled “Universities Are the Enemy,” despise these institutions for reproducing the liberal capitalist establishment, which they view as their mortal enemy.

Trump has justified the assault based on false charges of these institutions’ antisemitism and supposed hesitancy in crushing the Palestine solidarity movement. With that cover story, he has cut their funding, demanded they rewrite their curriculum, and called for them to abolish their diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

This assault on higher education will weaken U.S. imperialism. It will disrupt the reproduction of the ruling class, its ideologists, and professionals. And it will prevent the training of the skilled working class, essential for the United States to dominate its high-tech competitors.

These institutions are central to the military industrial complex, especially in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Cutting their funding will undercut U.S. efforts to win “the chip war” with China. The repercussions will not only be borne by the elite schools and their wealthy students in blue states, but also by public universities and working-class students in red states.

Even worse for U.S. imperialism,

Trump's witch hunt against foreign students, Chinese ones in particular, as well as international researchers, will drive them out of the country, depriving universities and corporations of a key source of international talent, especially in STEM fields. Already, Washington's competitors from Europe to China are recruiting Chinese students with offers of funding and lucrative jobs, leading the ruling class to panic about a brain drain.

Trump's onslaught on science will similarly compromise U.S. supremacy. He is not only defunding scientific research in higher education, but also at the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Weather Service, and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Such cuts will cripple research essential not only to corporations, but also to public safety and health, destabilizing U.S. society in the process. With FEMA and other agencies incapacitated, tragedies caused by climate change, like the drowning of over a hundred people in the recent flash flood in Central Texas, which could have been avoided with proper regulations, precautions, and alerts, will multiply throughout the country.

Trump's destruction of USAID, as well as withdrawal from most multilateral institutions and agreements—including the World Health Organization, the Paris Climate Accords, and almost every United Nations agency—fundamentally compromises Washington's soft power and ability to win allies and subjects to its imperial project against China. Instead, it will isolate and discredit the United States and make even more states view the United States with suspicion.

Trump's "America First" policies have already led powers to chart their own course, putting their economic, political, and military interests first. That, in turn, will lead to greater conflict between states throughout the world. It will also make it harder for the United States to pressure its

nominal allies, like Europe and Japan, to limit their trade with China. As a result, all the Trump regime will be left with is hard power, economic and military bullying.

Rather than restoring U.S. dominance, the regime's incoherent implementation of the prioritization strategy will likely accelerate its relative decline. Fiona Hill, who served in the first Trump administration, went so far as to compare her former boss to Boris Yeltsin, who oversaw the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, declaring, "Trump is deconstructing the United States, just as Yeltsin deconstructed the Soviet Union."

China goes toe-to-toe with Trump

Sensing its position of strength against the United States, China stood up to Trump's belligerence and exploited his administration's contradictions. It called his bluff on tariffs, matching each of his increases with ones of its own, including those designed to target Republican states.

It played the ace up its sleeve—its near monopoly on processing rare earth minerals and magnets that are essential components to everything from cars to U.S. fighter bombers like the F-35. It halted their export, paralyzing both civilian and military manufacturing.

China drove Trump to strike the "gentleman's agreement" for a 90-day pause to allow talks to secure a trade deal. While he blinked, so did Xi Jinping. With the economy already struggling to maintain growth, Xi Jinping could ill afford the near-total cessation of trade with the United States. Despite increased exports to Europe and Southeast Asia and modest growth overall, the loss of markets in the United States disrupted businesses in China.

But their agreement fell apart with China limiting the release of rare earth metals and the United States retaliating with bans on the export of chips, essential software, and parts for Chinese airline construction. With

their economies imperiled, they both again blinked, promising to reinstate their agreement and continue bilateral trade talks for a final deal. Nevertheless, China demonstrated Trump's weakness.

Xi has exploited the new administration's abandonment of superintending the neoliberal order of free trade globalization by posturing as its defender. He pledged to be, unlike Washington, a reliable trade partner to the rest of the world.

Of course, this was hardly disinterested, since China has been one of the main beneficiaries of that order and desperately needs access to international markets to export its capital and products. Indeed, China made up for the loss of markets in the United States by diverting exports throughout the world, achieving a record trade surplus of \$586 billion.

Xi has also taken advantage of Trump's foolish decision to launch his trade war on all countries at once by extending diplomatic and trade offers to states in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. But the response of states throughout the world has been contradictory. They have both welcomed China's offers and expressed concern that it will use them to export its surplus into their markets, undercutting their corporations.

Brazil recently embraced China in a common defense of free trade, but just last year investigated Beijing for dumping, while its steel companies demanded increased tariffs to protect their industry and market share.

Finally, Xi has responded to Trump's increased militarism with aggressive assertions of China's own hard power. China increased exercises around Taiwan, sent ships to Australia in an unprecedented naval exercise, escalated its conflicts with the Philippines and other states in the South China Sea over contested islands, and even deployed two aircraft carriers in Japan's economic waters.

Escalating global rivalry

The rivalry between the United States and China is engulfing the entire world, from Greenland to Panama, the Arctic, Antarctica, and even outer space. They are locked in competition in key conflicts and theaters in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

In Europe, Trump had hoped to cut a deal with Vladimir Putin for the partition of Ukraine, perhaps with the aim of peeling Russia away from its alliance with China. But his proposal has been rejected by Moscow, which seems intent on annexing as much territory as possible, no matter its cost to Russian and Ukrainian lives.

China remains committed to its “friendship without limits” with Russia, sustaining its economy against the sanction regime. For its part, Kyiv has opposed the partition of its country, refused to accept any settlement without security guarantees, continues to defend its sovereignty in the face of unrelenting Russian aggression, and has succeeded in launching a drone strike against Moscow’s fighter bomber fleet.

But Trump has made some gains, most importantly pressuring his NATO allies to increase their defense spending to 5 percent of their GDP and rearm at a frightening pace. As a result, Ukraine will continue to be a source of inter-imperial conflict over a national liberation struggle that could metastasize into a war involving several great powers.

In the Middle East, the United States had been the unrivalled hegemon, but China is a rising power. Because Beijing depends on the region’s oil and natural gas for energy and its petrochemical industry, it has established political and economic relations with everyone from Iran to the Gulf States and Israel.

Biden and now Trump have used Israel’s genocidal war to reassert U.S. power in the region and weaken the so-called Axis of Resistance,

decimating Hezbollah, weakening Iran, and cutting deals with the rebels that toppled Syria’s dictatorship. Trump had hoped to consolidate U.S. dominance with a “final solution” in Gaza, economic agreements with Arab states, expansion of the Abraham Accords to normalize their relations with Israel, and a new nuclear pact with Iran, so that it can prioritize China.

However, Palestinian resistance remains unbowed, and the region’s Arab masses oppose normalization and are hostile to their rulers for living in luxury amid their growing poverty. When the nuclear talks with Iran stalled, Israel took the opportunity to launch its blitzkrieg, not only against Tehran’s nuclear facilities, but also its leadership, military, and scientists.

Trump pivoted to support the attack and then dropped several of the U.S. military’s largest conventional bombs, the Massive Ordnance Penetrator, to decimate Iran’s nuclear facilities including the one at Fordow, which lies buried deep under a mountain. Trump, however, restricted action to a one-off attack, instead of an attempt at regime change, something that would have trapped Trump in an enormous war and undercut support from his isolationist MAGA base.

Trump has now pledged to restart talks with Iran, in the hope of reaching an agreement over its nuclear program. It remains to be seen whether the Iranian regime, which is torn between those who want to make a bomb and those who would prefer a deal, will agree to stop their program on U.S. terms.

While the United States seems to have scored major victories, the region remains a site of interstate conflicts, as well as resistance from below. China, which stood by while its Iranian ally was pummeled, will use any setbacks to U.S. interests to advance its own in the region, guaranteeing that its state conflicts and rebellions will be an occasion for imperial jockeying for advantage.

Latin America is another area of growing contestation. While the United States has been the regional

hegemon, China has used its Belt and Road Initiative to become a major investor in the region and South America’s leading trade partner. That has enabled it to pull middling powers like Brazil into its orbit through the BRICS alliance.

The United States has responded by reasserting its power against Beijing’s influence. Trump has used the charge that China secretly controls the Panama Canal to threaten to annex it, and ramped up tariffs on countries that depend on exports to the U.S. market to impose Washington’s dictates.

The two powers are also engaged in nothing less than a new scramble for Africa. China has become the largest investor in the continent, with a focus on mining, particularly of rare earth minerals. Trump has responded by using investment, tariffs, and geopolitical pressure to bully nations to tilt toward the United States.

For instance, during peace negotiations between Rwanda and Congo, he pressured Congo to allow U.S. extraction of rare earth minerals, instead of China. This is but one of many proxy conflicts between Washington and Beijing in Africa. These will escalate as China seeks to expand its extractivist monopoly in rare earths and the United States seeks to break it.

Flashpoints in the struggle for hegemony in Asia

By far, the region most prone to conflict between the United States and China, though, is Asia. There are several pivotal flashpoints that could trigger a war despite their declared intention to avoid one.

Already, the United States and China engaged in a quasi-proxy war over Kashmir with Beijing backing Pakistan and Washington supporting India. Both great powers carefully analyzed the performance of their planes, missiles, and defense systems against the others.

Even more ominous is South and

North Korea. The United States, which maintains massive bases in South Korea, has tried to block any peace deal with the North, pressure Seoul to spend more on its military and forge a military pact with Japan against China. That will only antagonize Pyongyang and Beijing, heating up a conflict involving three nuclear powers.

China's standoff with the Philippines over contested islands in the South China Sea is just as ominous. Trump has established friendly relations with the Philippines' new government of Ferdinand "Bong Bong" Marcos, the son of the notorious dictator, and dispatched Hegseth there on his first foreign mission in Asia.

Hegseth promised to uphold Washington's "ironclad alliance" with the Philippines "in the face of communist China's aggression in the region." He declared U.S. intentions to increase military aid, stage more joint operations, and pre-position U.S. military hardware for operations in the Asia Pacific.

The greatest and most explosive conflict is over Taiwan. As noted above, the stakes are not just geopolitical, but economic, because of Taipei's advanced microchip industry. Xi has ordered his military to be prepared to annex the country by 2027, while the United States has made defense of the island its top priority.

As a result, imperial and regional conflict is heating up throughout the Asia Pacific with states arming themselves to the teeth.

Against imperialist nationalism

In this ominous conjuncture, the Left must do everything in our power to stop inter-imperial rivalry from triggering another world war. In the United States, our first and foremost task is to oppose our own imperialist state, which remains the most dangerous power in the world.

The key site to build opposition is the broad resistance to the Trump regime. The emerging movement includes a

wide range of forces, from explicitly pro-Democratic Party NGOs like Indivisible, to the Palestine solidarity movement, and trade unions grouped around May Day Strong. The Left must argue for an independent working-class movement that stands against all of Trump's divide-and-rule attacks on the oppressed and opposes U.S. imperialism in all its forms—economic, geopolitical, and military.

We have to make several pivotal arguments. The resistance needs to oppose Trump's siren song of nationalism, protectionism, and xenophobic attacks on Chinese international students and researchers in the United States and Chinese workers in the mainland as a threat. Both Teamsters' Sean O'Brien and the United Autoworkers' Shawn Fain fell prey to that temptation, expressing support for tariffs as a way to save jobs.

Trump, a corrupt real estate boss who starred in a reality TV show with a tag line "you're fired," doesn't care about workers. Moreover, contrary to union officials' claims, the vast bulk of job losses have not been caused by globalization but by corporations' imposition of lean production and plant relocation within the United States from the unionized north to the non-union south.

Blaming globalization lets bosses off the hook. It also sows racist, anti-immigrant divisions within the multiracial, multinational U.S. working class and between U.S. workers and workers in other countries, especially China. Such bigotry will disrupt the solidarity necessary to organize against capitalism's international system of production, transport, and sale.

Economic nationalism had deadly consequences in the 1980s, when two laid-off auto workers, who blamed their unemployment on Japan, killed a Chinese American, Vincent Chin, whom they mistook for Japanese. It can have equally deadly consequences today, with Trump targeting Chinese international students and researchers and whipping up anti-Chinese racism and anti-Asian racism in general.

Even worse, nationalist bigotry weds the working class to U.S. imperialism. Trump and the Democrats will exploit such allegiance to con us into accepting austerity to pay for increased ICE and military budgets, as well as to kill and die to preserve U.S. dominance over China and other rivals, not to improve workers' lives.

