

Is Russia an imperialist power? Part I: Non-hegemonic gestation

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Abstract: *The status of imperial power cannot be clarified by liberal prejudices. The consolidation of capitalism is an existing precondition of that status. But imbalances in the economic model and the country's semi-peripheral insertion undermine this position. Russia is not part of the dominant circuit of contemporary imperialism and is harassed by the United States. It is also developing a policy of active geopolitical intervention, with actions in line with its weight within the military-industrial complex. The concept of a non-hegemonic empire in gestation offers the best definition of its current stage. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will either lead to the consolidation or dissipation of this profile.*

[Note by LINKS: This is the first in a four-part series of articles by Argentine Marxist Claudio Katz looking at the issue of Russia's imperial status. Read [Part II](#), [Part III](#) and [Part IV](#). Translation by Federico Fuentes. Original in Spanish [here](#).]

<http://links.org.au/is-russia-an-imperialist-power-non-hegemonic-gestation>

No one would have bothered to ask the question as to whether Russia was an imperialist power in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time, the discussion was limited to whether the country would retain any relevance. The Yeltsin era led to Moscow's international irrelevance, while all discussions on imperialism focused the United States.

Thirty years later the situation has shifted drastically with the re-emergence of Russia as a major geopolitical actor. This shift has reopened debates on the relevance of using the category of empire to define that country. The concept is associated with the figure of Putin and exemplified by the recent invasion of Ukraine. This incursion is seen as strong proof of renewed Russian imperialism.

The most common view considers this imprint to be an indisputable fact. They stress that Moscow oppresses its neighbours with the aim of undermining freedom, democracy and progress. They also denounce that the Kremlin is intensifying its aggressiveness so as to expand its autocratic political model.

Conventional errors

The main Western governments and media outlets question Moscow's incursions while justifying similar actions carried out by their own camp. The deployment of troops in Ukraine, Georgia or Syria is presented as an unacceptable act, but the occupations of Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya are interpreted as routine events. The annexation of Crimea is categorically repudiated, but the appropriation of land in Palestine is warmly welcomed.

This hypocrisy is combined with implausible allegations that seek to frighten the population. They describe a gigantic Russian power with immeasurable capacity for harm. Moscow's manipulation of the US elections through infiltrators and algorithms has been the most absurd accusation in this campaign.

Every diabolical conspiracy is attributed to Putin. The media often portrays him as the embodiment of evil. He is depicted as a despot rebuilding an empire that rests on brutal methods of internal totalitarianism (Di Palma, 2019). Comparisons are never made with the lauded plutocracies of the United States or Europe, which enforces validation of the domination exercised by ruling elites.

Liberals often describe Russian imperialism as a disease rooted in the country's authoritarian history. They consider that this society drags with it an old compulsion to subjugate other people's territories (La Vanguardia, 2020).

With this view they repeat clichés but never put forward a serious evaluation of the problem. If Russia contains the gene of empire in its DNA, then there is little point to studying the subject in depth. It simply becomes a hopeless cause when compared to the well-known virtues of the West.

With the same ease with which Russia's imperial omnipotence is highlighted, the United States and its partners are exempted from that condition. Imperialism is seen as a corollary of Moscow autocracy that the transatlantic community has avoided due to its attachment to republican tolerance. How this narrative is compatible with the colonial plundering suffered by Africa, Asia and Latin America is an insoluble mystery.

The diatribes against Moscow are taken straight from the old Cold War playbook, which counterposed oppressive Russian totalitarianism to the wonders of US democracy. The dead bodies left behind by the Pentagon as it seeks to guarantee the benefits of that paradise are rigorously concealed. The contrast between US bliss and Russia's dismal survival has persisted as a constant myth.

The Kremlin's imperial compulsion is also observed as an unfortunate resource of a country trying to cope with its grim fate. The most extreme Eurocentric views see Russians as a white ethnic group that failed to assimilate into Western civilisation and remains stuck in the backwardness of the East. The Nazis tried to solve this anomaly through the extermination of part of the Slavs, but Hitler's defeat buried for a long time that denigrating optics. Today, the old prejudices are once again being revived.

Such nonsense must be shelved if we want to evaluate with any seriousness Russia's place in the club of imperial powers. First of all, it is necessary to clarify the status of this country within the universe of capitalism. The presence of this system is a condition for belonging to the imperial swarm. Ignorance of this connection prevents liberals (and their media vulgarisers) from coming to an understanding of the problem.

The restoration of capitalism

For three decades now, the three pillars of capitalism have prevailed in Russia. Private ownership of the means of production has been restored; the norms of profit, competition and exploitation have been consolidated; and a political model guaranteeing the privileges of the new ruling class has been introduced.

