

The Left and Ukraine: Anti-Imperialism or Alter-Imperialism?

September 20, 2023



Note: Recently, several sites have published translations (<https://links.org.au/war-ukraine-four-reductions-we-must-avoid>) of some of my articles (<https://www.momentocritico.org/post/la-guerra-en-ucrania-cuatro-reducciones-que-debemos-evitar>) on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I thank them for this. Yet, I feel it is important to update some of these interventions, some of which were written more than a year ago.

Seeking to navigate in an increasingly unstable and complex international situation, the left should keep three fundamental principles in mind:

1. Consistent anti-imperialism
2. Recognition of the right of peoples to self-determination
3. Support of the struggles of the exploited and the oppressed in all states and nations

Surely, the first point includes the struggle against US and NATO imperialism. **We reject the notion of NATO or its member states as a democratic force.** Some NATO members (Turkey) are far from being democratic governments, even by the least demanding criteria. Some NATO allies are downright undemocratic (Saudi Arabia). On more than one occasion NATO members have supported the overthrow of democratically elected governments and protected those who overthrew them. Simply put: **NATO is an arm of Western imperialism and of US imperialism** within the Western imperialist bloc (tensions exist and have existed within that bloc).

The idea that NATO would dissolve after the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was based on the appreciation that its *raison d'être* was the Cold War against the Soviet Union and its allies. But that was *part* of its objective: **the broader objective is the defense of Western imperialist (and capitalist) rule on a global level**, against any threat. In recent decades this has included the imposition of the neoliberal order across the planet. This is why the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, far from leading to the dissolution of NATO, was followed by its eastward expansion and its redefinition as a “security” pact, enabled to act beyond the borders of its members states. And the frictions caused by this expansion led to the aggravation of tensions which is undoubtedly *one* of the causes of the present conflict between NATO and the Russian Federation. Those who denounce the role of NATO expansion in the preparation of the conflict are right. That is undoubtedly *an* aspect of the war that we cannot lose sight of.

How should the left respond to NATO expansionism and Western imperialist policy? The general line of this response is well known. It includes building a defense of the living standards and immediate interests of the majority; linking that defense to an anti-military, anti-interventionist policy, while struggling to give that movement an increasingly clear anti-capitalist orientation.

Nevertheless, while we fight US and NATO imperialism, we must not reduce imperialism to its Western variant. The transformations in Russia and China during the last decades have created two great capitalist powers interested in consolidating their own zones of influence and political, economic, and military control and the projection of their interests beyond their borders. The fact that these imperialist projects are weaker than Western imperialism does not change their content or their nature. We are, as Lenin described in his classic study, faced with a world of growing inter-imperialist conflicts. NATO's eastward expansion clashes with the Russian Federation's attempt to create *its own* zone of influence in territories of the former Soviet Union. The preponderance of the United States and its allies in Asia and the Pacific clashes with China's objective of carving out *its* sphere of influence in that vast region.

Those who argue that Putin or China are reacting to Western imperialism are right: Western imperialism is a dominant and aggressive force. But it must be underlined that the Russian and Chinese governments respond, *not* as anti-imperialist forces, but rather with their own plans for control and dominance. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian federation is part of that imperialist policy and, as such, an evident violation of the right of nations to self-determination. Affirming that right, we must recognize Ukrainian resistance as a just war against imperialist aggression. We reject NATO expansionism, but rejection of NATO expansionism does not imply support for Russian expansionism, if we are to abide by the first two principles mentioned above. We support the movements in Russia that are campaigning against Putin's war on Ukraine.

Some on the left insist that Putin's arguments regarding NATO's expansion and US imperialism are true. The West, Putin has argued, has no moral right to speak about democracy. Indeed, there are enough crimes of US and NATO imperialism around for anybody, including Putin, to point out and denounce. This is why we resolutely oppose Western imperialism. But **Western imperialism's crimes are no reason to support Russian imperialism.** What moral standing does the Russian capitalist oligarchy have to speak about democracy? Neither Western imperialism nor Putin have any standing in this regard.