At the same time, we should oppose the Democrats' defense of the existing neoliberal order of free trade globalization. That was a vehicle for U.S. imperial hegemony over global capitalism at the expense of the workers who were forced to compete in a global race to the bottom for our rulers' benefit.

The enemy of my enemy is not my friend

We also need to argue against those on the Left who support Washington's rivals like China or Russia as some kind of alternative. They are not. They are capitalist and imperialist states. Beijing proved its predatory and brutal nature in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, while Moscow has done the same in Ukraine.

The multipolar order that Washington rivals aim for is also no alternative. Of course, unipolarity—the unrivalled hegemony of U.S. imperialism—was horrific, as Iraq proved, but a multipolar order of competing imperial powers will be no better and potentially far more deadly. Remember that the last multipolar order ended in two world wars.

When sections of the Left support the Chinese or Russian state, they inevitably betray international solidarity with the liberation struggle of the nations and peoples those states oppress and the workers they exploit. In their view, such struggles threaten Beijing and Moscow and their ability to stand up to the United States. They trade working-class internationalism for great power nationalism in reverse.

Even worse, holding up those states as some kind of alternative will only

discredit the Left in the eyes of most working people. No one wants to live in police states like those in China and Russia, just like no one wants to live under Trump's increasingly authoritarian rule here in the United States.

For internationalist anti-imperialism

The alternative to the dead end of great power nationalism is internationalism. It comes in two forms. One common one, which seems on the surface appealing and realistic, is internationalism from above. Often put forward by pacifists and reformists, it argues for international cooperation between imperialist rivals as a path to cooperation and peace.

In the early 20th century, Karl Kautsky held out the promise of such a "golden international" only to see such hopes dashed by World War I. Today, leftists oriented on the Democratic Party hope to convince or elect its leadership to pursue a policy of great power collaboration.

That strategy is no more likely today to lead to success than it was in Kautsky's time. Why? Because it fails to grasp that inter-imperial rivalries are not a mere product of governmental policy but of the capitalist competition that drives great powers into conflict over the division of the world market.

Moreover, the chosen vehicle to accomplish the fantasy of cooperation, the Democratic Party, has shown itself impervious to left-wing influence. Remember, despite the Left's attempt to use the Democrats for anti-imperialist aims, they started most of the wars in the 20th century, from World War I to Vietnam and Israel's genocide in Gaza. And, while Democrats may have grumbled about wars like Iraq started by Republicans, they went along with them anyway, voting for military budgets to carry them out.

Instead, we need anti-imperialist internationalism from below. That

entails opposing our own imperialist state, the United States, first and foremost, and in all its forms, from its economic policies (whether protectionist or free trade) to its geopolitical bullying and wars.

Washington's heretofore imperial partners like the European Union, Britain, Canada, Japan, and Australia do not offer any kind of progressive option, as their histories of colonialism, conquest, and economic exploitation prove. Today, amid the decomposition of U.S. hegemony, they are only out for their own capitalist advantage.

At the same time, we should have no illusions about U.S. imperial rivals, most importantly China. We must oppose Beijing and defend the right of self-determination of nations like Taiwan and national minorities like the Uyghurs they oppress. And, just as importantly, we have to oppose Washington's cynical weaponization of these national and popular struggles for its own imperial purposes.

Workers against rivalry and war

Our main project must be to build international solidarity between the working classes in all the imperial and regional powers as well as oppressed nations. This is now more possible than ever. Globalization has interlocked the destinies of workers throughout the world.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, where the regionalization of production and migration of people has bound the fate of the North American working class together. Either we stand together as one, or we will be divided and conquered separately.

The same is true of U.S., Chinese, and Taiwanese workers who are bound together by global production, supply, and retail chains. For example, Apple designs products in California, subcontracts their manufacture to Taiwan's Foxconn, and in turn employs Chinese migrant workers to make iPhones and other devices in

China, which are flown by FedEx's workers to the United States to be sold either directly to customers or by retail shop workers.

Thus, even in the case of Taiwan, the world's most dangerous flashpoint in the rivalry between the United States and China, the international working class shares common interests against the three ruling classes collaborating in exploiting us.

Given our power to shut down their system, we have the potential to unite and oppose their rivalry and slide toward war. The most important way the labor movement can do that today is by opposing Trump's witch hunt against Chinese international students, graduate students, and scientists. This is essential in order to build fighting unity within the U.S. working class, in which Chinese graduate students in particular play a significant role in organizing unions in higher education.

If the labor movement can unite against Sinophobia here in the United States, it would send a strong signal to Chinese workers that workers here are their natural allies. And, Chinese international students, graduate students, and scientists can help establish connections across borders, making international solidarity concrete.

We have the chance to forge such unity amid the struggles provoked by capitalism's global slump, our rulers' increasing authoritarianism, and the austerity measures they are imposing on us all. Over the last fifteen years, we have witnessed an unprecedented wave of mass struggle all around the world, including in the United States with Occupy, Black Lives Matter, the Red State Teachers Revolt, and the Palestine solidarity movement.

Similar struggles have erupted in China. Migrant workers have gone on strike, Hong Kongers staged a mass democratic uprising, and Chinese people rose up in mass protests and strikes against the regime's brutal Covid lockdowns.

Washington and Beijing's rivalry will provoke yet more working-class struggle. Trump's brutal class war at

home to transfer wealth from workers to the billionaires and the Pentagon war machine has already triggered a national resistance.

Likewise, Xi will make the Chinese working class pay to challenge the United States, forcing them, in the words of one official during Trump's last term, to get through the trade war

“by eating grass for a year.” Such austerity will stoke rising levels of struggle in China.

Amid the resistance in both countries, our task is to find every way possible to link our common struggles. We can and must put forward Marx and Engels' slogan “Workers of all countries, unite.... The proletarians

have nothing to lose but their chains.” Today, that is not a utopian slogan but a realistic possibility and indeed a necessity.

1 August 2025

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China's labour movement under fire

30 November 2025, by [Manfred Elfstrom](#)

Manfred Elfstrom is a political scientist and professor at the University of British Columbia, whose research focuses on labour protests in China, the state's authoritarian responses and how struggle from below has shaped government policy. He is the author of *Workers and Change in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness*.

Elfstrom spoke with Serhii Shlyapnikov for LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal to discuss recent labour struggles in China and what they tell us about prospects for change under an authoritarian regime.

How did you decide on the focus of your book, *Workers and Change in China*?

Before I returned to academia, I worked for a non-profit group, China Labor Watch, and the International Labor Rights Forum (now Global Labor Justice). I ran some of their China programs, helping grassroots workers' centres and labour law clinics in Chinese law schools.

The book grew out of an interest in what all this activity accomplished.

Could you tell us about your work in China Labor Watch? In countries such as mine (Russia), NGOs are often seen as foreign agents and treated with suspicion by the state.

I worked with China Labor Watch and the International Labor Rights Forum in the late 2000s and early 2010s. At that time, the Chinese government

was suspicious of foreign and domestic civil society groups active on labour issues. But it did not take as hard a line as today. It was a period of relative openness — one marked by an extraordinary wave of labour activism.

You may recall some of the big strikes back then, such as the 2010 Honda plant strike, which captured the world's attention. Workers were not just asking for unpaid wages or injury compensation. They were asking for pay rises — what I refer to as offensive labour demands.

For that reason, the Chinese government saw value in exchanges with foreign labour experts to help them figure out how to absorb and manage these growing conflicts, as well as set up a legal infrastructure for dealing with industrial disputes.

About 15 years ago, US sociologist Beverly Silver forecasted that China would become a global epicentre of labour unrest. Looking back, do you think that turned out correct?

When Silver wrote that, China was a major centre of global labour unrest. Strikes, protests and riots occurred at an extraordinary level, even taking China's big population into account.

Looking back, it seems there was a peak in the early- to mid-2010s, followed by a gradual decline. I say “seems” because the data is extremely patchy. Those of us studying strikes in China rely on social media accounts and limited state media coverage of labour disputes. Under [Chinese

president] Xi Jinping, both social media and state media coverage of labour conflicts has been sharply curtailed.

The other factor is the COVID-19 pandemic. China featured lockdowns of a sort that we did not experience here in Canada. People were restricted to their homes, and mandatory testing was conducted on a regular basis. This significantly curtailed all kinds of activity.

But with China lifting COVID restrictions, strikes appear to have picked up again to some extent. Right after the change of policy, there were strikes by people directly affected by the pandemic, such as delivery drivers, who became a vital lifeline for people under lockdown in Shanghai, or people manufacturing personal protective equipment.

I do not think the level of activity is the same as in the early 2010s, but it is hard to say much more due to the lack of data.

Could you tell us about some of the more important strikes by Chinese workers in the past decades?

The Honda strike is worth dwelling on. It was dramatic because it involved young workers making ambitious demands for high pay raises. And Honda's just-in-time manufacturing process meant shutting down the auto parts plant had ripple effects all along the supply chain, leading to copycat strikes in other auto plants.

At first, the official trade union did not acquit itself very well, but when the municipal trade union got involved, it became broadly supportive of the bargaining process and did not rush to restore order, which is what trade unions often do in China. The head of the municipal trade union was a reform-minded official. So, a lot of different things came together at once.

The strike also occurred against the backdrop of many other disputes and discussions regarding new legislation for strikes, which never materialised. And it came not long after a wave of new labour laws were pushed through in 2008. These included the Labour Contract Law, the Employment Promotion Law, and the Labour Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law. In short, it occurred under rather exceptional circumstances.

The Honda strikes received a lot of attention, but several other noteworthy strikes occurred afterward. Only a few years later, a major strike broke out at a shoe factory in Dongguan. It is considered one of the largest strikes in modern Chinese history.

Other notable strikes involved truck drivers, as well as a strike by port-based crane operators. Notably, these strikes were coordinated nationally. Typically, strikes in China are contained to a single workplace, and occasionally they spread across workplaces. But they do not usually spread across regions in a coordinated way.

The last one I would mention — it's not really a strike, but a protest movement — was the Jasic electronics factory protests in 2018. Activists had been expelled from the factory in Shenzhen. Students from different universities — mainly from leftist student groups — came to Shenzhen and protested on behalf of the workers.

With the movement spilling beyond normal social boundaries, the government cracked down hard: students were detained, student organisations were shut down, people were shoved into vans on their campuses. Around this time, the

government launched a big campaign against labour NGOs and detained several prominent labour NGO leaders.

Could you tell me about the dataset on Chinese strikes that you maintain?

I started compiling my dataset in 2010, covering the period 2003-12, which spans the full Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration. I gathered information through searches of labour organisations and dissident websites, and a reporting form on my own site. I then cross-checked my data with the strike map of China Labour Bulletin from the year 2010 onward, adding missed incidents.

The dataset was needed because local official media coverage of labour activism is minimal, and usually limited to construction disputes and taxi strikes that are seen as less threatening. Reports from state outlets tend to follow a familiar structure, confirming what is already known and reporting on how the government resolved the issue. Large incidents may appear in local and national media, but these reports focus on problem-solving rather than criticising the government.

[US political scientist] Maria Repnikova has compared Russian and Chinese media, noting that while critical journalists in Russia view themselves as part of the opposition, critical journalists in China act as constructive insiders, focusing on resolving issues rather than exposing failures. The media frames labour conflicts as tricky issues that the government can resolve.

The best resource on strikes for the decade after my dataset ends is China Labor Bulletin and their strike map. I just saw the really sad news that the organisation is shutting down. That represents a significant loss — both in terms of data on labour activism in China and in terms of their being an important voice on Chinese labour issues.

In your book, you compare labour unrest in two deltas, the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta. Why did you choose those

two regions?

I chose them because they are similar in a lot of respects. Both are wealthy, export-oriented areas. Both have a lot of migrant workers employed in factories and construction sites. However, they also differ significantly in terms of labour unrest. They especially differed during the period I studied. Since then, the two regions have somewhat converged.

My argument was that the difference in labour unrest was both quantitative — with more strikes and protests occurring in the Pearl River Delta than in the Yangtze River Delta — and qualitative — in that workers in the Pearl River Delta made more ambitious demands and developed more sophisticated organisations.

This difference in turn led to differences in local governments.

Could you explain these differences in more detail?

