Their anti-imperialism and ours

written by Gilbert Achcar | April 18, 2021

The logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" is a recipe for empty cynicism.

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The last three decades have witnessed increasing political confusion about the meaning of anti-imperialism, a notion that, in and of itself, hadn't previously been the topic of much debate. There are two main reasons for this confusion: the victorious end of most post–World War II anticolonial struggles and the USSR's collapse. During the Cold War, the United States and allied colonial Western powers directly waged several wars against national liberation movements or regimes, along with more limited military interventions and wars by proxy. In most of these cases, Western powers confronted a local adversary supported by a large popular base. Standing against the imperialist intervention and in support of those whom it targeted seemed the obvious choice for progressives—the only discussion was whether the support ought to be critical or unreserved.

The main divide among anti-imperialists during the Cold War was rather caused by the attitude towards the USSR, which Communist Parties and their close allies regarded as the "fatherland of socialism"; they determined much of their own political positions by aligning with Moscow and the "socialist camp"—an attitude that was described as "campism." This was facilitated by Moscow's support for most struggles against Western imperialism in its global rivalry with Washington. As for Moscow's intervention against workers' and peoples' revolts in its own European sphere of domination, the campists stood with the Kremlin, denigrating these revolts under the pretext that they were fomented by Washington.

Those who believed that the defense of democratic rights is the paramount principle of the left supported the struggles against Western imperialism as well as popular revolts in Soviet-dominated countries against local dictatorial rule and Moscow's hegemony. A third category was formed by the Maoists, who, starting from the 1960s, labeled the USSR "social-fascist," describing it as worse than US imperialism and going so far to side with Washington in some instances, such as Beijing's stance in Southern Africa.

The pattern of exclusively Western imperialist wars waged against popularly based movements in the Global South started to change, however, with the first such war waged by the USSR since 1945: the war in Afghanistan (1979–89). And although they were not waged by states that were then described as "imperialist," Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 and China's attack on Vietnam in 1979 brought widespread disorientation to the ranks of the global anti-imperialist left.

The next major complication was the 1991 US-led war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. This wasn't a popular albeit dictatorial regime but one of the Middle East's most brutal and murderous regimes, one that had even used chemical weapons in massacring thousands of its country's Kurdish population—with Western complicity, since this happened during Iraq's war against Iran. A few

figures, who until then belonged to the anti-imperialist left, shifted on this occasion to supporting the US-led war. But the vast majority of anti-imperialists opposed it, even though it was waged with a UN mandate approved by Moscow. They had little taste for the defense of the emir of Kuwait's possession of his British-granted dominion, populated by a majority of rightless migrants. Most were no fans of Saddam Hussein either: They denounced him as a brutal dictator while opposing the US-led imperialist war against his country.

A further complication soon emerged. After US-led war operations ceased in February 1991, the George H.W. Bush administration—having deliberately spared Saddam Hussein's elite force for fear of a regime collapse that might have benefited Iran—allowed the dictator to deploy it to crush a popular uprising in southern Iraq and the Kurdish insurgency in the mountainous north, letting him use helicopters in the latter case. This led to a massive wave of Kurdish refugees crossing the border into Turkey. To stop this and allow the refugees to return, Washington imposed a no-fly zone (NFZ) over northern Iraq. There was hardly any anti-imperialist campaign against this NFZ, since the only alternative would have been continued ruthless suppression of the Kurds.

NATO's wars in the Balkans in the 1990s posed a similar dilemma. The Serbian forces loyal to Slobodan Milosevic's regime were engaged in murderous actions against Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims. But other means to avoid massacres and impose a negotiated settlement in former Yugoslavia had been deliberately neglected by Washington, eager to mutate NATO from a defensive alliance into a "security organization" engaging in interventionist wars. The next step in this mutation consisted in involving NATO in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 (2001) attacks, thus removing the limitation of the alliance's originally restricted Atlantic zone. Then came the invasion of Iraq in 2003—the last US-led intervention that united all anti-imperialists on the terms of opposing it.

Meanwhile, Cold War "campism" was reemerging under a new guise: No longer defined by alignment behind the USSR but by direct or indirect support for any regime or force that is the object of Washington's hostility. In other terms, there was a shift from a logic of "the enemy of my friend (the USSR) is my enemy" to one of "the enemy of my enemy (the USA) is my friend" (or someone I should spare from criticism at any rate). While the former led to some strange bedfellows, the latter logic is a recipe for empty cynicism: Focused exclusively on the hatred of the US government, it leads to knee-jerk opposition to whatever Washington undertakes in the global arena and to drifting into uncritical support for utterly reactionary and undemocratic regimes, such as Russia's thuggish capitalist and imperialist government (imperialist by every definition of the term) or Iran's theocratic regime, or the likes of Milosevic and Saddam Hussein.

To illustrate the complexity of the questions that progressive anti-imperialism faces today—a complexity that is unfathomable to the simplistic logic of neo-campism—let us consider two wars that arose out of the 2011 Arab Spring. When popular uprisings managed to get rid of the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, the whole spectrum of self-proclaimed anti-imperialists applauded in unison, since both countries had Western-friendly regimes. But when the revolutionary shock wave reached Libya, as was inevitable for a country that shared borders with both Egypt and Tunisia, the neo-campists were far less enthusiastic. They remembered that Moammar El-Gadhafi's supremely autocratic regime had been outlawed by Western states for decades—seemingly unaware that it had spectacularly shifted into cooperation with the United States and various European states since 2003.

True to type, Gadhafi bloodily repressed the protests. When the insurgents took over Libya's second city, Benghazi, Gadhafi—after describing them as rats and drug addicts and famously vowing to "purify Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, street by street, person by person, until the country is clean of the dirt and impurities"—prepared an onslaught against the city, deploying

the full spectrum of his armed forces. The likelihood of a massacre of massive proportion was very high. Ten days into the uprising, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution referring Libya to the International Criminal Court.

