

The East Is Not Red

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When one surveys the history of American interventionism in other countries—from Brazil to Guatemala, from Cuba to Chile, from Mossadegh’s Iran to Grenada and Nicaragua—and when we contemplate the many atrocities committed in the Middle East in the name of avenging 9/11 and stopping terrorism, it is tempting to search for counterbalances to American imperialism. And make no mistake: despite US liberals’ and neoconservatives’ democratic pretensions, American imperialism is an undeniable fact. Whether it manifests in the network of hundreds of military bases strung across the globe, the Pentagon’s gargantuan and ever-growing annual budget, the espionage programs recently brought under scrutiny by Reuters’ revelations of CIA technological incompetence, or the largely terminated, spectacularly failed attempts to “nation-build” in Iraq and Afghanistan, American imperialism is a factor in both foreign and domestic policy, starving domestic social programs, polluting the atmosphere and earth, and putting the US on a permanent war footing, a condition which exacts a steep toll in dead soldiers and injured veterans each year even as it enriches war profiteers and defense contractors immensely.

Seeking someone to root for in the realm of foreign policy, correctly regarding the present-day US government as irredeemably imperialist, and often rightfully concerned by the prospect of a great power conflict between the US and China or Russia, leftists of a particular stripe, epitomized by the Qiao Collective or *the Grayzone*, are attracted to and make apologies for China and Russia. Their explicit justification for regarding China and Russia as anti-imperialist powers draws much of its motivation from the 20th century history of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Such an easy equation of present and past is strange. It’s abundantly apparent that the US today is far removed from the America of Harry Truman. Likewise, it ought to be clear that contemporary Russia isn’t the USSR of 1917, and present-day China isn’t the revolutionary China of 1949.

One factor which may obscure this truth for some is the way that Vladimir Putin’s regime and the Chinese Communist Party continue to exploit rhetoric, symbols, and paraphernalia which hearken back to the zenith of Chinese and Russian revolutionary spirit. As I witnessed when studying Mandarin in Beijing in 2014, Xi and the CCP use posters, slogans, textbooks, and songs which are

reminiscent of Mao-era iconography and propaganda and the music of the Cultural Revolution, while Russian troops have been seen flying Soviet flags in Ukraine, and Putin pays tribute to the Soviet victory in World War II as motivation for the soldiers in Ukraine and as part of his efforts to rewrite the past. These cynical manipulations of cultural and political symbolism are a free riding on the past, efforts to cash in on the legacy of regimes which enjoy a certain cachet and residual fondness among some contemporary leftists despite their highly problematic, authoritarian histories.

The East, contra a famous Maoist anthem, was never red. Even when China and Russia were officially “leftist” and anti-capitalist decades ago, they were extremely repressive, hierarchical countries governed by small cabals of powerful elites, and millions of dissidents were killed or sent to re-education and labor camps. Neither country possessed a publicly accountable, democratically controlled economy. Workers did not control the means of production or distribution. Many industries may have been nationalized, but those industries weren’t run in the public interest, nor were they responsive to the people’s wishes. The USSR and the Mao-era PRC may not have been capitalist *per se*, but they certainly weren’t socialist.

If Russia and China weren’t socialist even when they were officially committed to socialist ideals, then they unquestionably aren’t socialist today, at a time when their ideological commitments are but distant memories. Russia is a thoroughgoing oligarchy marred by extreme inequality and rampant cronyism, corruption, and human rights abuses. Russia has imperialist ambitions in eastern Europe, as evidenced in Ukraine today, Crimea in 2014, Georgia and South Ossetia in 2008, Chechnya in the 1990s, and possibly in Belarus. Much the same can be said of China, particularly vis-à-vis its despicable genocide of the Uighurs; its imperial ambitions in the Pacific and East Asia, particularly in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea; and its neocolonialist, extractivist resource grabs in much of Latin America and Africa under the aegis of its Belt and Road Initiative. In both Russia and China, repression of left-wing activists and trade unionists is commonplace. The Russian left, most notably the Communist Party, is the subject of increasingly brazen suppression efforts by the Putin regime, while union organizing in China is highly dangerous, and left-wing dissent and criticism of the CCP from the left have been effectively verboten since the Tian’anmen Square protests, which featured socialist activists and critique prominently.

Both China and Russia are authoritarian, capitalist, imperialist countries, not beacons of internationalist solidarity. Russia’s attack on Ukraine should be resisted and deplored. Ukraine should be defended. China’s massacre of the Uighurs, assault on democracy in Hong Kong, and threats towards Taiwan should be condemned unequivocally. To say so isn’t to exculpate the United States for its own misdeeds at home or abroad, nor is it to surrender all hope of preserving a leftist critique of American militarism, nor is it to automatically condone the Ukrainian government’s support for neofascist groups like the Azov Battalion. It is simply to speak the truth about two execrable governments and their behavior on the global stage.

Ultimately, the moral calculus is straightforward. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. It is possible to walk and chew gum simultaneously. As leftists, we can criticize the US, Russia, and China, all at the same time. Within the US, we’ve witnessed a great deal of groundless Russophobia and Sinophobia, a good deal of it stoked by US imperialists. But this doesn’t absolve the Russian and Chinese regimes of their wrongdoing or mean that they deserve our support. And while it might be disorienting to not have a country to champion, such is the imperfect world we live in, and such is the lot of a leftist anyhow. Our allegiance shouldn’t be to any state in particular—it is to the good of the international working class and the planet as a whole, a “progressive international.” Losing sight of this fundamental truth will only postpone the day when the world in its entirety—East and West alike—is free.