There are structural differences between the two regions that account for the differences in labour activism. Guangdong [in the Pearl River Delta region] integrated into the global market earlier. As a result, there was more time for activism to mature. Also, the region generally specialised in lighter, lower value-added industries, whereas the Yangtze River Delta had a more high-tech industrial base.

Another factor was that workers in Guangdong tended to come from further away, whereas in the Yangtze River Delta, they came from closer by or from other places in the province of Jiangsu or Anhui. This contributed to more worker militancy in the Pearl River Delta than the Yangtze River Delta.

But my argument — contested by some — is that the crucial difference was not these structural factors, but rather the actions taken by workers themselves. Local authorities did not have to manage workplaces so differently simply because workers came from nearby or far away, or because factories were more or less high tech; they managed them differently due to the levels of labour

unrest.

Electronic workers seem to be at the centre of strategic tech sectors and exports. However, many are subcontracted. Could you tell us more about these workers and whether they do play a strategic role?

Some electronic workers can be said to be strategically located. But many are doing really basic and repetitive assembly jobs, such as assembling iPhones or computers for foreign multinationals. Whether their location grants them unique leverage, however, is hard to say.

In a certain sense, they do have leverage, though, as many foreign multinationals have structured their supply chains around China and a limited number of key suppliers. For example, much of the iPhone production is centred on Foxconn — a major Taiwanese company that operates huge worksites in China employing about 200,000 workers. It is not easy for Apple to uproot and find a new supplier.

At the same time, these workers are fairly replaceable compared to workers in more high-tech manufacturing. Even some garment workers have developed skills that are more difficult to replace.

Subcontracting is both a widespread phenomenon and a broader structural problem across the Chinese economy. In fact, even state-owned enterprises (SOE) — which were whittled down in the late 1990s and early 2000s — now only offer secure benefits and stable employment to a relatively small group.

Instead, they increasingly rely on subcontractors. They have an older, permanent workforce that enjoys benefits typically associated with SOE. Alongside them are newer, more precarious workers, hired through labour contract companies.

You also see this with construction. This has significantly exacerbated conflict, as large construction firms — both private and state-owned — often manage huge projects. They subcontract different parts, and those

people subcontract work to others who go to the countryside and scout for workers, often from their hometowns.

If someone along the subcontracting chain goes bankrupt or comes up short on money, workers at the bottom of the chain often go unpaid. This is especially severe for construction because workers in that sector traditionally receive only minimal payments throughout the year.

Most of their wages are paid at the end of the year — just before they return home for the Spring Festival, one of the most important holidays in the Chinese calendar. Often, at that time, money will go missing and workers will be left in really difficult positions. The situation may have improved somewhat in recent years, but it is still a problem.

Your book focuses on how ordinary people can impact the state. Could you say a bit about this?

There is an assumption that authoritarian states are less responsive to their citizens than democracies. That assumption holds some truth, and likely applies more strongly to certain authoritarian regimes than others.

In some contexts, however, precisely because there are no pressure release valves such as elections, and because every protest is treated as a serious problem, repertoires of resistance — whether protests, strikes, or riots — can achieve more than in more open societies.

So, for instance, in Canada or the United States, there are often protests over polluting chemical plants or something similar. In China, there are also protests against these plants, and some have led to multi-million dollar projects being cancelled in really short order. Just the fact that lots of residents in a city showed up was seen as enough of a big deal that local authorities had to shut the problem down.

More broadly, my book examines how labour unrest — particularly labour activism — might be reshaping the Chinese state and its capacities. It

arrives at a mixed conclusion. In some respects, I provide evidence that activism is leading the state to be more responsive to workers.

In regions with higher levels of unrest — more strikes, protests and riots — courts tend to rule more often in favour of workers, or deliver split decisions in formally adjudicated employment disputes. There are also signs of hesitant reforms in the official trade union federation. That is all on the positive side of the ledger from workers' perspective.

But the conclusion is mixed because, in those same regions, the state has also significantly increased its repressive capacity. It spends more on security services.

I provide statistics on increased spending on something called the People's Armed Police, which is a paramilitary force that gained elevated status after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 as part of the state's response to domestic unrest. The idea was that it would take on the role of maintaining domestic order in place of the military. The People's Armed Police gets promoted in places where there is more unrest.

Qualitatively, one can also examine how people in power respond to individual disputes. In the Pearl River Delta, strikes and protests have become normalised and the government no longer feels it must get involved in every case — at least not as much as before. However, it comes down hard on organisers in high-profile incidents, and in recent years it has gone after civil and labour societies in the region.

My broader argument is that workers are reshaping governance in China, but they are doing so in two opposing directions at the same time.

What lessons can we learn from the Chinese labour experience, given how difficult it is to build grassroots organisations when strikes are shut down and activists jailed?

Yes, it is hard, especially when you try to build something and it fails. When I

wrote my book, labour NGOs in China were already under pressure. Since then, most of that vibrant world, especially in the southeast, has been eliminated. Leaders of these organisations were either detained or warned off activism. Most left the field entirely, while some shifted to less politically charged work, like helping migrant workers' children.

Labour organising has been shut down, which is a real loss. These groups had begun to move away from legalistic work toward a more movement-oriented approach.

This is not the first time labour and civil society in China has faced repression: similar crackdowns happened in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But the current wave has been especially devastating for independent labour organising.

Could you discuss the current state of Chinese labour organisations, NGOs and leftist groups?

Many labour NGOs in China were aligned with international industrial relations and rule-of-law networks, and sought to create collective bargaining systems similar to those in Europe or North America. Some had a strong leftist commitment, while others focused more on rights protection from a more liberal perspective.

Young people became involved in labour activism, especially around 2018, and participated in Marxist reading groups. This movement, however, was heavily suppressed.

In the 1990s, the New Left emerged, which was distinct from Chinese liberals and critical of market reforms. Some supported the populist program of a party leader in Chongqing, which included migrant workers' housing and a new land policy.

Under Xi, parts of the left embraced his statist approach, including the emphasis on the state sector and "common prosperity". However, others remain skeptical.

To my mind, Xi's "common prosperity" agenda seems largely symbolic and lacking in substantial welfare reforms

or labour law changes. Xi has cracked down on workplace activists, and his policies appear more focused on encouraging corporate donations than real structural change.

How have the new generation of workers created and shaped their own worker cultures and solidarity movements, when compared to earlier generations?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there were arguably two distinct worker cultures in China. One was the culture of SOE workers concentrated in the northeast and interior regions, where heavy industry formed the backbone of the state sector. The other was the culture of migrant workers from the countryside, who moved temporarily to work in light manufacturing along the southeast coast. These two cultures were very different.

SOE workers often used explicitly class-based language inherited from the Mao era. Migrant workers, by contrast, tended to frame their demands in more legalistic and rights-based terms. An influential book, [Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt](#) by Ching Kwan Lee, draws this contrast. Over time, however, these boundaries began to blur.

Both groups started to organise ambitious strikes with similar demands. Labour NGOs made a concerted effort to foster a culture of self-respect and empowerment among migrant workers. Among other initiatives, they encouraged workers to view themselves as "new workers" or "new urbanites" rather than rural migrants.

There are generational differences within these groups of workers, too. For example, several generations of rural migrants have moved to coastal cities for factory work.

Also, many accounts suggest that the older generation focused heavily on sending remittances back to their rural homes, while younger generations are more settled in the cities where they work and feel less connected to rural life. They have created organic subcultures in factory zones, expressing themselves through

things such as bold hairstyles and fashion. They also gather and socialise in new ways within these industrial environments.

One form of worker culture — especially among migrant workers — is poetry. There are some powerful collections of poems written by migrant workers. A decade or more ago, a few of these workers gained broader recognition for their writing. Their poems often portray the harsh realities of life in export boomtowns and the toll on their bodies.

There is also an important gaming and online culture among white-collar workers. We have seen a wave of pushback against extreme workloads in Chinese tech companies, with people organising on platforms such as GitHub and other forums to protest or vent.

Could you share more about how you plan to compare protests in Appalachia in the United States, and north China in your upcoming book?

I am still at the early stages of that research. Appalachia is a major source of US coal, while north China is China's equivalent coal-producing region. Both regions have dramatic histories of popular protest.

In Appalachia, there were huge battles between union organisers, company thugs and local authorities in the early 20th century. The biggest of these, in 1921 at Blair Mountain, involved about 8000 armed miners marching through the forest to liberate an anti-union county in the south.

They were attacked by sheriff's deputies with machine guns and even bombed from airplanes secured by sheriffs and mine owners. It was essentially a small-scale civil war. The scale and violence of the conflict was extraordinary. In more recent decades, there has been activism around mountaintop removal mining.

In north China, large protests also occurred in the early 20th century. Mines in Shanxi province, for example, were operated by foreigners, specifically the British. A significant movement emerged to bring these

mines under Chinese control. In more recent years, north China has not seen much mine-related activism. Instead, activism has been more focused on farmers, agricultural taxes and similar issues.

Both regions have faced difficulties diversifying their economies. My interest lies in comparing the tactics used in these settings and evaluating what has proven effective or ineffective for activists. Natural resource conflicts are distinct because resource companies wield immense local power.

These conflicts can sometimes carry significant political consequences, as seen in past events in Russia and Ukraine, or in Britain and elsewhere. The goal is to highlight some shared patterns. People often regard China as a unique case, but it can be valuable to situate it within a broader context.

Could you recommend some readings for activists about the Chinese labour movement?

There is a recent book that provides a [good summary of the current dynamics in China](#) for a general audience. It is called [China in Global Capitalism: Building International Solidarity Against Imperial Rivalry](#), and was written by Eli Friedman, Kevin Lin, Rosa Liu and Ashley Smith.

Another book is [The Communist Road to Capitalism: How Social Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's \(R\)evolution since 1949](#) by Ralph Ruckus. It explains China's trajectory over the past few decades.

Both books are very accessible and aim to engage a broader audience in discussions about where China stands today and how the left should interpret that.

Ching-Kwan Lee's [Against the Law](#) offers a strong comparison between SOE workers and migrant worker organising. William Hurst's [The Chinese Worker After Socialism](#) explores protests among SOE workers and is also worth reading.

Eli Friedman has other useful books, such as [Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China](#), which applies a Polanyian perspective to how the Chinese state reacts — or fails to react — to labour activism.

Most of these scholars are based in Hong Kong, Britain, the US or Australia, but there are also important scholars within China, especially in the area of industrial relations. Unfortunately, their works are not always translated.

3 July 2025

Source: [Links](#).

For Hong Kong activists: Exile, Prison and Repression Without Borders

30 November 2025, by [Andrea Ferrario](#)

When Claudia Mo first entered prison, in February 2021, she had the impression of having plunged into a Kafka novel. A former journalist and opposition parliamentarian in Hong Kong, arrested along with 46 other democratic activists accused of having organised unofficial primary elections, Mo found herself catapulted into a parallel universe where time flowed according to alien rhythms and every certainty about the external reality seemed to dissolve. As she recounted in a Facebook post after her release in April 2025, her prison experience was "surreal, almost Kafkaesque at the beginning", but did not entail "the two main traumas of detention, loneliness and boredom, thanks to the internal social dynamics". During the four years and two months spent behind bars, Mo read over three hundred books, resumed studying French and found in the prison routine a paradoxical form of protection from the chaos of the outside world. Only when the authorities granted her

permission to see her dying father, for just ten minutes, with handcuffs on her wrists and officers preventing her from touching him, did the harshness of the punishment manifest itself in all its cruelty.

Claudia Mo's story is emblematic of the repressive strategy that Beijing has implemented in Hong Kong after the 2019 uprising. The case of the 47 democrats, which concluded with sentences ranging from four to ten years of imprisonment, represents the largest political trial in the city's recent history. The defendants were accused of having conspired to subvert state power simply for having organised, in July 2020, informal primary elections aimed at selecting the most competitive candidates for the subsequent legislative elections. The objective, according to the prosecution, was to win a majority in the Legislative Council and then block approval of the government budget, forcing the Chief Executive to resign.

The national security judges [1] established that this plan would have created a "constitutional crisis" and compromised the functioning of the government. In reality, the severity of the sentences has another meaning. As a local observer noted, quoted by the Lausan collective, [2] the fact that Benny Tai, probably the most politically moderate among the 47 defendants, received the heaviest sentence demonstrates that Beijing does not tolerate those who expose the fiction of the rule of law. Tai, a law professor and one of the founders of the 2014 Occupy Central movement, [3] embodied the idea that it was possible to obtain reforms through non-violence and respect for legal procedures. His sentence to ten years in prison represents an unequivocal message according to the logic of "kill one to warn a hundred": even the mildest of opponents will be crushed if they dare to question the official narrative.

