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Political imperialism, Putin's Russia, and the need for a global left alternative: Interview with Ilya Matveev

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[Editor's note: Ilya Matveev will discuss the topic of "Imperialism(s) today" at the online conference, "Boris Kagarlitsky and the challenges of the left today", on October 8. The Boris Kagarlitsky International Solidarity Campaign is organising the conference as part of its campaign for Kagarlitsky's release from Russian prison, after his jailing for speaking out against the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a conference co-sponsor, LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal encourages all readers to register for the event.]

Ilya Matveev is a Russian socialist and political economist. Currently a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, he is also a member of the Public Sociology Laboratory research group based in Russia. In this extensive interview with Federico Fuentes for LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal, Matveev discusses the two logics of imperialism, how they help us explain the different paths that China and Russia took to become imperialist powers, and the left's need for a shared global vision of progressive change.

Over the past century, the term imperialism has been used to define different situations, and at times been replaced by concepts such as globalisation and hegemony. How valid is the concept of imperialism today and how do you define it?

The main debate regarding imperialism is whether to view it as a theory for understanding global capitalism, or as a policy of aggression or coercion by a powerful country towards a weaker one. Lenin argued that imperialism was a global characteristic of late stage capitalism: the economic logic of imperialism was built into his definition. But that is the problem with Lenin's definition, because you cannot explain every specific act of imperialist aggression through economic motives alone. If you define imperialism as a characteristic of global capitalism, then it might make sense to substitute it with terms such as globalisation, which is sometimes referred to as a kind of "new imperialism". But if we treat imperialism as a systematic policy of aggression towards a weaker country through military, political and/or economic means, then it does not make sense to equate globalisation with imperialism.

Economics can drive imperialism, but the two are not the same thing. There is no eternal law that states imperialism must always coincide with the needs of capital. Moreover, imperialism can be driven by other factors. [British-American geographer] David Harvey, building on [Italian economist] Giovanni Arrighi's work, suggests two logics of imperialism: the economic logic of capital and the geopolitical logic of the state. The interaction between these two logics can be complex: sometimes their needs coincide, sometimes not. Moreover, these logics are not universal. The logic of capital is

more universal, in that capitalist contradictions are more or less the same everywhere. But the same can not be said for political imperialism. There is no universal logic of political imperialism: different countries will have different motives and strategies. This can lead to contradictions between the two logics. That is why we should not collapse them into one.

Are there elements, however, of Lenin's works on imperialism that remain relevant today?

Lenin's most important contribution in this area was to develop the ideas of English liberal author John Hobson to their logical conclusion. Hobson, who wrote a famous book called *Imperialism*, wanted to prove that imperialism was an aberration, and that capitalism and trade would ultimately bring peace to the world. But he had some unorthodox economic views that led him to develop a theory that when you have huge inequality within a country, you end up with excess capital that cannot be reinvested profitably at home and therefore needs to be invested abroad. For Hobson, this was the "economic taproot" of imperialism, because when you reinvested capital abroad, you needed to create conditions for your investments to be profitable. This could, for example, mean coercing other countries to accept your investments. You also needed to protect those investments and trade routes, which required a big navy. So, this economic logic created the need to use force in international affairs. Hobson's ideas made him a renegade within the liberal tradition, because he discovered that trade did not always lead to peace; instead, for Hobson, capitalist contradictions created the demand for a more aggressive foreign policy.

Lenin took Hobson's idea but said he was wrong about being able to reform capitalism. Lenin said capitalism will always produce a demand for external aggression because there will always be a surplus of capital. Uneven and combined development meant there would always be more developed and less developed capitalist countries, and developed capitalist countries would seek to export their capital to less developed countries and apply political pressure to ensure these investments were profitable. Reforming capitalism was therefore impossible. Lenin also envisioned that competing national capitals in developed capitalist countries would lobby their governments to help them gain a greater share of the world market. The problem was that once the whole world was divided among the different national capitalist blocs, the only option left for further expansion was war. Global war was therefore inevitable: it was built into the logic of capitalism.