Working class and oppressed peoples must fight NATO expansionism through organization and mobilization against militarism and imperialism, linked to the fight against neoliberalism, austerity, and the many-sided employers' offensive (against pensions, wages, labor rights, social provisions) and in defense of democratic rights (women's, reproductive, LGBTQ). An anti-imperialist government in Russia (or elsewhere) would link-up with these movements. It would, along with them, denounce the massive waste of resources in military projects, while itself adopting and implementing a working-class and democratic agenda. But this is not Putin's agenda or program. As the representative of a capitalist oligarchy this is not how he responds to NATO expansionism. Rather, he enacts his own imperialist agenda, a mirror image of his imperialist rivals. As anti-imperialists we reject *both* NATO imperialism and Putin's imperialist reaction to it, as well as the anti-working class and anti-democratic policies that go with it.

It should be stressed that, since all imperialisms are aggressive and predatory, their mutual accusations are often true. During the First World War, German social patriots denounced the despotic character of Tsarism and French imperialism denounced German militarism. After the war, German imperialism denounced the abuses of the Versailles peace and Japanese imperialism denounced the excesses of Western imperialism in Asia. They were all true accusations. But none of them justified supporting German, Russian, or French imperialism during the war, or German rearmament after the war, or Japanese imperialism against Western imperialism, let alone supporting the Japanese invasion of Indochina, Indonesia, or the Philippines. Similarly, our rejection of NATO and Western imperialism cannot lead us to support (or tolerate or fail to denounce) the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

After the First World War, the imperialist victors imposed harsh and humiliating terms on a defeated Germany. As some already predicted at the time, this helped nurture the rise of a reloaded German nationalism and imperialism, seeking to break out of the limits imposed on it. The left could and did denounce many of the terms imposed at Versailles and the imperialist victor's vindictive policies. But that did not turn the resurgent German nationalism and imperialism into a progressive or anti-imperialist force. The same applies to the catastrophic consequences of the capitalist shock therapy promoted in Russia by the United States and its allies in the 1990s. This surely was one factor that nurtured a nationalist reaction under Putin, seeking to repair some of the economic damage done under Yeltsin (and US advisors, such as Jeffrey Sachs). We can and should point out the West's role and partial responsibility in all of this, but, as in the case of a resurgent German nationalism in the 1930s, this does not make Putin an anti-imperialist.

The left is now faced with a major danger. If, in a world of intensified inter-imperialist conflict it clings to the notion of the US and its allies as the *sole* imperialism, it runs the risk of sliding from anti-imperialism to *alter*-imperialism: not opposing all imperialist powers and projects but rather opposing one or some, while explicitly or tacitly supporting another.

In short, we reject NATO imperialism, but not to support the expansionism of the Russian Federation headed by Putin. We do not reject one imperialism to support another. We are anti-imperialists, not alter-imperialists. Therefore, while denouncing Western imperialism, we unequivocally reject the invasion and occupation of areas of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

The same is true on the other side of the current inter-imperialist conflict. Our opposition to Russian expansionism cannot lead to any sympathies or illusions regarding NATO imperialism. That too would be a slide from anti to alter-imperialism.

Support for Ukrainian resistance does not imply or require an endorsement of Zelensky's government. This corresponds to the third principle presented above. It is true that Zelensky's government has perpetuated or initiated frankly anti-democratic, repressive, anti-worker and neoliberal measures. These policies must be denounced. Those resisting them must be supported.

But it is one thing to oppose Zelensky or Zelensky's policies, quite another to support Putin's intervention or Russian occupation. Zelensky's reactionary politics are a reason to oppose him or his government, not to support Putin's invasion. The left cannot embrace Putin as the agent of its democratic agenda. If Zelensky needs to be removed, this is a task for the Ukrainian people, not Putin.

Different voices have denounced the presence of far-right forces in Ukraine. Their weight is a matter of dispute. Yet, the same point applies: their presence must be opposed and denounced, but their presence does not justify the invasion led by Putin or support for that invasion.