Among those convicted are prominent figures from the trade union movement and Hong Kong's progressive left. Leung Kwok-hung, better known as "Long Hair", a Marxist militant and one of the city's best-known left-wing activists, received one of the longest sentences among those who were not considered principal organisers of the primaries. Leung has been active in democratic struggles since the 1970s, when Hong Kong was still a British colony, and has always linked the demand for political freedoms to criticism of neoliberalism and imperialism. Other convicted persons are trade union leaders such as Carol Ng and Winnie Yu, who mobilised workers during the protests against the extradition law, or LGBTQ+ rights activists such as Jimmy Sham, who continued his battle even from prison, managing last year to get the courts to recognise same-sex marriages celebrated abroad. The variety of the defendants' political backgrounds reflects the cross-cutting nature of Hong Kong's democratic movement before the repression, and at the same time reveals the authorities' intent to strike any form of organised dissent.

For the youngest among those arrested, the prison experience has represented a dramatic break in their lives. Many were teenagers when they were arrested during the 2019 protests and have spent years crucial for the formation of their own identity in overcrowded cells, far from families and studies. Lin Mingyi, a Taiwanese woman who had married a Hong Konger and had lived in the city for decades, visited political prisoners thousands of times, spending ten million Hong Kong dollars (approximately £1.15 million) of her own savings to provide material assistance and legal advice to detainees and their families. In an interview with the Taiwanese portal TaiSounds, Lin recounted having met the youngest political prisoner, a boy of just fourteen years. "Many of them already know, whilst inside, that the only real freedom will be possible only by leaving the city", explained Lin, who was then arrested in turn in June 2023 accused of having falsified documents on behalf of two detainees and, after five months of imprisonment, was forced to leave

Hong Kong in exchange for freedom.

Leaving prison, for those who have finished serving their sentence, does not mean finding freedom. The majority of those released are subject to supervision orders (liberty under strict surveillance) which can last from six months to two years and which impose stringent constraints. They must reside at addresses approved by the authorities, can only work in authorised sectors, must notify every movement and, since 2024, need prior authorisation to leave Hong Kong. The restrictions tightened after Chung Hon-lam, a student leader released at the end of 2023, obtained permission to travel to Japan during the supervision period and from there moved to the United Kingdom to seek political asylum. Leon, another former detainee who today works as a cook, confessed to *Initium Media* [4] that many of his prison companions, once outside, admitted wanting to return inside. "In prison life was disciplined, you didn't have to face all the pressures of the external world", he explained. Outside, instead, they must rebuild shattered existences, seek work despite a criminal record, re-establish relationships with friends and family members who in the meantime have taken different paths. And above all they must come to terms with a transformed city, where the space for dissent has shrunk until it has almost disappeared and where many of their peers have chosen to emigrate. For those who have been convicted, the only real freedom, in the end, truly seems possible only elsewhere.

Geographies of Exile

The Hong Kong diaspora that formed after 2020 is not a homogeneous community. Over 150,000 people have left the city bound for the United Kingdom thanks to the BN(O) visa, [5] a programme that allows former British subjects and their family members to move to the former colonial "motherland". Other thousands have chosen different destinations such as Canada, Australia

or Taiwan. Despite having travelled thousands of kilometres to escape repression, many of them still find themselves trapped in a condition of existential precariousness. Exile is not only a geographical question, it is an identity fracture that forces one to redefine who one is, to which community one belongs and what future it is still possible to imagine. The individual trajectories of the exiles reflect the different possibilities and different failures of this reconstruction attempt.

Felix arrived in the United Kingdom in 2022 with expectations that were rapidly shattered. Raised in public housing in Hong Kong, without property to sell nor family savings to rely on, Felix found work in a warehouse and then in a soy sauce factory in southern England. The days were gruelling, the manual work heavy for his slight physique, and the loneliness oppressive. One morning in August 2023, whilst at work, he thought of ending it all. A Ghanaian colleague stopped him at the last instant. Subsequently, that colleague began to mock him, suspecting that he was gay, forcing him to watch pornographic videos and simulating sexual acts together with another worker, trapping him between their massive bodies. Felix, who had imagined the United Kingdom as a place of freedom and acceptance, collided with a very different reality. In online groups of Hong Kongers in the United Kingdom, he read homophobic comments and complaints against the excessive presence of rainbow symbols in the city. When a friend criticised him for his financial management, taking for granted that his mother had savings to draw upon, Felix understood that many Hong Kong immigrants in the United Kingdom came from a privileged background, had sold homes in Hong Kong and enjoyed an economic security that he had never known. He felt closer to his African and Southeast Asian colleagues, immigrants like him, poor like him, forced to do double shifts to send money home. He sought refuge in local churches, but even there he encountered hostility and hypocrisy. Only after months of attempts did he find an Anglican community where an Indian couple told him, with simplicity, that some of

their friends were gay and that for them it was fine. Felix cried recalling that moment in an interview with Initium Media. "I've never been accepted like that before. After going round in a vicious circle, I finally found a place that accepts me."

Taiwan offers a different dimension of exile, that of democratic hope and the preservation of memory. Ah Jin, nom de guerre chosen by a radical activist involved in the fabrication of explosives during the 2019 protests, fled to Taiwan in February 2020 after being arrested and released on bail. He spent five and a half years in legal limbo, with tourist visas continuously renewed, until in March 2025 he became the first Hong Kong exile to obtain a Taiwanese identity card. A few weeks later, Ah Jin participated as a voter in the online parliamentary elections organised by the Hong Kong opposition in exile, a symbolic but meaningful initiative. "Taiwan is a free country", he said in an interview with TaiSounds. "How can you understand it? From the traffic." He was joking, taking inspiration from Taiwan's chaotic roads, but the content of his words was serious. In Taiwan he could vote, express political opinions, live a democratic life that Hong Kong has lost. Lin Mingyi, the Taiwanese woman who had dedicated years of her life to visiting Hong Kong political prisoners, returned to Taiwan after deportation and continued her battle. She actively participated in the campaign for the recall of legislators from the Kuomintang and the Taiwan People's Party, [6] fearing that Taiwanese political dynamics could replicate those that suffocated Hong Kong. Together with young Taiwanese and Hong Kong activists, Lin contributed to the creation of the Hong Kong Action Document Library, an archive that collects over ten thousand objects related to social protests in Hong Kong from 1960 to today. Sienna Lau, director of the collection, explained to Radio Free Asia that the objective is to preserve a history that risks being erased. "We must know our past to establish our identity. Preserving this history is also fighting the government's attempt to erase it." Taiwan is not only a refuge, it has become the custodian of Hong Kong memory.

Then there are those who remain blocked, suspended in an even crueller limbo. John, a refugee from East Africa, arrived in Hong Kong in 2012 after escaping a genocide in his native country that took away his parents when he was only seven years old. He spent thirteen years in the city waiting for his asylum request to be approved and for a third country to accept him. In 2024 the United States finally gave the green light. John and his family packed their bags, left their jobs, withdrew their children from school. The plane ticket indicated departure from Hong Kong in the early hours of 27 January 2025, with arrival in Albuquerque at 12:30 in the morning, local time. Thirty minutes after the entry into force of the refugee ban signed by Donald Trump on the day of his inauguration. The International Organization for Migration called John to inform him that the journey was cancelled. He and his wife had already organised a farewell party with the neighbours. When he received the news, some friends thought they were joking. John remained in Hong Kong, forced to sign a new two-year tenancy agreement, to seek work again, to re-enrol his children in school. His wife fell into a deep depression. The children continue to drag suitcases around the house asking when they will leave. "I thought that my refugee story was over", he told Initium Media. "Instead everything changed again." John represents those who remain trapped in the very city from which they had to flee, in a limbo that seems to have no end, where hope is lit and extinguished with the same arbitrariness.

Beijing's Long Arm

The joint operations between Hong Kong police and the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the central government in Beijing, announced on 13 June 2025, marked a turning point in the repression. For the first time, Chinese security agents did not limit themselves to supervising the work of local authorities from a distance, but intervened directly,

requesting assistance from the Hong Kong police to interrogate six people suspected of collusion with foreign forces. The operation involved home searches, seizures of bank documents and electronic devices, withdrawal of the suspects' passports. The official communiqué specified that the Office for Safeguarding National Security had acted on the basis of the regulation issued on 13 May 2025, which requires all government departments and public officials in Hong Kong to provide "all necessary and reasonable assistance, facilitation, support, sustenance and protection" to Chinese security agents. Those who obstruct the Office's work or divulge details of investigations risk up to seven years in prison. The distinction between local and central security apparatus has thus ceased to exist. The joint operation represents the practical death of the "one country, two systems" principle, which theoretically should have guaranteed Hong Kong substantial autonomy until 2047.

The authorities have also developed more subtle intimidation techniques, which do not necessarily pass through formal arrests. According to reports from various sources, including the human rights group Human Rights Watch, Hong Kong police have organised what is called in jargon "tea parties", apparently informal meetings in which officers invite citizens to "take tea" to discuss national security matters. The expression reprises a euphemism used in mainland China to indicate interrogations conducted by the National Security Office. These meetings have a cordial tone on the surface, but the underlying message is clear. Since January 2025, police have interrogated the family members of at least five activists in exile, searching their homes and confiscating money with the accusation of violating national security laws. In the case of Chung Kim-wah, a scholar now resident in the United Kingdom, officers raided the offices of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, the institution with which Chung was associated. In the case of Ted Hui, a former parliamentarian who sought refuge in Australia, police confiscated 800,000 Hong Kong dollars (approximately €92,000) from his family. The normalisation of

surveillance passes through these daily gestures of intimidation that instil fear without always needing to resort to open violence.

The cruellest tactic consists in arresting the family members of those who have fled abroad. On 30 April 2025, police detained the father and brother of Anna Kwok, executive director of the Hong Kong Democracy Council based in Washington, accusing them of having attempted to manage funds and assets belonging to Kwok, considered a fugitive. The father, Kwok Yin-sang, sixty-eight years old, was formally charged on 2 May with having changed the details of his daughter's insurance policy and having attempted to withdraw its residual value. He risks seven years in prison. The brother, thirty-five years old, was released on bail pending further investigations. This is the first case in which a family member of an activist in exile has been prosecuted. Anna Kwok is part of a group of nineteen Hong Kong dissidents on whom an international arrest warrant and a bounty of one million Hong Kong dollars (approximately €115,000) hangs, about three times the amount offered for murders. In July 2025, the authorities issued further arrest warrants against activists abroad, accusing them of having organised an unauthorised referendum and of being part of the so-called "Hong Kong Parliament", a symbolic initiative that promotes the city's self-determination and the drafting of a Hong Kong constitution. The British government strongly condemned the initiative, defining it as "a further example of transnational repression". The Chinese embassy in the United Kingdom rejected the criticisms, stating that it was "gross interference" in China's internal affairs and in Hong Kong's rule of law (sic).

Other activists in exile have suffered similar treatment. Nathan Law, a prominent figure of the democratic movement and a refugee in the United Kingdom since 2021, saw his mother and brother detained and interrogated by Hong Kong police in 2023. After their release, his brother was forced to denounce Nathan publicly on Instagram. The family knows that the authorities can return at any moment.

The family thus becomes a battlefield and an instrument of emotional blackmail. Those who leave know that those who remain can become hostages. This method transforms every affective bond into a potential vulnerability and forces activists abroad to choose between silence and the awareness of endangering their loved ones. The psychological pressure is devastating and often more effective than direct persecution. For those outside, every public statement, every interview, every appearance at an event can translate into consequences for family members remaining in Hong Kong.