These two ideas were Lenin's most important contribution. He was the most consistent proponent of these two ideas: that capitalism breeds imperialism, because more developed countries will always need new outlets for their investments; and that capitalism breeds inter-imperialist rivalries, because powerful countries will inevitably clash as they seek to expand their share of the global market. Lenin's big contribution was explaining the economic motives behind imperialism and inter-imperialist rivalry. The problem though, as I mentioned, was that he abstracted this economic logic from any kind of ideological or political considerations.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, world politics was completely dominated by US imperialism. In recent years, however, a shift seems to be taking place. We have seen China's rise, Russia invade Ukraine, and even nations such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, among others, deploy military power beyond their borders. How do you view these current dynamics within global politics?

After World War II, the world approached something similar to Karl Kautsky's idea of ultra-imperialism. Kautsky disagreed with Lenin's concept of inter-imperialist rivalry and suggested the possibility that imperialist countries could create a cartel or alliance in order to jointly exploit the rest of the world. He called this ultra-imperialism. We saw something similar to this under US hegemony in the post-WWII period, and especially from the '80s onward with the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this time, the West collectively ruled over and exploited the rest of the world.

This was possible because the economic logic of imperialism went into decline after World War II as Keynesian policies placed limits on the overaccumulation of capital. Instead, the driving logic of imperialism in this period was political; namely, the US' vision for the world and its fights against Communism. Starting in the '80s, however, overaccumulation re-emerged as a result of neoliberal policies. This was at the peak of what we could say was something similar to ultra-imperialism, during which a united West forced structural adjustment programs and neoliberal policies onto every peripheral country.

What we have now is the disintegration of this US-led ultra-imperialism. The problem was that the US tried to have it both ways. It wanted strong consumption at home, so it borrowed money from China. And it also wanted to export capital abroad. The end result was China's transformation into an economic powerhouse, which posed a threat to US economic dominance. It is this economic conflict that ultimately drives the political conflict between the two today. In my opinion, China's leaders do not actively want to confront the US. But their economic ambitions, driven by the objective contradictions of capital accumulation in China, have forced them to become more assertive. I also do not think that the US actively wants a confrontation with China. But, here again, the economic logic of imperialism is very powerful and difficult to counteract. That is what drives the US-Chinese conflict. We are left with not so much a multipolar world as a reemerging bipolar world. The confrontation between China and the US, while still manageable for now, is only growing. All this creates a very combustible situation, one that is no longer similar to ultra-imperialism, but more like the period before World War I.

But some, basing themselves on Lenin's definition, would question the idea that China is imperialist.

If we look at the world today, what do we see? We see the rise of China as an alternative centre of capital accumulation within the global capitalist system that exports capital through huge global projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The motivation of these projects is economic: China has a capital surplus and industrial overcapacity, so it needs new outlets for reinvesting capital and exporting goods. To achieve this, China has begun scrambling around the world for new markets. This has started a clash with the US, the world hegemon, which also requires outlets for its goods and investments. This means the cooperative relationship which existed while the US used China as a production platform is now slowly becoming antagonistic. Chinese capital, backed by the Chinese state, is now so powerful that US capital does not want to cooperate with it anymore. Instead, it fears China's rise and expects Chinese capital to become a powerful competitor. That is why US capital has begun enlisting the help of the US state to counter this threat.

We are left with a classic inter-imperialist rivalry, as described by Lenin. You have two powerful centres of capitalism clashing over outlets for their investment and goods. This, in turn, is leading to the creation of political blocs around these centres of capitalist accumulation: the US has the West behind it, China has Russia. In this sense, the economic logic of imperialism is still relevant for understanding today's world.

How then does Russia fit into this scenario? Can it also be defined as imperialist?

In Russia's case, there is a different dynamic at play. Russian capital was never powerful enough to challenge the West; it was always a junior partner to Western capital, which preferred to cooperate with Russian capital in order to better exploit Russian natural resources and profit from Russia's role as a sub-imperialist power in the post-Soviet world. Western capital used Russia to extract surplus value from post-Soviet countries. To give one example: [the majority Russian state-owned gas company] Gazprom had a lot of international investors, including the huge trillion-dollar US asset management company BlackRock. When Gazprom expanded into and profited from Ukraine,

Moldova, Belarus, etc, Blackrock also profited. Western capital was OK with Russia being a regional power as long as it provided Western capital with a window for making profits in the region. Economically speaking, there was no real contradiction: Russian and Western capital cooperated and both profited from this cooperation.