The adoption of this system occurred at a dizzying speed. In only three years (1988-1991) Gorbachev's attempt to gradually reform the USSR was buried. As his

Perestroika model rejected socialist renewal and popular participation, it facilitated a sweeping restoration of capitalism. The old elite self-demolished its own regime to get rid of all restrictions preventing its reconversion into a propertied class.

Yeltsin steered that breakneck transformation through 500 days of privatisations. He parcelled out public property to his close associates and transferred half of the country's resources to seven business groups. The new system did not emerge, as in Eastern Europe, from outside and under Western influence. It was gestated from above and within the preceding system.

The bureaucracy was transformed into an oligarchy through a simple change of clothing. This same mutation from standard bearers of Communism into proponents of capitalism occurred in all countries associated with the Kremlin.

It is clear that economic stagnation, declining productivity, the inefficiency of compulsive planning, shortages and underproduction underpinned the malaise that precipitated the collapse of the USSR. But the magnitude of these imbalances has been overestimated, forgetting that they never matched the magnitude of the financial collapses suffered by Western capitalism. The Soviet economy did not face, for example, an earthquake equivalent to the collapse suffered by the banks in 2008-09.

The USSR model was buried politically by a ruling class that reshaped the country. In this transformation lies Russia's great difference with China, which kept its traditional government structure intact while operating in a new scenario marked by the protagonistic presence of capitalists.

This difference determines the pre-eminence of a restoration already completed in Russia while still unresolved in China. The management of the state has been the decisive variable in the return to capitalism. This shift had the same historical impact as the fall of the monarchical regimes had in the emergence of that system.

Yeltsin forged a republic of oligarchs who seized control over oil, gas and the export of raw materials. He introduced authoritarian management of executive power and widespread fraud in parliamentary elections.

Putin contained this predatory dynamic through a sustained tension with the new plutocracy. But he did not attack the privileges of the millionaires. In order to curb private indebtedness, external deficit, monetary problems and local disinvestment, he introduced controls and challenged the wealthy when it came to deciding who had the power to make decisions.

This conflict was settled with the imprisonment of Khodorkovski, the displacement of Medvedev and the harassment of Navalny. In the wake of these events, Putin managed to extend his mandate and asserted his authority. But he also reaffirmed privatisations and the elitist management of strategic sectors of the economy. He only put a limit on the plundering of natural resources to marginalise the wealthy from direct government control.

This double action is often misunderstood by analysts who place Putin in the simplistic pigeonhole of authoritarian ruler. They omit the strategic role he played in the entrenchment of capitalism.

This process required a super-presidential political system, based on bureaucracies and security apparatuses doubled the size of those left behind by Yelstin. Putin ensures his predominance through manipulation of the electoral system and restrictions on who can run as candidate for relevant positions.

But this supremacy does not imply a unipersonal model dependent on the moods of the chief in command. The head of the Kremlin rules in a consensual manner to preserve cohesion among the elites. Through his moderating role, he avoids confrontation among the 100 families that control the economy. This harmonisation requires arbitration, which the president has perfected after two decades of governmental command.

In Russia, therefore, the restoration of capitalism as an unavoidable precondition for any imperial status is corroborated. But the prevailing variety of this system raises other kinds of questions.

A contradictory and uncertain model

For three decades, neoliberal academics have vacillated over just how far the much pondered “transition to a market economy” has matured. They never manage to explain Russia’s curious development, which refuted all orthodox predictions of competition and welfare. The promised capitalist prosperity did not emerge from the ashes of the USSR. Bureaucratic-compulsive planning was replaced by a model that brings with it greater imbalances (Luzzani, 2021).

The usual dynamics of the market face unprecedented obstacles in an economy with low productivity, lack of transparency and business practices at odds with the manuals of liberalism. The weight of monopolies is as dominant as the protagonism of mafias in a scheme ironically identified as “Jurassic capitalism”.

The process of accumulation is marked by the omnipresence of clans and their consequent modalities of personal dependence. A narrow circle of beneficiaries profit from informal mechanisms of appropriation based on state coercion. Within this framework, capitalism functions in the shadows, favouring an elite that expands its patrimony through limited investment, productive take-off or an expansion of consumption.

Several adversities within the prevailing regime of the USSR (bureaucratism, corruption, uncoordinated administration, inefficiency) have been recycled in an equally inoperative model. Cultural relations forged after many decades of bureaucratic primacy have been recomposed, generating an inertia that enhances inequality without allowing for the kind of development that the Soviet Union was once proud of. The old adversities of the bureaucratic model have converged with the new hardships of capitalism (Buzgalin, 2016).