The regime has also developed digital techniques to amplify its capacity for intimidation. In August 2024, during the anti-immigration riots that broke out in the United Kingdom after the Southport attack, [7] over one hundred and fifty posts from twenty-nine different accounts appeared on social media, distributed over three days, that sought to direct the attention of far-right groups towards Hong Kong activists in exile. The messages were addressed to figures such as Tommy Robinson, [8] leader of the British far right, and Richard Tice, parliamentarian for the Reform UK party. Some posts on Telegram had been published in the channels of Patriotic Alternative, a white nationalist group. The messages contained addresses of Finn Lau, Nathan Law and other opposition figures, accompanied by incitements such as "We all know what to do now, right? I recommend visiting Nathan Law first". One of the posts showed a screenshot of Apple Maps with the pointer on Law's address. The accounts disseminating these messages posted at times compatible with the Chinese time zone, often between three and four in the morning in the United Kingdom, during the working day in Beijing. Many used grammatically incorrect English, such as "HK refugees keeps coming our country". Computer security experts from Graphika, a social media analysis company based in New York, examined the posts and detected similarities with Spamouflage Dragon, a vast online influence operation that the Microsoft Threat Analysis Center attributes with "high confidence" to the Chinese Ministry of Public

Security. The objective was to make it appear that it was native Britons calling for attacks against Hong Kongers, exploiting local social tensions to fuel violence by proxy.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, national security has become a pervasive "culture" that permeates every aspect of bureaucracy. John Lee, Chief Executive, declared in an interview with Wen Wei Po [9] published on 6 June 2025 that "safeguarding national security must become a culture" and that the government is still in the initial phase of building an adequate institutional infrastructure. Clauses relating to national security have been inserted into licences for restaurants, entertainment venues, cinemas, amusement arcades and even funeral parlours. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department can revoke licences if owners, managers, employees, agents or subcontractors commit "offensive acts" against national security or the public interest. Similar clauses have been introduced in applications for government funds destined for environmental projects, in contracts for the sale of public land and in short-term lease agreements. Schools must prevent improper use of their facilities and prohibit activities involving "political propaganda". Librarians must ensure that collections do not contain material that endangers national security. Film censors can block films that "objectively and reasonably may be perceived as supporting, promoting, glorifying, encouraging or inciting" acts that constitute offences against national security. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council requires that evaluators of public funding commit to safeguarding national security. Even the Audit Commission, charged with verifying the finances of the public administration, must now identify gaps regarding national security in government departments. In June 2024 a new code was introduced for public officials that lists six fundamental values, the first of which is "upholding the constitutional order and national security". Confidential guidelines will be distributed to officials to "change the mentality and incorporate the concept of national security into their brains", as declared by Security Secretary Chris Tang.

Local officials have transformed themselves into zealous enforcers, applying directives with a meticulousness that transforms every bureaucratic act into a potential test of political loyalty. Hong Kong has become a laboratory for control techniques that can be exported elsewhere.

Living Under Perpetual Threat

The psychological dimension of repression is as pervasive as the legal one. Finn Lau, an activist living in the United Kingdom, was attacked by three masked men whilst walking along the Thames in west London in 2020. The last thing he thought before losing consciousness was that he was about to die. He is convinced that the Chinese regime played a role in the attack, classified by police as a hate crime. Since then Lau changes homes frequently and never knows if his current address will be made public like the previous ones. When in August 2024 posts on social media disseminated his addresses seeking to incite the British far right to attack him, he understood that the threat was permanent. "I've become extremely cautious on the street", he told the Guardian. "I keep looking around." Paranoia becomes a form of necessary lucidity. Lau and Nathan Law were among the targets of a surveillance operation thwarted by British police in May 2024. Living thousands of kilometres from Hong Kong offers no real protection. The trauma stratifies and the sequence protests, arrest, prison, release, exile, continued persecution never closes. Fang Yihui, released from prison at the end of 2021 after being arrested during the protests when he was still a secondary school student, began to suffer from recurring nightmares a year after his release. In his dreams he was chased, and sometimes scenes from the protests or prison life resurfaced. Ordinary situations can become triggering events. When his coursemates filmed a scene set in prison and asked Fang to iron costumes, he volunteered because in prison he did precisely that work. Only

afterwards did he realise how alive the memory of prison still was.

The weight of broken relationships is equally devastating. Chan Chi Sum, sentenced to twenty years for conspiracy to incite subversion for his role in a student group, has been released and seeks to recover the two years lost behind bars. An old friend who is about to enter the public administration sent him a message but never arranged a meeting. In the end they stopped being in touch. At school reunions, Chan remains silent whilst former classmates discuss property purchases and family plans. "They have completed their studies and have become the people they wanted to be. But I haven't become who I wanted to be", he told Initium Media. John, the refugee blocked in Hong Kong after the cancellation of the journey to the United States, video-calls his mother remaining in his country of origin only during holidays. Communicating with those who remained behind can put them in danger. Friendships break, intimate relationships are subjected to constant pressure. Felix, the young gay man working in a factory in southern England, finds salvation only in the bubble he shares with his boyfriend, whom he met in an environmental group. Two people profoundly disappointed by the world who support each other. Survivor's guilt accompanies those outside whilst comrades in struggle are still inside. Ocean feels the weight of being free, or relatively free, whilst others serve their sentences. Leon, who worked for two years as a volunteer supporting detainees and their families, fell into depression after absorbing the emotions of hundreds of people. He developed anorexia and insomnia. When his best friend was about to be imprisoned, Leon decided to quit. "One day I was really exhausted and decided that's it, I'm letting go." Even though he stopped, he continues to help when former acquaintances seek him out, unable to detach himself completely.

Yet, interwoven with trauma, there are elements of obstinate resistance. The preservation of memory becomes a form of resistance. Sienna Lau, director of the collection of the Hong Kong Action Document Library that collects objects related to social

protests from 1960 to today, explained that the objective is not only to preserve objects, but to demonstrate how Hong Kongers have integrated the spirit of protest into daily life. "In 2020, probably due to Covid and the political context, when street protests decreased, many people shifted their attention to consumer goods. These are objects of an essentially everyday nature, from greeting cards for Lunar New Year to mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival, or receipts from 'yellow shops' [10] with slogans that encouraged Hong Kongers. The protest elements were integrated into everyday life." Lin Mingyi, after returning to Taiwan, participated in the second Hong Kong human rights exhibition in Taipei, lending letters received from prisoners and conducting oral tours to tell their story. Archives are not only passive memory, they are nourishment for future actions. Su Linqi, Taiwanese president of the Hong Kong Action Document Library, explained to Radio Free Asia that preserving the history of Hong Kong's struggle is crucial also for Taiwanese people, because they face the same threat. "Preserving the history of Hong Kong's struggle is actually very important to remind Taiwanese people of the omnipresent threat of the Chinese communist regime and to unite the Taiwanese community in resistance."

Identity reconstruction passes through different paths. Leon, the former engineer turned cook, has compared his current life to a completely new path, undertaken after the possibility of returning to the previous life was lost forever. "Before I wanted a well-paid life, marriage, children. But it all seemed too caged, as if someone had decided for me and I was living someone else's existence. Now the chef's life is precarious, perhaps the restaurant will close, but at least I'm happy with what I do. I like the person I've become better." Choi Ho-jae studies media production and culture to make documentaries that bear witness to the changing Hong Kong. "I can show others the Hong Kong I see through my eyes." Ah Jin sells flags with the slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" to Hong Kongers throughout the world, from Canada to Europe, joking about being "the world's largest supplier of Hong

Kong independence flags". Adrian founded the BJMF badminton club, a Cantonese acronym for "fight without regrets", open to all nationalities and sexual orientations, with over two hundred members. On the website and on Instagram he put the rainbow flag symbol without hesitation. "This is a very important message, not only to reassure participants, but also to show that we mustn't be afraid to tell others that we exist." Hope is not naïve optimism, it is daily political practice. Ocean, still under surveillance and with a civil lawsuit to face, has found a precarious equilibrium. "Bad times and good times can really coexist. I feel quite comfortable now. The small details of life give me the feeling of being able to decide what to do." Fang Yihui, in his graduation film, had the protagonist who wanders in a dark passage say, "I don't know where precisely the place I'm in is." The trauma is permanent, as Leon admitted. "You'll never free yourself from it for the rest of your life, it's everywhere, it seeps into daily life." Yet one continues to walk, to cook, to play badminton, to make documentaries, to exist. Resistance is not heroic, it is this continuing despite everything.

10 October 2025

Source: Andrea Ferrario [Substack](#).
Translated for [ESSF](#) by Mark Johnson.

Footnotes

The Four Critical Junctures of Taiwan DPP's Transformation from Democratic Reformers to US Client

29 November 2025, by [Fang](#)

Compared to 2016 when Tsai Ing-wen came to power she was carrying her constituency's great hope for social progress and reform, Lai Ching-te's victory at the beginning of 2024 instead showed a lack of such political enthusiasms among the electorate. Instead, the DPP and its supporters

[1] Hong Kong's national security law, imposed by Beijing in June 2020, established a parallel legal system with specially designated judges, no jury trials for serious cases, and provisions allowing suspects to be tried in mainland China under certain circumstances.

[2] Lausan is an online collective of writers, activists and researchers focused on Hong Kong social movements and left politics, publishing in English and Chinese.

[3] The Occupy Central movement (also known as the Umbrella Movement) was a 79-day civil disobedience campaign in 2014 demanding genuine universal suffrage for Hong Kong's Chief Executive elections.

[4] Initium Media is an independent Chinese-language news outlet founded in 2015, known for in-depth investigative journalism on Hong Kong and Greater China issues.

[5] The British National (Overseas) visa scheme, launched in January 2021, allows Hong Kong residents born before 1997 and their families to live, work and eventually settle in the UK. BN(O) status was originally created before the 1997 handover.

[6] The Taiwan People's Party (TPP) is a centrist political party founded in 2019. Along with the Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwan's historically pro-unification party, it has been criticised for positions seen as accommodating to Beijing.

[7] The Southport attack occurred on 29 July 2024, when a knife-wielding assailant killed three children at a dance class in Southport, England, triggering widespread riots fuelled by online misinformation claiming the perpetrator was an asylum seeker.

[8] Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) is a British far-right, anti-Islam activist and founder of the English Defence League, repeatedly convicted of various offences including contempt of court.

[9] Wen Wei Po is a Hong Kong newspaper controlled by the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, serving as a key pro-Beijing mouthpiece in the city.

[10] During the 2019 protests, Hong Kong's 'yellow economic circle' emerged as a form of protest through consumer choices, with 'yellow shops' openly supporting the movement whilst 'blue shops' backed the government and police.

(commonly referred to as 台派, the Taiwanese Camp) have adopted an increasingly right-leaning and conservative stance, reflected in the following examples:

- During the last years of Tsai's administration, after Pelosi's visit to

Taiwan and the PRC's military drills, DPP members began advocating for pro-military policies, with the purpose of "safeguarding peace in the Taiwan Strait". In confronting the issue of militarization, those identified with the Taiwan Camp and its flanks who previously sought progressive reforms

and constitutional change either supported the militarized policies or chose to remain silent. Meanwhile, all anti-war voices were labeled by the Taiwan camp as “surrenderism”, “US-skepticism”, “fifth column”, or “Chinese Communist fellow travelers” (a trend that continues even today). Yet few in the Taiwan camp noticed that Taiwan is merely a pawn in America’s anti-China strategy, a tool for the US to deal with the Chinese regime. [1]

- On Labor Day, because labor movement groups criticized Lai’s appointment of Minister of Labor, the flanks insinuated that the labor movement was whitewashing the KMT proposals on “cutting wages to 80%” and “pension reform.” However, the crux of the issue has always been that as the ruling party, the DPP’s decision to appoint Ho Pei-shan — a hatchet person behind the previous weakening of the Labor Standards Act — as labor minister and its attempt to revise the Labor Standards Act for a third time which only cause grassroots workers to suffer even greater losses in labor rights under DPP rule. [2]

- During the Blue Bird Movement, the DPP and its flanks unthinkingly accused the Blue and White parties for having proposed a bill to expand legislative powers as “selling out Taiwan.” Yet they ignored that in 2012, when the DPP was in opposition, they had likewise put forward a similar bill for legislative reform.

- In a teaser clip of the forthcoming film *Zero Day Attack*—slated for release next year, supported by the Ministry of Culture’s “Tai-Flow Cultural Black Tide” project, and advised by Black Bear Academy founder Shen Bo-yang and pro-US, anti-China businessman Robert Tsao—the anti-war faction is depicted as fence-sitters, gangsters, and thugs, while the clip offers no criticism of American imperialism whatsoever.