But starting in 2014, the political logic of Russian imperialism began to decouple from the economic logic. Before then, Russian imperialism was based on a sub-imperialist arrangement: it had an aggressive policy towards countries in the post-Soviet region, but the West profited from its actions and therefore had a direct stake in Russian imperialism. But in 2014, Putin broke the script by annexing Crimea. At that point Russia stopped being a sub-imperialist power and chose the path of confrontation with the West. It broke the rules that the West had set for the Russian government and Russian capital. Yet there was no real economic logic to this move, as it only made life more difficult for Russian capitalists. There was no economic logic to annexing Crimea. While Crimea has some natural resource deposits, to exploit them Russia would need to invest a lot of money. Moreover, Crimea is today a net recipient of Russian energy and federal government funding. Therefore, the explanation for its annexation cannot be found in economic motives; the explanation lies in the realm of Russian ruling class' ideology.

So, the cases of China and Russia are different. With China, you have a more classic imperialism, as described by Lenin. With Russia, you have a different kind of imperialism — a political imperialism that is decoupled, to some extent, from economic interests.

Are you suggesting that, unlike the imperialist powers that arose in Lenin's time, Russian imperialism has no economic foundation and can solely be explained by political-ideological factors?

I am not saying that Russian imperialism is entirely different to other imperialisms or that it has no economic basis at all. Starting in 1999, Russia began to recover from the crisis of the '90s: up until about 2008, it experienced a period of strong economic growth with an annual growth rate of about 7%. During this period, Russian companies became powerful global corporations. While Russian capital was not as powerful as Western capital, it became a serious player on the global market. At the same time, there was an overaccumulation of capital inside Russia as a result of high energy and commodities prices.

These emerging Russian companies needed to reinvest their surplus capital somewhere — and they opted to reinvest in post-Soviet countries. Their aim was to reconstruct something similar to the supply chains and economic ties that existed during the Soviet-era. The difference, however, was this time Russian capital would be in control. During the Soviet Union, you had an integrated Soviet economy; now we were dealing with a Russian economy dominating the other economies of the region. This then created pressure on the Russian government to be more assertive in the post-Soviet region. So, in this sense, the classic Leninist economic logic of imperialism is relevant to the Russian case, particularly during the 2000s when Putin first comes to power.

But it is important to re-emphasise that when Russia was staking its claim over the post-Soviet region during this first period, it did so in a cooperative rather than confrontation manner with the US and the West. This was not just limited to economic cooperation between Western and Russian capital; there was also geopolitical cooperation between the Russian and Western states. For example, Russia cooperated with NATO in its war on Afghanistan: Russia was NATO's biggest supplier of oil and resources, and provided the NATO coalition with logistical land and airspace routes. In 2011, Russia sold transport helicopters to the US for the government it had installed in Afghanistan in a deal worth more than US\$1 billion. Clearly, despite any disagreements or tensions that existed, the West viewed Russia as a junior partner, at least until 2014.

Ultimately, there was nothing inevitable about Russia becoming an enemy of the West if we limited ourselves strictly to economic logic. Russia could have remained a sub-imperialist power that jointly profited from the post-Soviet space with Western capital. It could have been like Turkey is today, which appears to act independently but is careful to not spoil relations with the West. Or like Brazil, which has had leaders such as Lula [da Silva] who may have very militant rhetoric and disagree with the US on many points, but maintain relationships with the US that are far from extremely confrontational. Russia was comparable to these countries, in that they all benefited economically from being a junior partner of the West, even if certain tensions or contradictions existed.

So, what led to this change in Russia's positioning towards the West?

To understand this change, we have to look at the political logic at play. Putin feared that the West was plotting regime change against him. Putin was also clearly incapable of comprehending popular movements and social revolutions. For Putin, popular movement was a contradiction in terms, because people could never do anything by themselves; any such movements were always being controlled and manipulated from the outside. So, when the Arab Spring [of 2010-11] occurred, Putin saw it as nothing more than the West seeking to destabilise Middle Eastern countries.