For thirty years, a regime of raw material exports has prevailed, with large companies specialising in the commercialisation of gas (Gazprom), oil (Rosneft) and natural resources (Lukoil). The weight of the private sector is as spectacular as the enrichment of millionaires linked to these activities. Due to this dependence on exported fuel, Russia has been subjected to the international fluctuation of oil prices.

This pre-eminence of raw materials contrasts with the primacy of industry in the previous regime. Russia preserves an important level of technological development, but the opening up to imports, disinvestment and simple inertia have severely affected the old manufacturing apparatus and obstructed its modernisation. Industry was penalised by a liberal elite of exporters unconcerned about this sector. Small manufacturing production was also affected by the entry of multinational corporations in a context of low domestic financing.

The flip side of this reduced credit provision was the disproportionate levels of foreign indebtedness reached under the elites that demolished the USSR. By means of this mortgage, they precipitated the removal of controls over financial flows. The effect of this drain was the enormous flight abroad of the surplus generated at home. The gigantic mass of money that the oligarchs disseminated in tax havens abroad was withdrawn from the local accumulation process. Russia ranks first in the world in terms of expatriated capital, with Argentina in third place. The degradation affecting this South American economy illustrates the dramatic consequences of expatriating large patrimonies. In 1998, this decapitalisation led to a huge ruble crisis in Russia. Putin reacted with drastic changes to contain this neoliberal vulnerability. He stopped the haemorrhaging of funds and built a huge petro-state that retains a trade surplus to facilitate the safeguarding of reserves (Tooze, 2022). This dam serves to counterbalance the fragility of a model affected by primarisation. The durability of such a scheme remains a big question mark for all economists.

Today's semi-periphery

Russia fits into the category of economies that are equally distanced from capitalism's centre and periphery. It is a semi-periphery country, located in the intermediate link of the global division of labour. That insertion is likened by some analysts to the place that India or Brazil occupy in the world (Clarke; Annis, 2016). In all three cases, the enormous size of the country's territory, population and resources are key factors. A similar distance of separation also exists with regards to those economies that are more functional to globalisation (South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia).

Russia is not part of the club of powers that command world capitalism. Structural gaps remain between it and developed countries when it comes to every indicator of living standards, average consumption or size of the middle class. But its distance from the economies of Africa and Eastern Europe is equally significant. It remains in the semi-periphery, as far away from Germany and France as it is from Albania and Cambodia. Nor does the Eurasian giant act as a mere supplier of raw materials. It asserts its enormous influence in supplying gas to two continents. That is why it competes with other major suppliers in the battle for prices and conditions of supplying this resource. But none of Russia's energy companies has the strategic relevance of banks or technology firms in the United States, Western Europe or Japan. The country does not compete in the major leagues of globalised competition and digital capitalism. Russia's semi-peripheral status in global stratification differs from the impressive ascent of China, which has achieved a central place in that hierarchy. Moscow does not come close to that podium.

US imperial hostility

Russia's conversion into an imperial power is an open possibility due to the country's weight on the world scene. It exhibits an unstable but fully restored capitalism and an intermediate but very important international insertion. Its geopolitical role is determined by its clash with the dominant world structure, headed by the United States.

Russia is NATO's favourite target. The Pentagon is hell bent on undermining all the defensive devices of its great adversary. It seeks the disintegration of Moscow and came close to achieving it in the Yeltsin era, when US banks were probing around for shareholder control of Russian companies (Hudson, 2022). That failed attempt was followed by systematic military pressure.

The first step was the destruction of Yugoslavia, with the consequent conversion of an old Serbian province into the ghostly republic of Kosova. This enclave now guards the energy corridors of US multinationals in the vicinity of Russia.

NATO transformed three Baltic countries into a missile launching pad against Moscow, but was unable to extend this encirclement to Georgia. The military adventure attempted by its puppet at the time (Saakashvili) failed.

The Pentagon subsequently concentrated its attention on the southern border belt, through a wide range of operations located in Transcaucasia and Moldova. Through this it ended up converting Ukraine into the mother of all battles.

US ruthlessness against Russia includes one touch of inertia and another of historical memory of the experience of the Soviet Union. The goal of demolishing the country that incubated the first socialist revolution of the 20th century is a reactionary one that has survived even after the disappearance of the USSR (Piqueras, 2022). Despite the categorical pre-eminence of capitalism, the West has not incorporated Russia into its current sphere of operation.

