

## Imperialism on all agendas

### Introduction to the next book by Claudio Katz

The new cold war promoted by the US against Russia and China is disrupting the international scenario NATO regains prominence, Europe and Japan rearm, and militarization permeates all international relations. The consequences of this escalation are already verified in the two conflicts that convulse the planet. The war in Ukraine and the tensions in the China Sea anticipate the dramatic effects of the ongoing confrontations.

This book calls for a return to the concept of imperialism to clarify the new international scenario. It proposes to overcome the omission of that notion among world politics commentators, who tend to avoid that term because of its obvious critical connotations. The mere mention of imperialism is a reminder that the dominant powers assert their primacy through force.

To disguise the pre-eminence of the US in this coercive function, the spokesmen for the first power use substitute notions. They describe the North American giant as a "protector of the West" who "guards the world order." They especially enhance the deterrence capacity of the Pentagon to avoid chaos, which the absence of a "guarantor of international balance" would cause. At most, they mention imperialism to denounce the incursions of the opposing camp. NATO aggressions are invariably approved or silenced.

This book confronts these justifications head-on and develops numerous criticisms against its spokespersons. But it also registers that the reluctance to identify the US with imperialism is no longer so unanimous among establishment intellectuals. In the Bush era, neoconservative ideologues began to extol that connection. They extolled the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and uninhibitedly pondered the imperial action of the Pentagon.

This exaltation was also shared by some liberal trends, which praised the renewed civilizing action of the marines, in peripheral regions despised or populated by equally disqualified ethnic groups. Both currents praised the imperial mission that they attribute to a divine mandate or to requests from the "international community".

This idealization of imperialism lost its incidence after the fiasco faced by the invaders in Baghdad and Kabul. Its failure dimmed for a few years the fantasy of recreating a "new [North] American century." But after a decade, the praise and camouflage of US imperial conduct has reappeared in full. Exalters stress the convenience of making this dominant behavior transparent to maximize its effectiveness, and concealers warn against the rejection that this glorification generates. Mentions of imperialism in the publications of the hegemonic elite expand and contract, in tune with the preaching of one or another variant.

References to imperialism among critical thinkers are not subject to these conditions, but they have less weight than other concepts. Challenges to neoliberalism or capitalism are much more frequent than challenges to imperialism. This inconsideration usually obstructs the evaluation of the international scenario.

This book aims to reverse that neglect by using the concept of the imperial system. This notion contributes to investigate the triple economic, political and geopolitical dimension of the main device of global domination. The first plane involves the confiscation of resources suffered by the periphery, the second illustrates how the powerful confront the popular insurgency and the third clarifies the rivalries between the powers.

The imperial system is the main structure of expropriation, coercion and competition, which the big capitalists prop up to preserve their privileges. In the chapter that begins the first part,

a synthesis of this approach is presented and in the rest of the book the behavior of the protagonists, partners, companions and adversaries of this device is studied.

The imperial system has been in force since the second half of the 20th century and differs significantly from its classical precedent of the last century. The generalized wars between capitalist powers that marked that period were not repeated in the later scenario. In this context, the old empires did not reappear either. The contemporary model is based on social foundations and capitalist management far removed from those precedents.

But the current system maintains the coercive pillar that all imperial modalities have shared, to settle primacies, monopolize profits and consolidate power with the use of force. This persistent centrality of violence is illustrated in numerous parts of the book. Those examples confirm that the imperial system is not limited to the mere administration of economic supremacy. Nor does it restrict its action to the reproduction of myths, beliefs and ideologies that validate the status quo. It ensures the preservation of capitalism with gigantic military safeguards.

## US AND CHINA

The second section of the book looks at the peculiar American leadership of the imperial system. Washington manages this device through NATO to subdue allies and harass rivals. He periodically uses this mechanism to regain dominance, seizing wealth, putting down rebellions, and dissuading competitors. At such times he deploys the enormous military power that fuels his burdensome arms economy. With new hybrid wars he ruins societies and destroys States, recreating dramatic scenarios of refugees and civilian casualties.

The disappearance of the USSR encouraged this type of adventure and boosted military over-expansion, which periodically corrodes the stability of the US political system. Washington resorts to warmongering to counter its economic decline, but fails to stem that decline with outside incursions. He maintains great warfare superiority, along with significant technological and financial advantages. But he has not been able to counter China's stunning challenge with that prominence. The actions of the Pentagon do not compensate for the structural flaws that the first power drags.

