The Taiwan Question: From Civil War to External Intervention



By **Zang Ruxing**

Taiwan and the mainland are part of one and the same China. They have never been divided by any historical boundary. The people of Taiwan and the people of the Chinese mainland are one nation, with no division between them: they share the same language, the same history and culture, and the same folk-religious traditions.

The present-day separation between Taiwan and the mainland must be traced back to 1946. China was then known as the Republic of China (ROC) and governed by the Kuomintang (KMT) under Chiang Kai-shek. The country had only just emerged victorious from a fourteen-year war of resistance against Japanese invasion. The people lived in great hardship, and the country was in desperate need of reconstruction. The KMT, however, launched a war of encirclement against the Communist Party of China (CPC). Countless ordinary citizens and students mobilised against the civil war and the hunger it brought, but they could not stop it. The KMT collapsed with startling speed, and by 1949 it had been forced to retreat to Taiwan Province – one of China's thirty-five provinces. That retreat produced the stand-off that endures today.

The civil war began as a confrontation between left and right. As the Cold War took shape, it became one of its theatres – and, indeed, its frontline. Even after the Cold War began to unravel in the 1990s, the United States never abandoned its intervention. As US containment of the mainland has intensified, Taiwan – which Washington regards as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for the containment of mainland China – has become one of the regions of the world with the greatest risk of war.

The Legacy of the Chinese Civil War and US Intervention

On 15 August 1945, after fourteen years of bitter resistance by the Chinese people, the occupying Japanese army announced its unconditional surrender. It returned the territories it had seized in China, together with Taiwan, which it had occupied as a colony since 1895. The People's Republic of China (PRC) did not yet exist; the surrender was accepted by the KMT government, which represented China at the time and dispatched administrators and troops to begin governing Taiwan. Before the war, Taiwan had been a territory seized by an Axis power. Its return to the motherland after that power's defeat was wholly natural. Moreover, China was itself a victor in the war, and the handover therefore proceeded smoothly and without dispute – unlike in other places (such as the Ryūkyū Islands and Korea), which were placed under the trusteeship or military occupation of the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, or other powers. Taiwan's return marked the end of the era in which China had been carved up by imperialism, and the beginning of an era of unity. Taiwan also recovered the status of a Chinese province, which it had held before its cession to Japan.

But in 1946, the year after Taiwan's return, civil war erupted in China. By 1949 the defeated KMT government had retreated wholesale to Taiwan. The island accounts for less than four-thousandths of China's territory. At that point, the civil war was effectively over. On 1 October 1949, under the leadership of the CPC and in coalition with other parties, the PRC was proclaimed, replacing the old order. For the new China, Taiwan was a province that had yet to be liberated. For the KMT government, the prospect that Communist forces would launch an attack at any moment was a constant source of dread.

The Outbreak of the Korean War and the Cross-Strait Stalemate

On 25 June 1950, civil war erupted on the Korean peninsula. Socialist North Korea launched a general offensive, swiftly crossed the temporary demarcation line at the 38th parallel, and pushed south into Seoul, the capital of capitalist South Korea. On 27 June 1950, US President Harry Truman issued the 'Statement by the President on the Situation in Korea', announcing that he had ordered the US Air Force and Navy in the Far East to provide cover and support to South Korea. The statement also tied the Taiwan question directly to the conflagration on the Korean peninsula, treating both as facets of a single global communist threat in the Cold War. On this basis, Truman ordered the US Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. The US thus intervened directly in the Chinese civil war, blocking the CPC from taking Taiwan and completing national reunification.

Direct intervention by the US set the long stalemate of the Chinese Civil War in place. The present-day division and deadlock across the Strait can be traced to the US intervention that followed the outbreak of the

Korean War in 1950.

The Hardening of Division and the Construction of an Anti-Communist Order

Internal Purges and the Consolidation of Power

Having retreated to Taiwan, there was at last some reassurance for the KMT: it had survived. Its next task was to purge the opposition inside Taiwan – left-leaning students and intellectuals, alongside workers and peasants who opposed corruption. This was indispensable to the KMT, which understood that the reasons for its total collapse in only three or four years were not merely military: resistance from students, intellectuals, and the working masses had counted for more, and leftists in particular had to be eliminated. Between 1950 and 1953, some three-thousand people were executed by firing squad and seven to eight thousand were imprisoned. After this wave of mass purges against the left, the KMT's rule in Taiwan was consolidated, laying the foundation for the extreme right-wing, anti-communist system that followed.