Then came the [2014] Maidan Revolution in Ukraine. Putin refused to accept that this could be a real popular movement driven by people's genuine frustration with the government and repression. Instead, he saw Maidan as the US using Ukraine as a pawn in its chess game with Russia. Maidan transformed Putin's understanding of everything. Because if Maidan was a move by the West against Russia, then according to Putin's logic, Russia had to respond by violently crushing this move and making one of its own. Ultimately, Putin's fear of regime change coloured every calculation he made. It led him to conflate a political threat to his regime with a Western security threat to Russia. Generally speaking, NATO was not threatening Russia in any conventional military sense. But for Putin, NATO was behind Maidan, which he viewed as a plot against his rule.

The result was that Russia became a much more aggressive imperialist country after 2014: annexing Crimea, arming separatists in the Donbas, and occupying parts of eastern Ukraine, are all ultimately explained by Putin's ideological fear that the West was plotting regime change. In reality, the West was perfectly fine with Putin as a capitalist ruler that facilitated Western companies' access to Russian natural resources and the post-Soviet region. Putin was also fine with this, until he feared the West was plotting against him. This ultimately explains why Russia embarked on its confrontation with the West.

And once Russia started down this path, it was difficult to turn back as the confrontation took on a logic of its own. For example, after Russia annexed Crimea, Ukrainians started to hate Putin and turned to the West for help. Yet that is exactly what Putin wanted to prevent. So what did he do? He became even more aggressive towards Ukraine and ultimately initiated a full-scale invasion, all in the name of preventing a pro-Western Ukraine. But Ukraine's hatred of Russia was precisely the product of Russia's own actions. Putin could not understand this, however; for him, this was all just a manifestation of the West plotting against his rule. Paradoxically, while Putin's convictions were not grounded in reality, the chain of events he unleashed only strengthened his convictions, eventually leading him down the path of this disastrous war. That is why this war was not the result of economic motives; it was driven by ideology.

What influence do you think China's rise might have had in Putin's calculations and in Russia's shift from a sub-imperialist to imperialist power? It seems possible that China's presence as an alternative power that Russia could turn to once in confrontation with the West might have influenced the decisions Putin made from 2014...

That is an interesting question. I agree that Putin had a better sense of these global changes that were afoot compared to Russian economic managers and the government, who viewed this kind of extreme confrontation with the West as unimaginable. Just look at 2022: it was evident at the time that even the most hawkish sectors of the government were not expecting the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin, on the other hand, was completely convinced that Ukrainians were all just waiting for Russia to liberate them from Western colonialism and the supposedly small minority of Nazi Bandera types ruling the country. But while holding this fantastical view of Ukraine, Putin was in some ways more prescient than others when it came to the kind of tectonic shifts that were occurring in global affairs and Russia's place in the world. Putin could sense the possibilities posed by China and semi-peripheral countries such as Turkey, Brazil, and India becoming more autonomous from the US.

It is worth considering that in 2000, the G7 countries controlled 65% of global GDP, but that by 2021-22 this figure was more like 40-45%. The BRICS bloc of countries represented a slightly bigger share of global GDP when measured in purchasing power parity terms. This represented a huge change in economic and political power. Putin perceived this shift and, as you said, saw the opportunity. He understood that Russia breaking from the West would be very painful, but that it could probably survive in an alliance with China and by trading with semi-peripheral countries that had become powerful in their own right, economically and politically. And he was right about this: while his views on Western motives and Ukraine were wildly inaccurate and biased, his vision of what was happening internationally was quite accurate. This combination of sound and unsound thinking is what ultimately drove the invasion and everything that has happened since.

Some leftists, relying on Lenin's definition of imperialism, would argue that the lack of economic motives and Russia's much weaker economic power as compared to the West means Russia's war on Ukraine cannot be imperialist. Some even go as far as to impute some kind of anti-imperialist dynamic to Russia's war. Why, in your opinion, is it important to understand Russia's war as an act of imperialist aggression?