The above indicates that after eight years of DPP governance, the party has become increasingly unable to accept oversight and increasingly intolerant of political voices outside the DPP. However, this political stance to some extent continues Tsai Ing-wen’s “Resist China, Defend Taiwan”

approach, yet it is not founded on a Taiwan independence aspiration under national self-determination. Rather, it stems from a right-wing nationalist fervor that parasitizes American imperialism and defends the “Republic of China under DPP rule.” In short, this constitutes the DPP’s fourth “transformation” since its founding—namely, serving as a vanguard of right-wing nationalism in service of America’s anti-China strategy.

How exactly did this development come about? How did the DPP, which started out as a liberal reformist party, transform today into a US vassal? This article will start from the DPP’s history, examining the processes of its first three transformations and where the fourth transformation will take the DPP.

First Transformation: Turning to Electoralism

After the DPP was founded in 1986, the main debate within the party (between the New Tide faction and the Meilidao faction) was whether the DPP should develop mass movements or move toward electoralism. The relatively progressive New Tide faction in the DPP believed that mass movements were a vital foundation for Taiwan’s independence [3], as they could help overthrow KMT rule and achieve a bourgeois democratic system in Taiwan. [4] Because of this line, New Tide established an organizational strategy modeled on Leninist democratic centralism. [5] However, in terms of New Tide’s aims, it was not to advance a socialist revolution, but rather bore the political character of a democratic revolution and national revolution.

However, the DPP’s subsequent development ultimately reconciled this debate over its direction. Firstly, the DPP at its founding was not a mass party of the working class, but a liberal party serving the interests of the petite bourgeoisie and small-to-medium entrepreneurs. [6] Therefore,

from its inception the DPP could never sever itself from capitalism and electoralism. After 1991, then-chairman Hsu Hsin-liang proposed an “all-out electoral line,” which gradually replaced the New Tide faction’s social movement line, turning the DPP into a party that served an electoral machine. [7]

From another perspective, after 1989 Lee Teng-hui exploited the DPP as a tool to attack rival forces within the KMT, thereby promoting KMT restructuring and the process of bourgeois democratization in Taiwan. [8] Later, because Lee prevailed within the KMT and began to collaborate with the DPP to carry out constitutional amendments, the DPP’s political mission of constitutional reform was fulfilled. This process on one hand strengthened the DPP’s shift toward an electoralist political line, and on the other hand pushed the DPP to make the parliamentary arena of official politics its main battleground, rather than mass movements. [9]

Embracing electoralism was the DPP’s first transformation. It can be said that the expansion of political and economic liberties under capitalist development allowed the DPP’s political demands to be realized, and also ensured the DPP could never become a party of the working class. Although quite a few “leftists” attempted to “enter” the DPP in hopes of transforming it from within and pushing it leftward, these attempts not only failed but instead delayed the timetable for Taiwan’s working class to build its own independent power. [10]

More precisely, the DPP was a weapon used by Taiwan’s native political elite to attack the KMT, with the main goal of enabling emerging native Taiwanese elites to obtain real economic and political power. While freedom of speech was indeed one of its appeals, their purpose was still to serve the pursuit of political and economic power.

Second

Transformation: Toward KMT- ization

In the 1993 local elections (for 23 counties/cities mayors), the DPP won only 6 seats compared to the KMT's 15, which was undoubtedly a crushing defeat. It was in this context that the DPP began absorbing second- and third-tier KMT local factions and politicians into the party, in order to strengthen the DPP's power in local elections. [11] However, because of the entry of these local factions, the ties between the DPP and local elites grew ever closer (though still unable to rival the KMT's native factions), and the DPP's political program was further diluted.

This situation continued up to 2000, when Chen Shui-bian unexpectedly won the presidency due to a split in the KMT. Not only did this mark Taiwan's first electoral change of ruling party, it also enabled the DPP to successfully seize control of the state apparatus. However, this victory highlighted an even bigger problem: the DPP not only lacked governing experience, but as a "minority government" it also didn't have enough technocrats to manage the state apparatus. In order to smoothly maintain its hold on power, the DPP had no choice but to learn from the KMT's past model of governance—beginning to rely on conglomerates for funding support [12], finding ways to increase incentives for local faction bosses to join the DPP [13], and recruiting technocrats who had worked for the KMT in the past (though not necessarily KMT members). [14] For those faction bosses and officials who had served under the KMT, joining the DPP represented new opportunities for advancement, so they were happy to accept the DPP's invitation.

Although Chen Shui-bian won twice, allowing the DPP to accumulate governing experience, the pan-Green coalition in Chen's era was a minority government, meaning that throughout Chen's eight-year rule he was always reliant on those faction bosses and officials. However, these DPP "new

subordinates" were not entirely drawn by the DPP's political ideals, but rather by opportunism and calculation for their own political careers. Conversely, the uneven quality of these "new subordinates" again further diluted the DPP's political program.

This was the DPP's second transformation — essentially the DPP's beginning of "KMT-ization." Even though Chen Shui-bian's administration also implemented many reformist policies [15], it also perpetuated the money-power patronage networks that had been established between the old KMT regime and big capital, even culminating in subsequent corruption scandals involving the Chen family.

Third Transformation: Upholding Plutocracy

During the Chen Shui-bian administration (2000-08), the US and China relationship was still in a cooperative phase: the US needed to rely on China's vast and cheap labor; China likewise needed foreign investment to help build its capitalist system. In 2006, Chen Shui-bian abandoned the "Four Noes and One Without" pledge against *de jure* independence of his first term and instead pivoted to consolidating political support by leveraging the Taiwan independence movement. However, this not only hindered capitalist cooperation across the Strait, but also threatened to undermine peace in the Taiwan Strait and the US-China relationship. [16] Therefore, toward the end of Chen's presidency, the US pivoted to favoring the KMT, who pledged to maintain cooperation with China, enabling Ma Ying-jeou's landslide victory in 2008.

During Ma Ying-jeou's eight years in office (2008-16), the growth of Chinese capitalism increasingly threatened US hegemony, forcing the US to re-examine its China policies. In 2012, Barack Obama announced the Pivot to Asia, which on the one hand

signaled that the US shifting its focus to East Asia (primarily China), and on the other a shift towards competitions for US-China relationship. At the same time, the people of Taiwan, afraid of China's rise, turned towards an anti-KMT consensus. A movement started from Taiwan's urban areas in 2014 and culminated in the Sunflower Movement. This change in social mood caused the Ma administration to lose public support; and unlike before, the US was much more ambiguous toward Taiwan's anti-China movements. [17]

Under this dual pressure, the KMT government ultimately lost power, and the DPP captured the political vacuum left by the 2014 anti-KMT protests, returning to power in the 2016 elections. It should be noted that by this time the DPP no longer treated social reform as its top priority, instead leaning more toward protecting the interests of big corporations. Tsai Ing-wen's administration, like Chen Shui-bian's before her, appointed a large number of technocrats [18], and the "Kuomintang-ization" was further reinforced—for example, colluding with big capital, worsening labor laws, freezing liberalization of the Assembly and Parade Act (which was long criticized by DPP themselves for enabling police brutalities at protests), and breaking its political promise to lower the threshold for forming unions. [19]

Under Tsai's administration, the DPP became even further removed from mass movements and no longer seeks radical reforms. Serving the moneyed interests and plutocracy became its new mission. This marked DPP's third transformation. This coincided with the shifting of US-China relationship between the US towards competitions. When Trump launched a trade war, a new US-China Cold War fully erupted; coupled with the rise of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement in 2019, anti-China sentiment became the general consensus among Taiwanese people, giving the DPP—campaigning under the banner of "Resist China, Defend Taiwan"—a landslide victory in 2020, the highest vote count since direct presidential elections began in Taiwan.

Fourth Transformation: Catering to America's Anti-China Strategy

In 2022, as US-China tensions escalated, Pelosi insisted on visiting Taiwan despite warnings, leading the PRC to conduct island-encircling military drills. This event underscored the DPP's fourth transformation process, namely that the DPP has become a US vassal, subservient to America's anti-China strategy.

In fact, ever since the DPP pivoted to electoralism, its previous stance on Taiwan independence has gradually shifted toward the "Taiwanization/Democratization of the Republic of China" (with internal tussles and turbulence along the way). Under Tsai Ing-wen's rule, it moved decisively toward "defending the Republic of China under DPP governance" in place of "establishing an independent Republic of Taiwan". [20] This diluted the pro-independence element, but in the process incorporated the "Chinese independence" camp (those DPP supporters/faction who are in favour of merely maintaining the status quo, ie, the Republic of China as an independent sovereignty, or "de facto independence" - translator's note). In short, to preserve the stability of Taiwanese capitalism, the DPP unified the struggle between the Taiwan independence and Chinese independence factions, and designated the People's Republic of China as the common enemy of both.

In the early opposition (tangwai) period, the New Tide faction still maintained a critical attitude toward the United States. [21] However, after the Hong Kong National Security Law was introduced in 2020 and Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement was suppressed, DPP members began strengthening their political loyalty to the US. Objectively speaking, the "Resist China, Defend Taiwan" line that brewed from 2014 and helped the DPP win in 2019 carried a democratic

political character, but as the DPP unreservedly followed America's strategy, "Resist China, Defend Taiwan" has morphed into a more authoritarian "Pro-US, Anti-China," and the DPP has become increasingly intolerant of voices that do not align with its ruling interests.

In 2012, when the US mad cow disease outbreak reoccurred, the DPP had demanded that the Ma administration pull US beef products off the market in Taiwan. Yet by 2020, after the DPP took power, it not only opened up imports of ractopamine-tainted US pork, but even insisted that allowing US pork in would bring a more stable economic and trade relationship between Taiwan and the US. However, to this day Taiwan has gotten nothing in return but an insignificant 21st Century US-Taiwan Trade Initiative that might "hollowing out Taiwan." In 2021, environmental groups initiated the "Cherish the Algal Reefs" referendum, but the DPP and its flanks responded by smearing the environmentalists with their habitual label of "Chinese Communist fellow travelers."

After Lai Ching-te took office, the Blue and White parties attempted to use their legislative majority to constrain the DPP's oversized executive power, which triggered the Blue Bird Movement. During this movement, the DPP and its flanks once again whipped up a "sense of national doom," painting the legislative power expansion reform as a treasonous bill—selectively forgetting that 12 years ago, when it was in opposition, the DPP itself had proposed reforms against contempt of the legislature and to strengthen legislative investigative powers. [22] Confronted with the political pincer attack from the Blue and White parties, the DPP immediately petitioned for a constitutional interpretation, and Lai Ching-te even used the Blue Bird Movement to threaten the opposition. Compared to the DPP before Chen Shui-bian's presidency, which was still pursuing democratic reforms, the difference is stark.

This change is also reflected in the DPP's Taiwan independence platform. What began as a vision of Taiwan independence tinged with national-

revolutionary and democratic reform ideals has, in the Tsai-Lai era, degenerated into a right-wing nationalism that depends on the United States and seeks the protection of American imperialism. Under this narrative framework, it no longer appeals to a just transitional justice or pursues substantive social equality, but instead relies on America's umbrella to prolong the DPP's rule. Confronted with the PRC's military threats, the DPP has rolled out a series of militarization policies such as extending conscription, expanding US arms sales to Taiwan, and establishing an "All-Society Defense Resilience Committee." Meanwhile, any voices questioning America's intentions (for example, calls for equidistant diplomacy or peace advocacy) have been completely silenced by the DPP and the pro-Taiwan flanks.

Today, no matter what high-sounding language the DPP uses or what justifications it gives to defend its militarization policies, if war breaks out it will inevitably become a proxy war — one that could even turn "Taiwan independence" into a weapon of American imperialism against China.

A Decade of Change in the Sunflower Generation

As the DPP has become increasingly plutocratic and conservative, the left-leaning political fervor of the 2014 Sunflower generation has all but vanished over ten years of capitalist changes. Ten years ago, due to competitive pressure from Chinese capitalism and an industrial vacuum created by Taiwanese businesses moving to China, coupled with pro-capitalist policies under Ma Ying-jeou such as cuts to the inheritance tax, stimulation of the housing market, and the stingy youth internship subsidy plan (22K low starting salary policy), the younger generation widely felt anxious about their future. [23] Thus, under the banners of housing justice, anti-low wages and anti-China, they took to the streets.