Benghazi's population implored the world for protection, while emphasizing that they wanted no foreign boots on the ground. The League of Arab States supported this request. Accordingly, the UNSC adopted a resolution authorizing "the imposition of a NFZ" over Libya as well as "all necessary measures…to protect civilians…while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." Neither Moscow nor Beijing vetoed this resolution: Both abstained, unwilling to assume the responsibility for a massacre foretold.

Most Western anti-imperialists condemned the UNSC resolution as reminiscent of those which had authorized the onslaught on Iraq in 1991. In so doing, they overlooked the fact that the Libyan case had actually more in common with the NFZ imposed over northern Iraq than with the general onslaught on Iraq under the pretext of liberating Kuwait. The UNSC resolution was clearly flawed, wide open to interpretation in a way that would allow protracted interference of NATO powers in the Libyan civil war. Yet, in the absence of alternative means of preventing the impending massacre, the NFZ could hardly be opposed in its initial phase—for the same reasons that had led Moscow and Beijing to abstain.

It took very few days for NATO to deprive Gadhafi of much of his air force and tanks. The insurgents could have carried on without direct foreign involvement, provided they were given the weapons needed to counter Gadhafi's remaining arsenal. NATO preferred to keep them dependent on its direct involvement in the hope that it could control them. In the end, they frustrated NATO's plans by completely dismantling Gadhafi's state, thus creating the current chaotic situation in Libya.

The second—even more complex—case is Syria. There, the Obama administration never intended to impose a NFZ. Because of inevitable Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UNSC, this would have required a violation of international legality like that committed by the George W. Bush administration in invading Iraq (an invasion Obama had opposed). Washington kept a low profile in the Syrian war, stepping up its involvement only after the so-called Islamic State surged and crossed the border into Iraq, and then restricting its direct intervention to the fight against ISIS.

Yet Washington's most decisive influence on the Syrian war was not its direct involvement—which is paramount only in the eyes of neo-campists exclusively focused on Western imperialism—but rather its prohibition of delivery by its regional allies of anti-aircraft weapons to the Syrian insurgents, primarily due to opposition from Israel. The result was that the Assad regime enjoyed a monopoly in the air during the conflict and could even resort to extensive use of devastating barrel bombs dropped by helicopters. This situation also encouraged Moscow to directly engage its air force in the Syrian conflict starting in 2015.

Anti-imperialists were bitterly divided on Syria. Neo-campists—such as, in the United States, the United National Antiwar Coalition and the US Peace Council—focused exclusively on Western powers in the name of a peculiar one-sided "anti-imperialism," while supporting or ignoring the incomparably more important intervention of Russian imperialism (or else timidly mentioning it, while refusing to campaign against it, as in the case of the Stop the War Coalition in the United Kingdom), let alone the intervention of Iran-sponsored Islamic fundamentalist forces. Progressive democratic anti-imperialists—this author included—condemned the murderous Assad regime and its foreign imperialist and reactionary backers, reproved Western imperialist powers' indifference to the fate of the Syrian people while opposing their direct intervention in the conflict, and denounced the nefarious role of the Gulf monarchies and Turkey in promoting reactionary forces among the Syrian opposition.

The situation got further complicated, however, when a surging ISIS threatened the Syrian left-wing nationalist Kurdish movement, the only progressive armed force then active on Syrian territory. Washington fought ISIS through a combination of bombing and unembarrassed support to local forces that included Iran-aligned militias in Iraq and Kurdish left-wing forces in Syria. When ISIS threatened to take over the city of Kobanî, held by Kurdish forces, these were rescued by US bombing and weapons' airdropping. No section of the anti-imperialists stood up significantly to condemn this blatant intervention by Washington—for the obvious reason that the alternative would have been the crushing of a force linked to a left-wing nationalist movement in Turkey that all the left had traditionally supported.

Later, Washington deployed troops on the ground in Syria's northeast to back, arm, and train the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The only vehement opposition to this US role came from NATO member Turkey, the national oppressor of the largest section of the Kurdish people. Most anti-imperialists remained silent (the equivalent of abstention), in contrast to their 2011 stance on Libya—as if support of popular insurgencies by Washington could be tolerated only when these are led by left-wing forces. And when Donald Trump, under pressure from the Turkish president, announced his decision to pull US troops out of Syria, several prominent figures of the American left—including Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, the late David Graeber, and David Harvey—issued a statement demanding that the United States "continue military support for the SDF" (though without specifying that it should exclude direct intervention on the ground). Even among neo-campists, very few denounced this statement publicly.

From this brief survey of recent complications of anti-imperialism, three guiding principles emerge. First and most important: Truly progressive positions—unlike red-painted apologetics for dictators—are determined as a function of the best interests of the peoples' right to democratic self-determination, not out of knee-jerk opposition to anything an imperialist power does under whatever circumstances; anti-imperialists must "learn to think." Second: Progressive anti-imperialism requires opposing all imperialist states, not siding with some of them against others. Finally: Even in the exceptional cases when intervention by an imperialist power benefits an emancipatory popular movement—and even when it is the only option available to save such a movement from bloody suppression—progressive anti-imperialists must advocate complete distrust in the imperialist power and demand the restriction of its involvement to forms that limit its ability to impose its domination over those that it pretends to be rescuing.

Whatever discussion remains among progressive anti-imperialists who agree on the above principles is essentially about tactical matters. With the neo-campists, there is hardly any discussion possible: Invective and calumny are their usual modus operandi, in line with the tradition of their past century's predecessors.