This is the problem with economistic definitions of imperialism: when a country does not fit a certain economic profile or you cannot immediately explain a country's actions on the basis of some kind of economic logic, then the default position is that the country cannot be imperialist or aggressive, and its actions must therefore be defensive. But a country can be aggressive without its actions being driven by specific economic motives.

If we understand imperialism as a policy of systematic aggression towards a weaker neighbour, then we can see why imperialism defines exactly what Russia has been doing to Ukraine since the '90s. There were already flashpoints of aggression back then when Russia manipulated gas supplies to Ukraine in order to influence government policies. Then in 2004, Russia tried pressuring Ukraine into electing a pro-Russian presidential candidate, sending spin doctors and covert operatives from Moscow to Kyiv to help defeat [Viktor] Yushchenko. When this failed, Russia sought to coerce Ukraine by halting its supply of natural gas, first in 2006 and again in 2009. Russia also acquired economic assets in Ukraine in order to create an economic platform to use as a political foothold in the country. After this you had the annexation of Crimea, Russia's participation in the war in the east and, finally, the full-scale invasion in 2022.

The whole story of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the post-Soviet period is one of Russian imperialism towards Ukraine. How else can you describe this if not imperialism? Moreover, how can this be defined as defensive? Russia's imperialist actions began well before there was any talk of Ukraine joining NATO: for example, when Russia was interfering in Ukraine's 2004 elections, Ukraine was in no way connected to NATO. And in what way can Ukraine be said to have attacked Russia? How is that even possible? With what army? Ukraine's army was practically non-existent

before 2014. Ukraine only started strengthening its army as a response to Russian imperialism. It is self-evident that Russia is the aggressor in this relationship. Its aggression has escalated gradually, but Russia has always been the aggressor. By sticking to a solely economic understanding of imperialism, we miss Russian imperialism as a phenomenon.

In light of everything we have discussed, do you see any possibilities for building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles and struggles in imperialist countries, bearing in mind that different struggles will confront different powers and may therefore seek support from rival imperialist blocs? What should anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist internationalism look like in the 21st century?

There are, of course, practical aspects to internationalism, such as helping political prisoners. International solidarity campaigns can achieve a lot and have achieved a lot, for example for [jailed Russian anti-war Marxist] [Boris Kagarlitsky](#). Unfortunately, there are a lot of left-wing prisoners in Russia right now. So, in practical terms, this is something the socialist movement can do: have each other's backs by helping political prisoners in Russia.

But in terms of thinking about this issue more generally, we need to first understand the nature of the current inter-imperialist rivalry compared with the Cold War. Though the Soviet Union was problematic in many respects, there was an ideological component to its foreign policy: it had a vision for another world that represented some kind of alternative. The Soviet Union had an ideological project, even if it was distorted by Stalinism and hollowed out by the cynicism of the elites. This ideological vision influenced the Soviet Union's attitude towards the Third World, even if there was also a cynical element to its approach to post-colonial movements. But Russia is not the Soviet Union. If we look at Russia today, we see there is no vision of an alternative.

The only thing Russia offers is confrontation with the West. Russia says: "You need to fight against the West." But fight for what exactly? What is Russia's vision of an alternative political, economic model? Russia is an ultra-capitalist country ruled by oligarchs, with huge inequality between people and regions, and a very weak welfare state. The war with Ukraine may have forced these oligarchs to reorient their business interests towards markets in Asia and move from their London estate to a huge apartment in Dubai. But what difference does that make for an ordinary Russian worker? There is nothing progressive about Russia. The same is true for China: it has no ideological vision beyond capitalism with a large state presence; it offers no alternative vision of progressive change.

That means progressive movements around the world need to fight for an alternative. They need an alternative vision to guide this global internationalist workers and socialist movement. It also means no compromise with dictatorships or predatory capitalist classes, whether in China, Russia, or the US. Ultimately, this boils down to a very classic vision of imperialism, in which the main enemy is at home. The main enemy of Russian socialists is Russian imperialism; it is not the US or Ukraine. And the main enemy of US socialists is US imperialism. That is the basis for true internationalism: unity against our own imperialist governments and for a shared vision for progressive change in the US, in Russia and in China. This may sound abstract, but it is just sound logic. That is the basis on which we can build bridges between our struggles.

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