Today, members of the Sunflower generation have gone from being restless young students to becoming workers under capitalism or small and mid-sized business owners and property holders. Many have bought homes, married and established their careers, while other student movement leaders have entered establishment party politics. The biggest change facing the Sunflower generation in the workforce is that they went from “without a house” to “having a house,” which has made them beneficiaries and supporters of capitalism’s sky-high housing prices. As for those movement leaders who entered politics, since progressive social advocacy cannot be translated into steady votes, the best way to sustain their political careers is to throw in their lot with the DPP or become pro-Green flanks. In either case, the common features are the fading of left-wing political fervor, a retreat from social movements, and becoming the DPP’s echo chambers and apologists in defense of capitalism.

This explains how the Sunflower generation’s cries for reform have today degenerated into voices echoing the DPP’s alignment with America’s anti-China strategy. Their developmental trajectory is similar to how the DPP went from a reformist, enlightened party to a US vassal—both came about by abandoning mass movements, embracing electoralism, and pursuing only piecemeal reforms within capitalism.

Lessons from the DPP’s Transformations

For Marxists, we can summarize the following key points from the DPP’s four transformations as follow:

The example of the DPP proves that replacing class issues with the Taiwan independence issue and electoralism will only lead to political regression and futile efforts. There are no shortcuts or tricks to achieving social equality; only by organizing workers and building class consciousness and political education among Taiwanese

laborers can we develop a solid and unshakable organizational foundation.

Without a working-class foundation, merely pursuing democratic reforms is not enough. The fundamental reason the DPP gravitated toward electoralism and simultaneously began “KMT-ization” is that by adhering to electoralism, the DPP became more conservative with each instance of “bowing to popular sentiment.” This explains why the left needs a revolutionary socialist program: only in this way will we not be satisfied with the immediate reforms at hand, but instead be able to focus on a more far-reaching revolutionary vision.

From the history of the DPP and the Sunflower Movement, we can see that the petty-bourgeois inclination toward reformism is weak and unreliable. The reason the Sunflower generation abandoned mass movements over ten years to turn toward maintaining capitalism is that on the one hand they were unwilling to challenge capitalism, and on the other hand they failed to anchor their mass movement in the correct class. This allowed the DPP to become the biggest winner of the Sunflower student movement, and prompted the Sunflower generation’s student leaders to devote themselves to the DPP’s and its flanks’ petty-bourgeois political reforms. Now, this petty-bourgeois reformism has also “shifted right” along with the DPP.

The task of achieving social equality and defending democracy cannot rely on bourgeois politicians or petty-bourgeois reforms, and even more so cannot depend on any imperialism to carry it out on our behalf. Confronted with the PRC’s saber-rattling and threats of force, throwing oneself at American imperialism to preserve peace in the Taiwan Strait is not only a fanciful delusion, but will further inflame the conflict. What we need is a workers’ anti-war solidarity based on internationalism—only then can the Taiwanese masses preserve the greatest degree of democracy and peace.

In view of the above, Marxists need to draw on these lessons to ensure Taiwan’s left does not repeat the DPP’s mistakes. Especially given the increasingly acute US-China

confrontation and the heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait, we have no room for error.

Because Taiwan has always lacked a tradition of labor movement, the left in Taiwan often constitutes a tiny minority in society. Carrying out leftist work is undoubtedly beset with difficulties, but this indirectly proves the correctness of a leftist program. In our experience, examples of reformist parties betraying the grassroots are very common — the DPP is merely one more typical example.

For this reason, the people of Taiwan need to rethink why we must challenge capitalism and why we must establish a new socialist system. And we will heed the lessons of history and continue our work until the day the oppression of capitalism is completely swept away.

July 29, 2024

Footnotes

[1] Ibid.

[2] In fact, by the end of 2023, labor groups had already put forward the slogan “[All three parties failed; the ruling party is the most arrogant](#)”, giving a failing grade to the labor rights programs of all three presidential candidates, and highlighting the ruling DPP itself should bear the greatest political responsibility.

[3] “[On the Road to Independence](#)” (1991), ch. 7. “Mass movements have already been proven as the most effective means of opposing the KMT, and so the parliament is only a means...”.

[4] From Lin Cho-shui’s 1989 article “Strengthen Mass Line Movements, Actively Prepare for the Overall Decisive Battle,” which noted: “Since Taiwan simultaneously faces three levels of issues — nation-building, political democratization, and fair social distribution — which are different yet interconnected and cannot be separated... and since

the entire KMT system is used to manipulate native society, the opposition activists cannot avoid promoting mass movements outside the system, allowing the people to free themselves from the old system and old values...”

[5] [“New Tide Faction and the Democratic Movement of 1980s Taiwan”](#) (2016).

[6] Chien Hsi-chieh’s 1993 article [“Only Labor Movements Outside the System Are the Main Force.”](#).

[7] The 2014 article [“Historical Review of the DPP’s ‘Encircle the Center from the Local’ Strategy \(1989-2000\)”](#).

[8] The Lee Teng-hui Phenomenon: Political Leadership and Party Transformation (1996).

[9] In the fully re-elected Legislative Yuan in 1992, the DPP won 51 seats, bringing leaders of various DPP factions into the legislature and thereby strengthening the DPP’s turn toward electoralism. See the 1993 article [“When Will the Honeymoon Between Lee Teng-hui and the DPP End?”](#)

[10] See Lin Hou-jun’s preface to *Marxism on the Labor Movement* (2005).

[11] Same as Note 8.

[12] See the 2010 article [“The DPP Only Learned Half of the lesson of the KMT”](#).

[13] For example, Chen Ming-wen, who joined the DPP in 2001.

[14] See a 2002 BBC report: [“Taiwanese Elites Swear En Masse to Join the DPP.”](#) Among the most representative figures was Tsai Ing-wen, who had served as an official in the Mainland Affairs Council during Lee Teng-hui’s administration and later joined the DPP in 2004.

[15] For example, loosening government controls over the media, and enacting the Act of Gender Equality in Employment and the Indigenous Peoples Employment Rights Protection Act to protect the rights of women and indigenous people.

[16] For example, the United States opposed the referendum on joining the UN proposed by Chen Shui-bian and the DPP in 2008. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Thomas J. Christensen even stated: [“Any course of action that would put at risk Taiwan’s peace and stability is also directly contrary to the interests of the United States and... the interests of the people of Taiwan...”](#).

[17] During the Sunflower Movement, the US State Department stated that it [“supports Taiwan’s vibrant democracy.”](#).

[18] For example, Lin Chuan’s Cabinet included David Lee (Lee Ta-wei), Feng Shih-kuan, Hochen Tan, etc. In 2015, Tsai Ing-wen also said: [“In appointing officials, we look at ability, not party color.”](#)

[19] Consequently, former DPP Secretary-General Lo Wen-jia criticized that Tsai Ing-wen’s government [“had degenerated into just another secular political party.”](#)

[20] In her 2016 inaugural address, Tsai Ing-wen said: [“...I have a responsibility to safeguard the sovereignty and territory of the Republic of China... We will also strive to maintain the existing mechanisms for cross-strait dialogue and communication.”](#)

[21] See Yang Bi-chuan’s 2001 Basic Reader, appendix: [“What Kind of Taiwan Card Is the US Playing?”](#)

[22] See our article, [“Legislative Reform Splits the Ruling Class, The Left Should Not Drift Along..”](#)

[23] See a 2014 special article, [“Resolving the Sunflower Generation’s Economic Anxiety”](#).

Preliminary Theses on the Taiwan Strait Crisis and Taiwanese Self-Determination

26 November 2025, by [Worker Democracy](#)

The Historical Rights of Taiwanese People

The history of Taiwan’s colonization from 1895 to the one-party rule of the Kuomintang (KMT) from 1945 to 1996

has solidified a Taiwanese identity and experience distinct from those of the Chinese on the mainland. This has also empowered the Taiwanese, who have been oppressed for more than a century (by the Japanese and mainland regimes), with the right to decide their own destiny democratically, including their relationship with mainland China.

The Myth of “One China”

Even now, Taiwan’s official state name is still the “Republic of China” (ROC). In effect, there are two ‘Chinese’ governments today, though the government in Beijing—the People’s

Republic of China (PRC)—refuses to recognize this reality. However, many benshengren (those with ancestors who came to Taiwan before Japanese colonization) have disagreements with the ROC name, and instead call for Taiwan's independence. Thus, we believe that the people of Taiwan should also have the right to decide on their own country's name.

As seen from the three joint communiqués between the United States and China on the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, neither side has respected the wishes of the people of Taiwan. Both sides have violated the most basic principles of democracy. China believes that both sides have agreed that "Taiwan's sovereignty belongs to the PRC." However, from the text and the US' subsequent elaborations, it is clear that the US is only "aware that both sides of the Taiwan Strait advocate that Taiwan is a part of China," not "Taiwan belongs to the PRC." The two positions are different. And after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US in 1979, the US acknowledged that the PRC represents "China." Still, it did not fundamentally change its position on who should have sovereignty over Taiwan. So, the US and China have disagreed on who should have sovereignty over Taiwan. However, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the US has also severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan, influencing other countries to sever ties with the ROC and instead establish ties with Beijing. Taiwan's international relations have continued to shrink in the face of China's rapid rise on the global stage. Today, Taiwan has diplomatic relations with only 11 small countries (that are members of the United Nations).

The Historical Development of the People's Republic of China

and the Republic of China

But we must first consider the status of "Taiwan" or "ROC" from the Taiwanese people's point of view, not those of the Chinese, American, or other governments. Such a point of view must also be considered independently, in accordance with democratic principles, and in light of the history of political developments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The PRC was founded in 1949, while the KMT, whose corrupt and authoritarian behavior is well-known, retreated to Taiwan. At that point, global anti-colonial and progressive movements saw the PRC as a symbol of revolutionary advancement. Thus, they largely dismissed Taipei's regime, and sympathized with or supported the PRC's reunification of Taiwan. However, the PRC's treatment of its people has become increasingly reactionary, even before, but especially after 1979. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, one-party dictatorship has ended, and its people now enjoy basic democratic rights, especially the freedom to protest against the government's injustices (which is not the case in mainland China at all). And so, cross-strait politics today is very different from what it was in the past. The KMT finally lost power in 2000 under the pressure of mass movements outside the party. And so, a military reunification of Taiwan under the PRC would only be a reactionary dictatorship conquering a representative democracy (even with its limitations), eliminating the Taiwanese people's basic political rights, especially their right to social protest.

Historically, China under the Mao era appeared to be developing along an anti-capitalist course, in contrast to KMT rule in Taiwan, which evolved into an authoritarian capitalist regime heavily dependent on the West. But anti-capitalism does not always signal a continued path of socialist transformation. The PRC had already degenerated into governance by a privileged clique of bureaucrats, serving only itself and causing the death and suffering of tens of millions of people. By the time the PRC had

completely restored capitalism since Deng Xiaoping's reign, the regimes on both sides of the Taiwan Strait had become homogeneous in their class character, that is, capitalist. One can no longer say that China's class character is more progressive than that of Taiwan. Coupled with the fact that the PRC has become even more totalitarian, there would not be the slightest ounce of progress if it conquered and ruled Taiwan through military invasion. This is not to mention that the PRC has ignored the wishes of the Taiwanese people, committing the cardinal sin of a large nation oppressing a smaller nation.

There is another view in the international community that the crisis in the Taiwan Strait is merely a proxy war in the struggle between the US and China for hegemony. In this consideration, Taiwan only matters in the context of geopolitics, just as an appetizer is only meaningful in relation to the main course of a meal, so Taiwan's own wishes do not matter. This is an imperialistic perspective, not one that people should share, or else we would completely forfeit the legitimate rights of 23 million Taiwanese people.

The PRC's Understanding of the Chinese Nation

The PRC's chauvinist attitude towards Taiwan comes directly from its theory of the "Chinese nation". The PRC has directly inherited the KMT's claim that "the five ethnic groups are one" and does not recognize the right of self-determination of the ethnic minorities. Nor does it recognize the right of national minorities to secede from the "Chinese nation" if they are oppressed after joining it. Its chauvinistic arrogance manifests in its complete omission of the Indigenous residents of Taiwan in its official documents, who are not Han Chinese and were never part of any conception of a Chinese nation. This position thus betrays a founding principle of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that existed until the 1930s, which "recognizes the right of self-determination of China's minorities."

In fact, the Taiwanese Communist Party advocated Taiwanese independence before the KMT destroyed it. Today, the PRC no longer mentions this part of its history. This conception of the Chinese nation is as reactionary as Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that "Russia and Ukraine are one and the same" (a principle that has justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Both must be opposed.

