

Is Russia an imperialist power? Benevolent glances

By **Claudio Katz**

Abstract: *Washington's bullying and the gulf with tsarism do not place Moscow outside the imperial universe. Its embryonic place in this space negates the characterisation of the country as a semi-colony. Military arsenal is a defining feature of a foreign policy that includes oppressive tendencies. The intervention in Kazakhstan illustrates this dynamic of a power with a long tradition of international protagonism. Putin is not a progressive leader. He validates the privileges of millionaires, arbitrates between chauvinists and liberals, manipulates elections and harasses the left. Anti-imperialist projects are forged with popular subjects*

[Note by LINKS: This is the fourth part of a series of articles looking at the issue of Russia's imperial status by Claudio Katz. Translation by Federico Fuentes]

Some analysts exempt the Kremlin of imperial responsibilities because it is a target of US hostility (Clarke; Annis, 2016). But such aggression only confirms the nature of the bully; it does not clarify the status of the bullied.

Just because Russia is a priority target for NATO does not automatically place this power outside the imperial dynamic.

Nor does the NATO membership of old USSR allies clarify the profile of the Eurasian giant. The exclusion or participation of Russia in the circle of international dominators must be evaluated by analysing Moscow's foreign policy.

A semi-colonial profile?

Characterising Russia's international status requires registering that this renewed power incubates within it some potential variety of imperialism. This starting point is categorically rejected by those authors who view a similarity between the country and the concept of semi-colonial dependency. They consider Russia to be a submetropolis subjected to foreign domination (Razin, 2016).

But it is very difficult to find any data to support this diagnosis. It is obvious that Moscow acts like a major international player, challenging Washington for the largest atomic arsenal on the planet. All its actions demonstrate an external protagonism, not only on its borders but in conflict zones around the world, such as the Middle East.

It is a complete mystery as to how a semi-colony could deploy such a global presence. It is also not clear which foreign state apparatus dominates Moscow. Washington? Berlin? Paris? It makes less sense to present Putin — who confronts Biden, Merkel or Macron as equals — as a puppet of those metropolises.

The characterisation of Russia as a semi-colony is based on certain statistics showing a large level of foreign economic incidence in certain branches of production or services. But the concept of semi-colony refers to the political sphere and presupposes a lack of sovereignty. Following the norm that prevailed in place such as Africa, Asia or Latin

America in the 19th century, the major decisions of the Russian administration would be being made by a foreign leader.

The inanity of this characterisation derives from an attempt to recreate an outdated concept. Colonies and semi-colonies were a form of domination of classical imperialism, which lost significance with the decolonisation process that took place after World War II. Modalities of explicit dependency were replaced by other forms of foreign control, more suited to the interests of the new local bourgeoisies of the periphery.

Russia does not fit into any of these obsolete scenarios of the past century. Nor does it fit within a reasoning guided by an exclusive distinction between imperialist dominators and dominated semi-colonies. Russia is not the only country that falls outside this classification. The crude and exclusive division between two polarities leads to numerous errors, such as situating Turkey in the semi-colonial sphere or South Korea among the imperialist states. The complexity of the 21st century cannot be comprehended with such simplifications.

Inadequate arguments

Other views make more reasonable objections to Russia's imperial status. They highlight the gulf that separates Putin from the tsars as an indication of the distance between Russia's current and past territorial ambitions. This historic gap is enormous, but it only confirms that 21st century imperialism shares few similarities with its ancestors. This divorce does not clarify the current process underway, nor Russia's status in the contemporary era.

The extent of the country's military power is a more contested aspect when trying to settle Russia's imperial status (Williams, 2014). Some assessments argue that Russia's enormous arsenal persists as a mere inheritance from the Soviet Union. But they omit that this apparatus is not treated by Putin as an unfortunate legacy, to be eradicated in the shortest possible time. This attitude was adopted by Yeltsin and reversed by his successor. For the past two decades, Moscow has been modernising its bellicose structure and tended towards transforming it into a major foreign policy card.

Some analysts also highlight the limited practical effectiveness of Russia's atomic weapons. They claim that the power of the country's conventional forces are very limited when compared to its NATO rivals (Clarke: Annis, 2016). But this evaluation sidesteps other spheres of military action. Russia is the world's second largest exporter of weapons, is present in various conflict zones and asserts its enormous capacity to provision deadly arms.