The United States has unleashed an endless succession of aggressions to prevent the re-composition of its enemy. It has implemented this escalation through a military alliance forged in the post-war period and operating as if the defunct socialist camp continued to exist. NATO has recreated the Cold War along the same lines of the 20th century and rekindled old international tensions. In the same way that the Holy Alliance continued to harass France after the defeat of Napoleon (simply because of the memory of the revolution), the contemporary aggression against Russia includes traces of revenge against the Soviet Union.

Complicity and reactions

France and Germany participate in the harassment of Russia with their own agenda that prioritises economic negotiation. Moscow offers energy supplies at very convenient conditions for German industries and Berlin has tried to counteract Washington's displeasure at this partnership.

The critical point lies in the construction of the natural gas pipeline under the waters of the Baltic Sea (Nord Stream 2). Already 1230 kilometres of pipelines have been assembled, directly connecting the Russian supplier to the German buyer. The United States has resorted to every conceivable manoeuvre to sabotage this project, which rivals its sales of liquefied gas. That conflict is one of the main undercurrents of the war in Ukraine.

Washington has exerted pressure on all fronts and during the pandemic succeeded in imposing a European veto on the Sputnik vaccine. Now it is demanding total submission to sanctions against Moscow, which tend to undermine the German project of trade agreements with Russia.

Berlin tried to take advantage of the collapse of the USSR to extend its prosperous Eastern European business. It sought to take advantage of the commercial opening initiated by Yeltsin and aspired to forge a Franco-German axis to attenuate Washington's dominance. The State Department escalated clashes with Russia to neutralise this strategy and succeeded in dragging its partners into the great crusade underway against Moscow (Poch, 2022).

The United States imposed a process of NATO rearmament that has widened the military spending gap with Russia. In 2021, the war budget of the largest power reached \$811 billion, Great Britain invested \$72 billion, Germany \$64 billion and France \$59 billion. These figures far exceed the \$66 billion of the Russian Federation (Jofre, 2021). The Ukrainian war was preceded, moreover, by an intensification of joint transatlantic exercises. Defender Europe 21 (held in May and June last year) involved 40,000 troops and 15,000 units of military equipment, with simulations very close to the borders on the East.

Russia attempted to stop this advance through several proposals that were ignored by the West. This rejection has been a constant feature of Washington's policy, which has chosen to disappoint Putin time and again. The Kremlin leader began his career with a great expectation of coexistence with the United States. After Yeltsin's traumatic experience, he tried to achieve a status quo based on recognition of Moscow as a power. To that end he issued countless messages of conciliation.

Putin collaborated with the US presence in Afghanistan, maintained cordial terms with Israel, cancelled the delivery of missiles to Tehran and did not interfere with the bombing of Libya (Anderson, 2015). That initial approach went as far as to include a suggestion of partnership with NATO.

The State Department responded to every peace offering with increased incursions and Putin gradually gave up on his illusions of harmonious coexistence. In 2007 he began a counteroffensive, which he consolidated with victories in Georgia and Syria.

Regardless, he continued to put forward armistice proposals that Washington simply ignored (Sakwa, 2021).

Russia is harassed, with the same brazenness that the Pentagon exhibits towards all countries that ignore its demands. But the United States is confronted in this case with a rival that is not Iraq or Afghanistan, nor one that it can mistreat as it does in Africa or Latin America.

Foreign interventions and military power

Russia is a capitalist country that has rebuilt its international weight, but until the incursion in Ukraine did not have the general features of an imperial aggressor. This format indicates the deepening of a path of geopolitical offensive that Putin has not yet fully developed, but had already hinted at.

The implosion of the USSR was followed by conflictive tensions in 8 of the 15 former Soviet republics. In all the conflicts in surrounding countries, Moscow has deployed its military force. From a discreet presence before the destruction of Yugoslavia, it moved onto a devastating incursion into Georgia and the current invasion of Ukraine.

Russia is trying to slow down the passage of its old allies to the Western camp and to avoid destabilisation on its borders. An example of this policy was the recent truce it

imposed on Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno Karabakh. It endorsed the recovery of territories consummated by the latter, to counter the defeat suffered in 2016.

But faced with the danger of a major conflagration, Putin forced an armistice that displeased his Armenian allies. Moscow displayed its power by imposing an arbitration that postponed the resolution of outstanding conflicts (refugees, local autonomies, corridors linking areas populated by both groups).

This equilibrium, in which all local elites are under its strict command, guides the Kremlin's intervention in the post-Soviet sphere. Russia issues orders in line with the Primakov doctrine, which favours the recovery of the country's influence abroad to counteract US hegemony (Armanian, 2020).