The PRC accuses Taiwanese people of harboring "separatist" sentiments. But the PRC has never ruled Taiwan, and Taiwan's separation from China occurred long ago. It is also worth noting that the ROC preceded the PRC, which emerged 38 years later. Regardless of one's perspective, the separation of Taiwan from China is a historical fact. If the PRC truly regards the Taiwanese as "compatriots," it must first acknowledge this history and reality as a foundation for dialogue with the Taiwanese government, instead of dictating the myth that "Taiwan has belonged to China since ancient times" to the Taiwanese people.

Two Types Of Peace Movement

And so, we oppose the PRC's armed reunification, and advocate cross-strait dialogue between the two governments. The people of Taiwan have elected the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration. Therefore, if the PRC respects public opinion at all, it should set aside its arrogance, prioritize diplomatic negotiations, and abandon the prospect of armed reunification. But, people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait cannot expect the PRC to back down voluntarily, and must prepare accordingly. Mainland Chinese people must mobilize a peace movement in civil society, calling for cross-strait dialogue and pushing against armed reunification. Although space for collective action is limited in the mainland because of totalitarian rule, we must remember that there are many Chinese and Sinophone students and other communities living abroad. The diaspora can play a crucial role in developing such a peace

movement: if these ideas can take root among these communities, it may break the PRC's media blockade and spark ideas among those at home.

There is a kind of peace movement that focuses its attention on calling for Taiwanese people not to provoke the PRC and to reject arms from the US, telling them to sit and wait with the hope that peace will come. However, it pays little attention to how the PRC's revanchism is not legitimate at its core. The whole concept of "the Chinese nation as a whole" is even more wrong, as it violates the basic principle that nationalities have the right to determine their own identity, or the right of national minorities to self-determination. This framework is not genuine peace, but an unprincipled accommodation of the PRC's autocracy and expansionism.

Why Taiwan Has The Right to Self-Defense

An armed reunification of Taiwan by the PRC would be an unjust war—an invasion. And so, though we must support calls for peace in Taiwan now, we also recognize that Taiwan is a weaker nation threatened by a larger neighbor with force. So, if the Taiwanese people choose to prepare for war and decide to fight against it in the event of war, they have every right to do so. For the oppressed nation, there is no contradiction between calling for peace and preparing for resistance in principle. Taiwan has the right to buy arms from other countries, including rival imperialists like the US, to defend itself.

As people outside of Taiwan, we respect the democratic decision of the Taiwanese people, whether they want to prepare for war and/or resist. This is a natural extension of respecting Taiwan's right to self-determination. This does not mean that we, as outsiders, should directly encourage Taiwan to prepare for war and resist: by recognizing that they have the right to do so in principle, we are also acknowledging that they have the freedom not to exercise that right

(e.g., not to prepare for war or resist, and accept the PRC's conditions). We can recognize Taiwan's right to prepare for war, resist, or purchase arms, without necessarily agreeing that it is always prudent for Taiwan to exercise such a right. However, whether Taiwan's decision is prudent or not, we can criticize it while being clear that the Taiwanese people should be empowered to make these decisions.

These basic democratic principles remain unchanged even if the ruling party changes. Whatever party comes to power after an election, as long as the election is truly fair and its behavior after coming to power does not violate the sovereignty and will of the Taiwanese people, the ruling party can be considered as more or less representative of the public opinion, and has the right to exercise the right of preparedness for war and self-determination, if necessary. This is not the same as recognizing that the ruling party's decisions are always correct. "Electoral autocracy" is possible; as Thomas Paine once said, government is at best a "necessary evil." The state, as a specialized institution of coercion and violence, can easily become a tyrannical force overriding the will of the people. It is even more frightening when state power could be combined with multinational consortia. This is why we need to guard against any abuse of power by the government, and emphasize that support for a ruling party's preparedness for war against foreign invasion is not the same as political endorsement of that party. The two aspects should be handled separately.

For Peace in East Asia; Oppose US Militarism

All things should have limits. First, at this stage, it may be appropriate for Taiwan to emphasize peace and unconditional dialogue, while preparing for resistance in a low-profile manner. Second, when it comes to national defense, the government must exercise restraint, avoiding excessive measures and

respecting the people's civil rights. It must also not foment exclusionary nationalism and vilify Chinese people, giving the PRC an excuse to demonize its struggle further. Lastly, the strategy to defend Taiwan should concern politics as much as it does military defense, not just the latter. The more Taiwan strengthens its democracy and protects people's livelihood while preparing for war, the more it bolsters its soft power in the international arena. In China, there are many potential sympathizers of Taiwan within civil society, as well as within the party-state, including even the military. Winning over these elements, and not to mention, exploiting any fissures within the party caused by Xi Jinping's personal dictatorship, would be advantageous for Taiwan's allies at home and abroad.

Regarding international relations, being aware of our limits is even more important. We must oppose a US military landing on Taiwan or setting up a command center on Taiwan, and any efforts to use Taiwan's war preparations as an excuse to justify the development of nuclear weapons (as Chiang Kai-shek once tried). Any preparation for atomic warfare could escalate any war of self-defense into a major war between the US and China. In a war of this scale, the damage to the island of Taiwan would be devastating. And so, Taiwan's war preparations must have certain limits. We must be vigilant for any signs that a war of self-defense is escalating into more disastrous proportions. Otherwise, the impact will extend far beyond the Taiwan Strait and affect the people of East Asia as a whole, who also have the right to consider their own safety. For example, the residents of Okinawa in Japan, who, in addition to the bitter experience of World War II, have been suffering from eight decades of suffering brought about by American military bases. They have been mobilizing for peace in Asia, and also have every right to speak and act in the Taiwan Strait crisis. We also recognize that the US aggression against China builds on and stokes a long legacy of Sinophobia, which places a target on Chinese and other Asian communities. And so, it is all the more important to firmly oppose exclusionary sentiments

toward Chinese people in Taiwan's fight for self-determination.

The US-China Rivalry and Taiwan's Right to Self-Defense

Some "pacifists" oppose Taiwan's right to prepare for war and purchase arms from foreign countries. Their reasons can be broadly categorized into three types. The first is based on the desire to avoid escalating tensions between China and the US over Taiwan, which could lead to an escalation of inter-imperial rivalry, even to the point of war. The second is due to an absolute opposition to US hegemony and military competition. The third argues that only the US is imperialist, not China, thus opposing the US while supporting China. Each of these viewpoints has its own focus and areas of avoidance, but they all reach the same conclusion. We believe that, first and foremost, it is essential to distinguish between stronger and weaker nations. Confusing the two is inherently misleading. As a hegemon, China is asserting power against the weaker nation of Taiwan. China's threat of armed unification is inherently an act of bullying the weak, and must be opposed. One cannot strip Taiwan of its right to self-defense just because of the threat of American intervention. Second, some argue that in the US-China rivalry, the US poses a greater threat than China, so to support Beijing, one cannot also support Taiwan's existence as a political entity. However, China is a nuclear-armed state, the world's largest trading nation, the second-largest economy, and the second-largest military spender. Who can convincingly claim that China's threat to the world's people will always be negligible in the future? China's military may be inferior to the United States', but its overall threat, especially for Taiwan, may not be smaller. There is also a political consideration: while Trump may be authoritarian and bellicose, there is still some room for social movements from below to check his power and defend various institutional and non-

institutional checks and balances in place. In contrast, China has already established authoritarian rule, with little room for dissent, let alone organized resistance. If Xi were to launch a war, there would be no one to check him, and it would be far more difficult for anti-war movements to emerge and sustain themselves in China than in the United States.

The three viewpoints above all oppose Taiwan's right to self-defense to varying degrees due to the possibility of US intervention. However, this simplistic approach is far too crude to capture the complex nuances of geopolitics, especially the relations between the world's leading imperial power and the nearly 200 other nations. As advocates of democracy and peace, we oppose any hegemonic nation engaging in military competition. However, international relations are extraordinarily complex. At certain times and in certain places, the need for self-defense for smaller countries may overlap and intersect with the designs of different imperialists, which is not uncommon. In light of these limits, weaker nations purchasing arms from another imperialist may result in some profit for the latter. However, the survival of a weaker nation facing war from a rival imperialist is one gain that offsets this harm, in a sense. Of course, between the US and China, the US is a stronger imperialist than China. However, between China and Taiwan, China is stronger than Taiwan, and also treats various Southeast Asian countries with arrogance (not dissimilar to the US). The viewpoints above focus solely on the dangers of the US-China rivalry, while ignoring that China's armed unification of Taiwan would also be disastrous for the world. If Beijing successfully unifies Taiwan by force, it will become even more emboldened to bully other small countries. It would further entrench its imperialist tendencies, competing with the US on the international stage, which would exacerbate the dangers of a world war rather than mitigate them. Instead, we should address both issues simultaneously. Regarding the US-China rivalry, we emphasize the need to oppose military competition between the two countries. However, regarding China's dominance over

Taiwan, we continue to support Taiwan's right to self-defense.

During World War I, Lenin remarked that Tsarist Russia was at once subordinate to British and French imperialism on the global stage, just as it was the dominant threat to national minorities in its peripheries, like the Poles. At that time, peace movements challenged European hegemony, just as they combated any expressions of Great Russian chauvinism in Russia's peripheries. Our two-pronged approach to the US-China rivalry and Taiwan's self-defense serves the same purpose. This also means that we support all other local peace movements that oppose the US imperialists' use of Taiwan as an excuse to intensify the military competition. We support grassroots anti-war and peace movements in Okinawa, South Korea, the Philippines, and mainland China. We also call on these anti-war and peace movements in East Asia to actively intervene and speak out against any bullying of small countries by large countries in the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis.

De Facto /De Jure Independence?

Taiwan is too small (only one-sixteenth the size of Ukraine) to initiate a major military war, let alone a long-term and/or nuclear one. However, one political maneuver would surely escalate the possibility of armed conflict: for Taiwan to renounce the ROC title and formally become independent as the Republic of Taiwan (de jure independence). Although we support the right of the Taiwanese

people to self-determination, including the right to independence, it would be unwise to risk serious escalation by pursuing de jure independence, given the disparity in power between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. If the DPP maintains the 'ROC' state name, providing less justification for the PRC to pursue armed reunification, it would be more likely for Taiwan to win international support. Although the DPP's party platform, the "Resolution on Taiwan's Future" (1999), declared that the ROC had "in fact become a sovereign and independent democratic country," this sovereignty does not include mainland China (except for the three small islands of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu). This position makes it clear that the DPP is not pursuing de jure independence of Taiwan, but rather maintaining its de facto independence. It also makes clear that, although the country's name is the ROC, Taiwan's territorial boundaries have already excluded mainland China; therefore, this "China" no longer has territorial disputes with the Beijing government.

Supporting Taiwan's Self-Determination While Opposing Inter-Imperialist Rivalry

Although the US ostensibly defends Taiwan, it does not genuinely respect the Taiwanese people's right to self-determination, which is why it has joined the PRC in suppressing

Taiwan's independence. After all, it protects Taiwan primarily for its own interests, not for the Taiwanese people. The US has also adopted the position of "strategic ambiguity"; in other words, it remains unclear whether it will actually come to Taiwan's aid in the event of a cross-strait war. This deceptive attitude maximizes its own flexibility, while at the same time deterring both sides from making any rash moves—thus killing two birds with one stone. In Trump's second term, the fate of the Taiwan Strait has never been more uncertain and treacherous. The US-China rivalry is increasingly dominating the frontstage of geopolitics, with cross-strait relations being a key flashpoint. This situation is particularly unfavorable to Taiwan. In these conditions, there is a greater responsibility for all the East Asian countries outside Taiwan, the US, and different peace movements to speak out for Taiwan—which must begin on the foundation of recognizing Taiwan's right to self-determination.

Taiwan is caught between the US and China, and even if it pursues the best course of action, it is difficult to ensure that the two nuclear-armed countries will not go to war with each other. Regardless of whether Taiwan exists or not, once inter-imperial rivalry reaches a certain level, the possibility of nuclear war would increase to some extent. This is why peace activists around the world must intensify our opposition to inter-imperial rivalry, advocate for global nuclear disarmament and global arms reduction, starting with the US, China, and Europe, which are the root causes of global rivalry.

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