Let us recall the precedent of China and Japanese imperialism. During the 1930s, the international left supported China in the face of Japanese aggression. The left sided with China even though its government was controlled by the repressive and corrupt Guomindang apparatus, headed by Chiang Kai-Shek (fiercely anti-communist and perpetrator of the 1927 massacre), a government supported by western imperialism. Chinese resistance was a just fight against Japanese imperialism, despite the nature of its government and of the support it received from rival imperialisms. Similarly, Ukrainian resistance is a just fight against Russian aggression, despite the nature of its government and of the support it received from rival imperialisms.

The position outlined here closely follows Lenin's views on this question. Lenin underlined the need to fight all forms of national oppression, which in turn required the recognition of the right of nations to self-determination. Tsarism had nurtured hatred against Russia among many in the oppressed nations of the empire, including Ukraine. The end of that oppression and the hope of reconciliation between the peoples estranged by Tsarism demanded the recognition of the right to self-determination, among other measures. In his own way, *Putin understands this quite well: he openly blames Lenin for Ukraine's independence*, which he considers a crime against Russia that his invasion seeks to rectify. Logically, he also repudiates Lenin's doctrine of the right of nations to self-determination, which he considers absurd and untenable. Consciously or not, those in Russia (or elsewhere) struggling against Putin's war and defending Ukraine's right to self-determination are recuperating Lenin's orientation.

But Lenin also argues that all national cultures and all nationalisms, *including* the nationalism of the oppressed, contain aspects that are undemocratic, oppressive, discriminatory, and chauvinistic. The same democratic impulse that inspires the fight against national oppression commands us to struggle against these oppressive aspects present in all national cultures and characteristic of all nationalisms. *In the struggle against US colonialism in Puerto Rico (to speak of the struggle in which I have been involved since the 1970s) we must also fight against the conservative, sexist, racist aspects of Puerto Rican culture, for example.* This applies to Ukraine and all nations under imperialist aggression. While struggling against Russian imperialism, a fight must also be conducted against the reactionary dimensions of Ukrainian nationalism. Fighting Russian aggression but ignoring this would be inconsistent from a democratic and liberating perspective. Nor is it permissible to deploy the reactionary aspects of Ukrainian nationalism to support Russian aggression: this would be equally inconsistent from a democratic and anti-imperialist perspective.

To resist, Ukraine must obtain weapons wherever it can. Without recognizing this right, the denunciation of Putin's invasion becomes an empty gesture. In the present context, Ukraine may only obtain these weapons in the NATO imperialist camp. There is no contradiction between denouncing NATO imperialism and supporting Ukraine's use of its military supplies to resist Russian aggression. Unlike many in Ukraine, we foster no illusions regarding NATO, nor will we call for an end to the flow of military material required for an effective resistance. The same applies elsewhere. **Faced with US aggression, we recognize the right of Cuba, or Venezuela, for example to seek material and military support wherever they can obtain it, including a rival imperialism, such as Russia.** We would foster no illusions regarding Putin, nor would we call for an end to the flow of military supplies required for an effective resistance to US aggression. Again: this is the only way of remaining consistent anti-imperialists instead of embracing some version of alter-imperialism.

Alter-imperialism would have us choose between imperialisms. For some, any opposition to NATO implies support for Putin. To oppose Russian imperialism, they would have us side with NATO imperialism. For others, opposition to Putin is an indication of pro-NATO sympathies. To fight NATO imperialism, they would have us embrace Russian imperialism. We reject both formulas, based on the same alter-imperialist logic. We can and should stand against *both* NATO and Russian imperialism, and with the victims of their aggression, be they Cuba or Venezuela, or Ukraine.

Similarly, to call for an end of military aid to stop the war, despite the humane intentions of many, in practice disarms Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. It plays into Putin's hands. It means peace at the cost of Ukrainian capitulation. **If the US were to invade Cuba or Venezuela, would we seek to disarm them to bring about an end to the war?** Surely, we would campaign for an end to US aggression, while hoping that Cuba or Venezuela arm themselves to resist as best they can, using whatever sources they have at their disposal no matter how unsavory. The same position must be adopted regarding Ukraine and Russian aggression.