Before the KMT's retreat, Taiwan had a population of around six million. In 1949, the remaining KMT troops who arrived on the island numbered 600,000. Together with military dependents, right-wing bureaucrats, capitalists, and landlords who had lost their land on the mainland, this contingent totalled between 1.2 and 1.5 million people, the majority of whom were committed supporters of the KMT's anti-communist order.

Economic Control, US Aid, and Prolonged Martial Law

When Taiwan returned to China in 1945, Japanese enterprises of the colonial period were taken over by the KMT government. After the KMT's retreat to Taiwan in 1949, these enterprises – spanning industry, mining, finance, electric power, and transport – became the most important pillar of its rule. Classified as 'state-owned' or 'public', they marked the transformation of Japanese monopoly capital into state capital, which then dominated Taiwan's economy.

From 1950, the US decided to bring Taiwan into its defence perimeter and turn it into a bastion of anti-communism. Washington began to provide economic aid to the KMT government under the Mutual Security Act (1951) passed by Congress. This aid took the form of free and low-interest US-dollar loans, supplies of agricultural produce and industrial equipment, and the direct dispatch of technical and military experts to Taiwan.

The US monitored and controlled the use of this aid with strict rigour, ensuring that it served the strategic objectives of the Cold War: consolidating the KMT regime, developing Taiwan's economy as a stable anti-communist fortress, and integrating Taiwan into the global capitalist system. The effect was to turn Taiwan into an economic appendage of the US, with its excessive dependence on Washington distorting the development of indigenous Taiwanese industry.

The Korean War broke out on 25 June 1950 and the US announced on 27 June 1950 that the Seventh Fleet would patrol the Taiwan Strait. The US Thirteenth Air Force was stationed in Taiwan from August 1950. In January 1951, the Exchange of Notes Concerning the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group in

the Republic of China was signed, and the US began supplying military materiel to Taiwan to secure the island's 'safety'. In 1954, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of China was signed and remained in force until 1979, when the US established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

The Chinese Civil War began in 1946, and on 10 May 1948 the KMT government promulgated the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of Communist Rebellion across the whole of China. These provisions, in effect a set of wartime clauses granting the president powers above the constitution, also applied to Taiwan as part of China. After the KMT's retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the provisions remained in force until 1 May 1991. In addition, on 19 May 1949, shortly before that retreat, martial law was imposed on Taiwan. It was not lifted until 15 July 1987 – thirty-eight years later, the longest unbroken period of military martial law anywhere in the world.

Under this pro-US, anti-communist regime of martial law, the people of Taiwan lived under dictatorship for forty years. Their political rights were suppressed, the struggles of workers and peasants for the right to subsistence were crushed, all contact across the Strait was forbidden, and the popular demand for peaceful reunification was given no hearing. Faced with the tragedy of national division, only one voice was permitted: the official slogans of 'counter-attack the mainland' and 'destroy the communist bandits'.

International Shifts and Turning Points in Cross-Strait Relations

The Rupture of Diplomatic Recognition and the Crisis of Rule

From the founding of the PRC on 1 October 1949, the ROC represented by the KMT had in reality lost both its representative character and the legitimacy of its rule. It was the backing of the US that allowed the ROC to continue to represent China at the United Nations (UN). Only in 1971 did the UN adopt Resolution 2758, deciding 'to restore all its rights to the People's Republic of China and to recognise the representatives of its Government as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations, and to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it'. On 1 January 1979, even the US gave up its diplomatic recognition of the ROC and established relations with the PRC, acknowledging it as the sole legitimate government representing China.