All attempts at US imperial revival have also eroded the internal cohesion of the country. Trump's failures and Biden's impotence illustrate that effect, which has corroded every administration in recent decades. That long-term crisis does not equally imply a continued and precipitous decline of US primacy. The first power occupies an irreplaceable place in the leadership of the world system of domination, which leads it to repeated and failed attempts to recompose leadership.

The book sets out several possible outcomes for this crisis, reviewing in particular two views of the dilemmas at stake. The hegemonic succession and global empire theories are discussed taking into account the contrast with the British antecedent. The comparison between the clear profile that contemporary capitalism presents and the indefinite course of the imperial system also clarifies these dilemmas.

In different parts of the book, the relations that the US maintains with other members of the imperial structure are studied. It investigates how the old European empires that act autonomously in their sphere of influence have mutated, but abide by the North American command in global affairs. These forms of British or French alter-imperialism coexist with other varieties of Australian, Canadian or Israeli co-imperialism. The partners that Washington has incorporated into custody from various corners of the planet maintain a close relationship with his godfather.

In the third part of the book begins the evaluation of the powers located outside the imperial system. The study of China occupies a preponderant place due to its obvious role in the strategic clash with the US. The text highlights that this bid involves two dissimilar powers, which exhibit opposing positions in the face of the conflict. While Washington leads an aggression aimed at reinstating its imperial leadership, Beijing tries to sustain its economic growth without external confrontations.

The following chapters explain the connection of that caution with the inconclusive capitalist restoration, the unique political regime and the history of external harassment that China has suffered. The novel combination of productive expansion and geopolitical prudence that the Asian giant is testing contrasts with the trajectory followed by the challengers of international leadership in the last century.

But the text also underlines the tensions generated by the introduction of capitalism in China. It questions the indulgent views, which are unaware of the incompatibility of this system with the proclaimed "cooperation" to create an "inclusive globalization". It is highlighted that the new power is not part of the Global South and already faces imbalances typical of a developed economy or a major creditor.

This analysis is extended to a review of what happened in China during the pandemic and to an evaluation of the meaning of the Silk Road. In this chapter, the concept of uneven and combined development is used to explain how the country achieved an exceptional development based on socialist foundations, mercantile complements and capitalist parameters. This combination allowed the birth of a model linked to globalization, but focused on the local retention of the surplus. The absence of neoliberalism and financialization allowed, in turn, to limit the imbalances that have affected the bulk of its competitors.

In the book it is estimated that capitalism is already very present in China, but it does not exercise effective control over the economy as a whole. As the new bourgeois class failed to gain control of the state (in a frozen socialist transition), an intermediate status prevails. This context differentiates the country from the capitalist restoration already accomplished in Eastern Europe and Russia. This evaluation concludes by pointing out that the country's profile will be defined in the course of intense political struggles and popular battles.

## RUSSIA AND MIDDLE EAST

The fourth section extends the questions of imperial status to Russia, noting that the full restoration of capitalism has consolidated a presupposition of that condition. The limitations of this passage are also highlighted, which emerge in the vulnerability of the economic model and in the semi-peripheral international insertion.

It is clear that Russia is not part of the dominant circuit of contemporary imperialism and that it is harassed by the US. But its active external geopolitical intervention is also very visible, with large displays of war arsenal. The book proposes the figure of a non-hegemonic empire in the making, to conceptualize this contradictory combination of besieged and invading power. It explains why the consolidation or fading of that imprint will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

This look diverges from the simple characterization of Russia as an empire that resumes the trajectory of tsarism and polemicalizes with the frequent analogies that are drawn with the USSR. He recalls the absence of capitalism under that regime and highlights that this system included mechanisms of external oppression, but never configured a "Soviet imperialism." The text also confirms that internal colonialism has resurfaced, but without defining an imperial status with this recreation. Russia contains in only embryonic form the features of that device under Putin's leadership. That president has confirmed his total distance from the

progressive universe, with policies that validate the privileges of millionaires, arbitrate between chauvinists and liberals, and harass the left.

This evaluation of Russia with the parameters of the contemporary imperial system, dispenses with the criteria bequeathed by Lenin to settle that condition. In this case, the inadequacy of this instrument is obvious. Russia fails to meet all the budgets of financial pre-eminence, global weight of monopolies or weight of exported capital that this approach requires. The imperial position of a new power cannot be settled with mere economic indicators.