The author of this doctrine gained relevance as a precursor of Putin, promoting the multipolar project as a counterweight to US unilateralism. He promoted a strategic triangle with India and China (later extended to Brazil and South Africa), to create an alternative pole to US primacy.

Putin has followed these guidelines to thwart Washington's unilateral domination and with the aim of turning the Kremlin into a co-manager of international affairs. It is a very active strategy but does not in itself confer imperial status.

Military action is the key ingredient in terms of this status. Russia's war power has gained increased visibility. Moscow has 15 military bases in 9 foreign countries and asserts its gravitas as the world's second largest arms exporter.

This military influence does not compete on an equal footing with the arsenal of its US opponent. The United States has 800 foreign bases and its arms exports are double that of Russia. Of the top 100 companies in this sector, 42 belong to Washington and only 10 to Moscow. Moreover, the defence spending of the 28 NATO members exceeds its Russian equivalent by 10 times (Smith, 2019).

But the incidence of the arms economy in Russia is very significant. It is the only sector exempt from the industrial decline that followed the fall of the USSR. The high competitiveness of that branch already constituted an exception during the decline of that regime and has been consolidated in recent decades.

Putin did not limit himself to preserving the arsenal bequeathed by the Soviet Union. He reactivated the military industry in order to strengthen the country's international presence. This intervention has forced the military complex to extend its functions beyond the logic of deterrence. The defensive dynamic of these devices coexists with their use in foreign interventions.

A non-hegemonic empire in gestation

Russia is not part of the dominant imperialism, nor is it an alter-imperial or co-imperial partner within that network. But it carries out policies of domination through intense military activity. It is globally hostile to the United States, but adopts oppressive behaviours within its own radius. How can we define this contradictory profile? The concept of non-hegemonic empire in gestation synthesises this multiplicity of features. The non-hegemonic component is determined by the country's positioning in terms of the centres of imperial power. Like China, it is the object of systematic harassment by NATO. This harassment places Russia outside the main circuit of domination in the 21st century.

The imperial element is emerging in embryonic form. Capitalist restoration in a power with centuries of oppressive practices has already been consummated, but indications of imperial policies remain solely as possibilities. The term empire-in-formation highlights a status that is incomplete and, at the same time, congruent with the return of capitalism.

The definition of a non-hegemonic empire in gestation makes it possible to avoid two one-sided views. The first limits itself to merely pointing out conflicts between Moscow and Washington. The second exclusively focuses on oppressive tendencies.

Russia's dual status — as a nascent empire confronted by the US dominator — is overlooked by analysts who opt to merely describe Moscow's policy. They correctly point out that Russia is the largest country on the planet, with no room for partnerships with Europe or Asia. It also has a nuclear arsenal second only to that of the United States.

But Russia's economic performance is very unbalanced and has major weaknesses compared to China. It drags with it the weight of a convulsive capitalist restoration, which obstructs its insertion into the usual models of imperialism.

Comparisons with Brazil or India do not resolve Russia's imperial status, since this condition is equally controversial in both those cases. In the 21st century, it is no longer enough to distinguish between the dominant central powers and subjugated peripheral countries. Nor does the simple observation of similarities between large semi-peripheral economies clarify the geopolitical status of each country. US harassment of Russia does not extend to India or Brazil, but it determines Moscow's very different place in the global order.

The characterisation of Russia as a non-hegemonic empire in gestation contrasts with the image of a power already integrated into imperialism. Semi-peripheral insertion, the limited radius of Moscow's military interventions and the reduced magnitude of Russian transnational firms illustrate the differences with an already established status. But Russia includes clear imperial potentialities due to its capitalist condition and its dominant role in conflicts with its neighbours.

This empire in gestation faces a decisive test in the war in Ukraine. The incursion represents a qualitative shift in Moscow's actions, the results of which will have an impact on the country's international status. The conflict has consolidated Western imperialism's opposition to this Eurasian power, but it has also reinforced the Kremlin's oppressive behaviour in its border radius. The imperial tendencies that appeared as possibilities have been taken to a new level with the military operation against Kyiv (Katz, 2022).

How this war plays out is still open-ended. But it is conceivable that if Russia succeeds in this, its first large-scale incursion, the current embryonic profile could complete its process of maturation and overcome the barrier that currently separates it from a full-fledged empire.

On the contrary, if Moscow faces a sudden defeat or gets bogged down in an exhausting war of attrition, these imperial tendencies could be aborted before becoming effective. Ukraine will define whether Russia consummates or not its leap towards imperialist status.

In either hypothesis it is necessary to clarify more elements of the contemporary meaning of imperialism. We will analyse this problem by reviewing Lenin's thesis in the next article.

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