After the UN denied the ROC its status as the legitimate government of China, Chiang Kai-shek's KMT regime faced an immediate crisis of rule. In legal terms, Taiwan had become a region unlawfully occupied by the KMT. As a matter of practical politics, the case for the regime's legitimacy that Chiang had spent more than twenty years constructing – that the KMT was the legal government of all of China, that the mainland was unlawfully held by the CPC, that the present task was therefore to put down a rebellion, and that martial law was necessary and presidential elections could not be held during this 'period of communist rebellion' – was thoroughly familiar to the people of Taiwan. UN Resolution 2758 demolished this narrative entirely.

Shifts in Mainland Policy and the KMT's Intransigence

After the KMT was rejected by the UN in 1971 and by the US in 1979 (with the establishment of US–PRC

diplomatic relations), long-suppressed dissatisfaction with KMT rule began to surface in the form of opposition to dictatorship and demands for bourgeois democratisation. The Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of China was abrogated, dealing a heavy blow to the KMT government. The US immediately enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (1979), maintaining its relationship with Taiwan and supplying it with arms in a two-handed game – but the extent of its intervention could no longer compare with what had gone before. For the KMT, this was a serious crisis of rule; for the long cross-Strait confrontation, it offered a vital opening.

In late 1978, the Chinese mainland announced its policy of Reform and Opening Up, and on 1 January 1979 it established diplomatic relations with the US. These two major changes – domestic and international – made possible the mainland's promulgation of the 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan' – a major shift in cross-Strait policy. The proclamation's core content was: an end to military confrontation, with peaceful reunification to be achieved through negotiation on the basis of the One-China principle; the preservation of Taiwan's existing social system and way of economic life after reunification; and the opening of trade, transport, and postal links across the Strait. The KMT, fearing that cross-Strait peace would dismantle the 'anti-communist system' on which it had built its claim to legitimacy, flatly rejected the possibility of negotiations. It immediately denounced the mainland's proposal and put forward what came to be known as the 'three nos' policy: no negotiation, no contact, no compromise.

By the 1980s, the KMT was forced to revise its slogan towards the mainland from 'counter-attack the mainland' to 'reunify China under [the KMT's] Three Principles of the People'. By that point, the idea that the KMT could reunify China by force had become an unspoken joke among ordinary people, and an adjustment to the new realities was inevitable. Even so, 'reunifying China under the Three Principles of the People' meant that the KMT formally persisted with the goal of vanquishing the other side at the level of ideology. This was in keeping with the long-running, anti-communist education imposed on Taiwan, and stood in sharp contrast to the mainland's proposal for the coexistence of two systems within the framework of One China. Until that moment, there remained one shared premise across the Strait: that both sides belonged to One China. If today the situation were still a confrontation under the principle of One China, then – given the mainland's Reform and Opening Up and the dense web of trade, investment, and personal exchange (travel, study, intermarriage) that has grown up across the Strait – we could reasonably expect a steady movement towards peaceful reunification.

The Formation and Development of Taiwanese Separatism

The Emergence of Separatism and the Rise of the DPP

A political force advocating separation from China emerged within Taiwan – its representative is the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has held executive power from 2000 to 2008 and from 2016 to the present, with the backing of the US.

In 1895, after its defeat by Japan, Qing China was forced to cede Taiwan, which became a Japanese colony until Japan's defeat in 1945. Across fifty years of colonial rule, struggles against alien domination were ceaseless. To consolidate its control, Japan first imposed assimilationist policies. With the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, it forced what was called the *kominka* (imperial subject-isation) policy,

suppressing the Han Chinese folk-religious traditions of the population, requiring the use of the Japanese language, indoctrinating loyalty to the Japanese emperor and to militarist ideology, encouraging the adoption of Japanese surnames, and compelling the population to worship at Japanese Shintō shrines (in that period, Shintō beliefs were tightly bound to Japanese state ideology).

As one would expect, *kominka* met with resistance in many forms. In private, people kept up traditional beliefs and customs, secretly studied written Chinese, and watched traditional theatre in order to preserve their Chinese cultural identity. Some young people went further, joining the war on the mainland and fighting alongside their compatriots against Japan.