One only has to look at the country's forceful return to the African continent to see this influence. In Mali, the private Russian security company, Wagner, recently replaced French soldiers in the role of guarding the country against two powerful organisations tied to al-Qaeda and Daesh (Calvo, 2021). In the Central African Republic, this same firm carried out a similar swap of roles, after having tested this out first in Mozambique. Russia's return to Africa has little economic significance, but the scale of its arms sales is impressive. Nearly a third of the new equipment acquired by the continent is bought from Moscow and half of the African governments have signed military agreements with this supplier (Martial, 2021). The intervention in Syria provides another visible indication of the gravitational pull of warfare in Russia's foreign policy.

Oppressive tendencies

Russia's leading role in the global arms market complements its defensive strategies (in the face of US pressure) and actions of direct control in border areas. Through these incursions, Moscow is not helping its neighbours, but rather reinforcing its own interests. Suggestions that these actions are based on solidarity embellish the real motivations behind these operations.

In the same way that China trades and invests in the periphery to benefit its companies, Russia sends troops, provides advisors and sells arms to augment its geopolitical influence. The economic strategy of the Eastern giant and the military diplomacy of resurgent Moscow power are not guided by norms of cooperation.

The last vestiges of these principles was buried with the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Putin did not even enunciate any justification for his recent deployment of troops to Kazakhstan. He simply applied the clauses of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to prop up an allied regime.

Those who sidestep criticism of this policy of domination tend to highlight the conspiratorial presence of Western imperialism. But they emphasise this interference without mentioning the abuses of the governments that Russia supports. They present, for example, the recent rebellion in Kazakhstan as a coup programmed by US agencies (USAID, NGOs) that was sensibly crushed by Russian troops (Ramírez, 2022).

This interpretation omits the existence of mass protests against a neoliberal government that eliminated all social security nets to enrich Nazarbayev's oligarchy. This elite has shared in the enormous profits it reaps from oil rent with Western companies (Kurmanov, 2022).

Against this looting, oil workers have fought back through a long succession of strikes (2011, 2016), which the government responded to with force. The banning of the Communist Party and other left forces clears up any doubts as to the regressive profile of this government (Karpatsky, 2022).

Russian military intervention to prop up such a regime is very illustrative of Moscow's oppressive tendencies. Views that evade these tendencies tend to reproduce sugarcoated images conveyed by official propaganda. They present the actions of Russia outside its borders as par for the course given the contemporary bellicose reality. At most, they offer descriptions that do not clarify the meaning of these incursions.

It is true that Russia's imperial status has not yet been settled, it is still maturing and it is not clarified by the use of summary definitions. The country is harassed by the United States and shares with China a certain association within a non-hegemonic bloc. But at the same time it incubates growing evidence of an oppressive external conduct, which is ignored by those who wear rose-tinted glasses.

Moscow has so far not crossed the line that separates the gestation and consummation of an imperial status, but these tendencies are present on many levels. Russia does not act on an equal footing with the United States, but it does display behaviours typical of a dominator. Those who are prisoners to binary reasoning, and reduce the division of the world into two camps, fail to recognise this process. With such simplifications, they idealise Russia, forgetting the capitalist nature of the social-political system that prevails

in that territory. This foundation grants a significant imperial potential to a country with a long tradition of protagonism in global affairs.

Arbitrations and tensions

The West's harassment of Russia has aroused certain sympathy towards Putin among some progressive sectors. Alongside those who hold sympathetic views are those who go as far as to present the Russian president as a heroic figure confronting imperialism. This glorification has intensified amid the heat of a strong confrontation within Russia with the liberal right, that the US State Department sponsors. Putin clashes with the godchildren of the group who buried the USSR and in particular with Navalny, a person idolised by Washington and propped up by segments of the pro-Western media in Moscow and St Petersburg.

These sectors believe Putin governs a country inhabited by culturally immature people who are structurally incapable of acting in a democratic manner. With that contemptuous view towards their own fellow citizens, they redouble their campaigns against "populism", which large media outlets propagate across the planet. (Kagarlitsky, 2016).

Putin has forcefully confronted this rightist opposition, banning its protests and jailing its leaders. With this overwhelming response he has neutralised the successors of Yeltsin and consolidated this position internally. He relies on the sectors that privilege stability and supports a bureaucratic network based on the underprivileged population. The head of the Kremlin has demonstrated, moreover, a great capacity to assimilate opponents and distribute quotas of power.

The success of this policy has enhanced his image as a leader who thwarts conspiracies. But this effectiveness does not make him into an exponent of progressive politics. The allegations of repressive conduct are not mere inventions of the CIA. He has been accused of eliminating adversaries with polonium in London and of ordering the shooting down of a flight that caused 300 civilian deaths in 2014. He recently banned the organisation, Memorial, which investigates the crimes of Stalinism. (Poch, 2022)

The Russian president presides over a regime that restored capitalism for the benefit of the oligarchs and to the detriment of the majority of the people. His prolonged continuity at the head of the state has ensured the privileges of the millionaires who control the most profitable sectors of the economy.