Sometimes, the rise of China and Russia as rivals of US imperialism is presented as the emergence of a multipolar world, no longer under the thumb of the latter. But the contrast of unipolar and multipolar is too abstract. We must ask: what kind of “multipolarity” is crystallizing in today’s world? **We should remember that the world order that produced the first and second world wars was a multipolar world. In other words, a world of inter-imperialist conflicts is a multipolar world.** In such a world the role of the left is not to cheer or celebrate the rise of multipolarity given the consolidation of new competing imperialist projects but rather to clearly position itself against all such projects.

We recently encountered the argument that “Whatever you think about Ukraine, in Africa, Russia is fighting imperialism.” The premise here is that anybody clashing or in tension with Western imperialism is anti-imperialist. Again, the example of Japanese imperialism is illustrative. During the 1930s did it clash and fight Western imperialism in Indochina, Indonesia, the Philippines, etc.? Yes. Was it fighting imperialism? No: it was advancing its own imperialist project. In other words, rival imperialisms conflict with each and the fact that Russia clashes with Western imperialism does not make it any less imperialist.

Imperialist powers normally embellish their plans with reference to admirable ideals. US and NATO imperialism act in the name of freedom and democracy and, more recently, of anti-terrorism and even women’s rights. The left rightly dismisses these proclamations as the deceptions that they are. It seeks to demonstrate the stark realities that they hide. But this is and will be equally true of **new imperialist projects. They will speak in terms of multi-polarity**, cooperation, anti-hegemonism, etc. (Japanese imperialism once presented its Pacific empire as a “co-prosperity sphere.”) They will justify their denial of democratic rights as a sovereign act or as an alternative to degenerate or decadent Western culture and denounce any criticism as a foreign intervention or as eurocentrism. The left must also see through this rhetoric and teach others to see through it. Otherwise, it will be lured from anti to alter-imperialism while embracing the ideological justifications of one imperialist camp or another.

We similarly must reject such notions as the “Asian” sources of Russian imperialism, counterposed to “European” democratic values (there are many variations of this). If anything, little is more typical of Europe than imperialism, which has been part of European development since the rise of capitalism. Contemporary Russian imperialism is no less capitalist than its tsarist predecessor (both with diverse non-capitalist admixtures) and its present rivals: its roots are capitalist, not “Asian.”

It is a fact that inter-imperialist conflict creates some space for maneuver for non-imperialist countries in the Global South seeking concessions from the major powers. It is legitimate to play one power against another, to seek more aid, better trade arrangements, debt forgiveness, etc. But often governments may go beyond this to assume the perspective, orientation, or politics of their closest imperialist ally, be it US imperialism or Russian imperialism. Anti-imperialists must not follow them down that path if they wish to avoid the drift toward alter-imperialism.

In the present context it is easy to fall into a one-sided perspective. Faced with US and NATO aggression, military buildup, and propaganda (in Latin America, for example), it’s easy to lose sight of the need to confront Russian and Chinese imperialism or the need to support Ukrainian resistance. Faced with Russian aggression, it’s easy to lose sight of the need to oppose NATO imperialism. **An internationalist left must offer a perspective which integrates the struggle against all imperialist camps**, while defending the right of peoples to self-determination and the struggles of the exploited and oppressed in all states and nations, *including* those under imperialist attack. This is the perspective we have tried to present in this text, a perspective that can bring together progressives fighting in different fronts: those conducting working class struggles in

Western Europe, those directly confronting US and NATO imperialism in the Global South, those struggling against Putin's capitalist authoritarianism in Russia, and thus resisting Russian aggression in the Ukraine, while struggling for a democratic transformation of their own country (against the reactionary forces within it). This is not a program, but only a general framework. It must be developed by the participants in all those struggles. But it can be a shared starting point.