But there are always collaborators under colonial rule. The collaborators of the *kominka* era were drawn mainly from those Taiwanese who held positions in the Japanese colonial administration – landowners, sections of the elite who had benefited from colonial rule, and industrial and commercial capitalists. After Taiwan's liberation from colonial rule, this group was not subjected to any reckoning, but it did lose its former privileged position. It is this disaffected stratum that later became the core of the anti-KMT Taiwanese separatist movement. From the 1980s onwards, the theory of colonial modernisation and the colonialist view of history that they propagated became the mainstream of Taiwanese society. The *kominka* education described above left its imprint on the consciousness of the Taiwanese people, helping the separatists' colonial historiography to take root as the prevailing view.

External Manipulation and the Intensification of Internal Contradictions

If those who had collaborated with the *kominka* policy were never purged by the KMT, why did they become the force that opposed it? Although the KMT undertook no personnel or cultural reckoning with the colonial residue, the large number of governing elites it brought from the mainland when it retreated to Taiwan occupied all the major posts in government, displacing the upper-class elites of the Japanese colonial period and provoking their resentment. Although the social elites who came over with the KMT made up only a small fraction of China's population, they appeared numerous against the small island of Taiwan.

The KMT, having retreated to Taiwan, also implemented land reform in stages between 1949 and 1953, principally to forestall the kind of peasant revolution that had swept the mainland. The reform compelled landowners to surrender their land in exchange for stock in state-owned enterprises and physical land bonds. Large landowners turned into industrial and commercial capitalists, while middling and smaller landowners declined relatively – the latter becoming one of the main forces opposing the KMT and supporting separatism.

The decisive external factor in Taiwanese separatism is the backing of the US. In November 1943, with Japan's defeat already in sight, the leaders of China, the US, and the United Kingdom issued the Cairo Declaration. This was the first international document to specify that, after Japan's defeat, 'all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China'. In July 1945, one month before Japan's defeat, China, the US, and the United Kingdom – later joined by the Soviet Union – reaffirmed this principle in the Potsdam Proclamation. In August 1945, Japan's Instrument of Surrender explicitly accepted the Proclamation. Taiwan was thus returned to China. All of this accorded both with international law and with the principled right of a country to recover its territory.

By 1951, however, the US – driven by the requirements of its Cold War containment of China – concluded

the Treaty of Peace with Japan (the San Francisco Peace Treaty), excluding China from the process. Article 2 of that treaty merely states that Japan renounces all 'right, title, and claim' to Taiwan and the Penghu Islands. Of these renunciations, the treaty deliberately failed to say to whom they were made: Taiwan was rendered 'of undetermined status'. A treaty concluded without the principal party concerned can carry no legitimacy, and it ran contrary to both the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation. The PRC duly issued a statement denouncing it as 'illegal and invalid'.

In contriving the 'undetermined status of Taiwan', the US in fact still recognised One China (of which Taiwan was a part), even as it recognised the ROC government as the sole legitimate government of China. The 'undetermined status' was an ambiguity deliberately manufactured by Washington – an insurance that Taiwan could one day be used as a pawn. In 1956, a pro-US, pro-Japanese, Taiwanese separatist organisation – the 'Provisional Government of the Republic of Taiwan' – was founded in Japan, taking 'the undetermined status of Taiwan' as its legal basis. When the US established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979 and the KMT's representative status was rejected by Washington and the wider international community, the KMT government was not the only force to face an unprecedented crisis. The still-weak Taiwanese separatist movement, then unable to operate openly, also felt the alarm. As fanatical anti-communists of the far right, the separatists feared above all that Taiwan would be reunified with socialist China. In March 1979, the general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, Kao Chun-ming, issued the 'Declaration of Formosan Self-Salvation', openly calling for Taiwanese separatism. It served as the herald of the separatist movement that would develop through the 1980s.

An Artificial and 'Anti-National' Construction

Almost all separatist movements around the world are grounded in a distinct nation, religion, language, or historical and cultural identity, or in the memory of a past state. Taiwanese separatism alone has nothing to do with any of these. Taiwan and the Chinese mainland have historically belonged to the same country; Taiwan has never been an independent kingdom; the two sides share the same language, the same folk-religious traditions, the same history, and the same culture.