The fifth section applies all the categories exposed to what happened in a region torn by military confrontations. It postulates that the bloodshed recorded in the "Greater Middle East" is not due to religious or cultural causes, but to the US attempt to regain primacy in that area. It details the aggressions carried out by the Pentagon to manage oil, deploy military forces, put down rebellions and deter rivals. It also confirms that the adverse result of these operations led to humiliation in Afghanistan, withdrawal from Iraq, the fracture of Libya and failure in Syria. In that region, it has been very visible how Europe's economic divergences with the US coexist with the subordination of Brussels to Washington. The limited incursions of Paris or London have always been consummated with the prior approval of the Pentagon. In the same area it has been confirmed that Russia is testing great power actions, with a direct military presence in Syria. That incursion has been very illustrative of an empire in formation. On the contrary, China's economic role without a military correlate confirms the non-imperial profile of the Asian dragon. Also in the Arab world, Beijing prioritizes the dispute over business with its downtrodden North American competitor.

The annexations and apartheid -implemented by Israel in this region- are feasible due to their integration into the internal geopolitical structure of the US. This symbiosis allows Zionism to develop a territorial expansion, with obsolete modalities of late colonialism.

The Middle East is also the main field of corroboration of the contemporary profile that sub-imperialism presents. Three countries in that region have explicit or potential characteristics of this condition, operating as intermediate economies in subordinate or autonomous tension with the US. Sub-imperialism is in plain sight in the expansionism of Turkey and could spread to Saudi Arabia, if the monarchs consolidate their warmongering drift. The eventual reconstitution of the same status in Iran will depend on the outcome of the disputes with its opponents in the area.

## POLITICAL DISPUTES

The last section of the book addresses certain political consequences of the conflicts generated by the imperial system and reviews the contemporary sense of anti-imperialism. It stresses that the succession of defeats faced by the US in the East does not in itself imply popular victories against external oppression.

In Afghanistan the retrograde Taliban triumphed, in Iraq a repressive theocratic administration rules, in Libya the distribution of the loot prevails and in Syria hope was crushed. In all these cases, the anti-imperialist yearnings were diverted towards inter-religious confrontations and the pan-Arab progressive project was replaced by the fundamentalist dream of the Caliphate. Anti-imperialism is an important compass for the left in the controversial conflicts in the Middle East. This criterion underlines the gravitation of the popular leadership in the confrontations against the main enemy. With this indication, it diverges from the mere alignment with the different geopolitical blocks that fight in the international arena. He also disagrees with the neutralist views, which avoid positions in the face of these clashes. This last position ignores the incidence of global tensions on the national struggles of different peoples. With this vision and these guidelines, the book evaluates what happened in Syria and Libya.

The following pages investigate what happened in Ukraine, highlighting the primary responsibility of the US in that conflict due to its refusal to negotiate the containment of NATO and the neutrality of Kiev. Washington encouraged the harassment of Moscow to subordinate Europe and to block the economic exchange of the Old Continent with Russia. It also encouraged reactionary nationalism that unleashed the confrontation and facilitated the destruction of peaceful cohabitation between the two regions of the country.

But the Russian invasion was not limited to protecting the settlers of the East. It broke up the peace negotiations and introduced a disproportionate and unjustified response. This action disregarded the opinion of the Ukrainian people and contributed to reinvigorate the myths of Western liberalism. The US took advantage of this nonsense to manipulate Ukraine's sovereignty, hiding the fact that the right to national self-determination is inseparable in this case from demilitarization and reaching an international equidistance status for the country. With this perspective, the book supports the calls to restart the negotiations to stop the humanitarian tragedy that the war has unleashed. That output offers the most progressive course in the current scenario. It contrasts with the lenient positions towards NATO (and the calls to provide weapons to Ukraine), promoted by some leftist currents.

The final chapter complements these two assessments of the Middle East and Ukraine with a response to the critics of our thesis, who raised their objections to the preparatory articles for this book. This debate clarifies why the renewed economic competition does not recreate the wars between the main capitalist powers. The controversy also contributes to understanding the role of Russia and China due to their exclusion from the dominant framework and corroborates that the current tableau is not understandable with the old opposition between imperialisms and semi-colonies. The discussion is particularly useful for recording how the repetition of dogmatic formulas obstructs action on the left.

The book excludes references to Latin America, since this topic has been dealt with in another forthcoming text (*Las encrucijadas de América Latina. Derecha, progresismo e izquierda en el siglo XXI*, Batalla de Ideas, 2023).

All the chapters of this volume collect articles published on the specified dates of each text. Many questions about current imperialism remain pending, which lead to new elaborations and promising debates. The characterization of the imperial system is essential to understand and transform contemporary reality.