

Eastern Europe: The ‘two logics’ of imperialism

Tuesday 8 October 2024, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [MATVEEV Ilya](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2024).

Russian socialist and political economist Ilya Matveev sat down with Green Left’s Federico Fuentes to discuss imperialism’s “two logics” and how they help us better understand the world today.

Matveev is speaking on the panel “Imperialism(s) today” at the October 8 online conference, Boris Kagarlitsky and the challenges of the left today, of which Green Left is a co-sponsor.

How valid is Vladimir Lenin’s concept of imperialism today?

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.

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.

What then was Lenin’s main contribution to understanding imperialism?

Lenin made two important contributions. First, that capitalism breeds imperialism, because more developed countries will always need new outlets for their investments.

Second, 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, as I mentioned, was that he abstracted this economic logic from any kind of ideological or political considerations.

In terms of imperialism, how do you view 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 United States 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. 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 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 does Russia fit into this scenario?

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. Yet there was no real economic

logic to this move, as it only made life more difficult for Russian capitalists.

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.

[Abridged from a much longer interview at links.org.au.]

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