The Russian president prioritises the maintenance of his authority among the different segments of the elite. He works to sustain the equilibrium between these fractions and periodically renews agreements with parties close to or distant from the ruling party (A Just Russia, New People, United Russia) (Kagarlitsky, 2021). With this leadership, he sustains a foreign policy of resistance to NATO and recovery of control of the post-Soviet sphere.

Until the incursion in Ukraine, Putin operated with a lot of astuteness in the international arena. He consolidated a defensive bloc with China, but intensified relations with Beijing's rivals (South Korea, Japan, India, Vietnam) to compensate for the adverse economic gap with his partner. These moves at the global level have allowed the Russian president to sustain his prolonged domestic supremacy.

The left versus Putin

Putin built up his leadership during his initial 1999-2008 term. He then secured another term in 2012 and subsequently modified the Constitution to extend his presidency, with amendments that would allow him to rule until 2036.

This permanency was reinforced by institutionalised fraud mechanisms, which guarantee favourable results in all elections. Some analysts estimate that in the recent elections he retained the majority in the Duma via fraud enacted with the electronic voting system (Krieger, 2021).

These anomalies are not only denounced by biased observers from the West. They have also been raised by leftist currents operating inside Russia. They point out the existence of countless obstacles to registering opposition candidacies and mention the existence of sophisticated devices that add or subtract votes.

But unlike in the past, Putin is beginning to encounter serious hurdles. In the recent elections he triumphed with the worst result he had received since 2003 and his management of the pandemic was strongly objected to due to the little support that the government provided to the population. In a scenario of business closures, job losses and hardship among migrants from the interior, he favoured tax benefits for large companies.

The left within Russia must deal with a president in conflict with the US aggressor, who at the same time is consolidating a capitalist regime based on inequality. The erosion of social cohesion and deep political demoralisation have so far obstructed the massification of protests. The negative consequences of the implosion of the USSR continue to weigh heavily on a society affected by frustration and apathy.

But the promising results of the left in the last elections introduce a quota of hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel. The Communist Party (KPRF) achieved its best result since 1999 and consolidated its position as the second force in the Chamber of Deputies. This organisation has oscillated between supporting and criticising the government, but has started to open up towards radical currents inserted in the social struggle. These currents integrated activists into their lists of candidates, modifying the tone of the last electoral campaign (Budraitskis, 2021).

Anti-imperialism and popular subject

Putin is also viewed with sympathy among certain progressive sectors for his promotion of multipolarity, as a geopolitical alternative to US preeminence. But there are few certainties regarding the context that such a configuration generates. So far, multipolarity harbours a heterogeneous variety of regimes that do not share a common pattern.

Multipolarity facilitates a world scenario more favourable to popular projects than the previous scenario of unilateral US domination. But the new dispersion of power (or its arrangement around a non-hegemonic bloc) is a long way away from underpinning resistance to imperialism. Nor does multipolarity chart an alternative course to the destructive dynamics of capitalism. This diagnosis should be borne in mind when evaluating the international scenario.

A socialist outlook demands abandoning characterisations centred exclusively on geopolitical events that determine the primacy of one power or another. Leftist approaches must focus their attention on popular interests and the battles against the ruling classes of each country.

The frequent neglect of democratic-social struggles is a corollary of the substitution of political analysis for its geopolitical equivalent. The first approach emphasises the role of social forces in conflict while the second highlights the dispute between powers for global domination. From an exclusive attention to these latter clashes arises the expectation that progressive achievements will come about merely through the continued emergence of multipolarity. Hope is centred on the favourable international arm-wrestling of certain governments, without taking into account events that impact on popular organisations.

Because of this lack of interest in what is happening below, many of the rebellions that break out against governments of the non-hegemonic bloc are misinterpreted. These uprisings are automatically discounted or identified with external conspiracies. There is a great sensitivity to detecting CIA plots and a total indifference to registering the legitimacy of protests against authoritarianism and inequality.

This tonic tends to prevail among authors who praise Putin, viewing the global scenario through the exclusive filter of his confrontation with Washington. They assume that the destiny of the peoples will be decided in the Kremlin and not in the streets.

Popular action does not by itself open up paths to emancipation and can sometimes be instrumentalised by imperialism or local elites. But it is impossible to build another future without operating in this sphere and without raising the superiority of a socialist project within the universe of the dispossessed. Clarifying Russia's imperial status contributes to this alternative construction.

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