Taiwanese separatism draws its impetus from two sources. First, anti-communism – on the basis of their class position, the leading separatists are deeply afraid of reunification with socialist China. Second, anti-nationalism –since anti-communism had already been the principal governing ideology of the KMT, it alone was insufficient for seizing power. Therefore, the main impetus of the separatist movement had to be anti-national. By 'anti-national' is meant the distortion of the class contradictions of Taiwanese society as 'native-place' contradictions. Finally, because hostility between native-place groups (chiefly the 'native Taiwanese' against the 'mainlanders' who arrived after 1949) was still insufficient to sustain a separatist movement, 'native-place' antagonisms were elevated into a 'national' contradiction.

A word is necessary here on the question of 'native place'. About 400 years ago, Taiwan was inhabited by indigenous peoples living in small tribal communities, alongside a small number of migrant cultivators from the Chinese mainland. From 1624 to 1662, the island was under Dutch colonial rule. In 1662, the Ming Dynasty general Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) reclaimed Taiwan from the Dutch, bringing with him tens of thousands of officers, soldiers, and their families. From then on, waves of migrants from the south-eastern coastal provinces of the Chinese mainland settled on the island, until Taiwan became a predominantly Han Chinese society. According to the 1940 census, the population stood at around six million, of whom indigenous peoples accounted for only 2–3% – roughly 150,000 to 160,000 people. The rest, all Han Chinese,

fell into two groups: those who had migrated from southern Fujian and spoke the Minnan (Hokkien) dialect of Chinese, and those who had migrated from Guangdong and Fujian and spoke the Hakka dialect.

Between the liberation of Taiwan in 1945 and the KMT's retreat in 1949, over a million soldiers, civilians, capitalists, and bureaucrats arrived from the mainland. Because they came from various provinces and cities across the mainland, they were referred to in Taiwan as 'mainlanders' (*waishengren*). This demographic structure essentially holds today: Hokkien (about 70%), Hakka and 'mainlanders' (13–15% each), and indigenous peoples (2–3%). The first three groups are all Han Chinese, and Taiwanese society is therefore a society centred on Han Chinese culture. Within it, the Hokkien, relying on their numerical preponderance, have come to call themselves 'Taiwanese'. It was from this group that Taiwanese separatism initially emerged.

The Distortion from Class Contradiction to 'National' Contradiction

Between Taiwan's liberation in 1945 and the early 1950s, when the KMT had completed its retreat to the island, two major events took place. The first was the popular uprising of 28 February 1947 – the so-called 228 Incident – against the tyranny of the KMT, which was put down by the KMT government with more than a thousand killed and injured. The second was the KMT's systematic arrest and execution of leftists between 1950 and 1953, in which around three-thousand people were put to death and several thousand more were imprisoned. Both events were, in essence, acts of resistance by the people in the face of class oppression: the first spontaneous, the second organised. If we fail to grasp this essence and look only at their outward form, it is easy to misread them as the oppression of 'native Taiwanese' by 'mainlanders' (that is, by the KMT ruling clique). Add to this the friction that inevitably arises between native-place groups in everyday life, and the separatists have all the more room in which to distort the historical record.

Native-place contradictions, of the kind that exist in many countries as regional contradictions, cannot in themselves give rise to a separatist movement. They had therefore to be distorted into 'national' contradictions. From this came the slogan 'Taiwanese are not Chinese', through which the rule of the largely mainland-born KMT clique was reframed as the rule of an 'alien nation'. It bears noting that the 'Taiwanese' the separatists invoke refers specifically to the Hokkien, and excludes the Hakka and the indigenous peoples.

To fabricate a national contradiction, it was necessary to fabricate a nation. If Taiwanese are not Chinese, then revulsion and hatred towards the Chinese had to be manufactured. Anti-communism and the hatred of a particular ethnic group came to define the separatists' steady march toward fascism. More serious still: because the people of Taiwan are themselves Chinese, this required a profound deformation of human nature in order to make them despise and detest themselves – to deny their own bloodline, history, culture, language, religion, and ancestors.

In order to invent a 'Taiwanese nation' distinct from the Chinese, some separatists have argued that, having been colonised by the Dutch and the Japanese, the Taiwanese carry 'the DNA of their rulers' in their blood. The construction of a new nation by artificial means is inevitably a contorted enterprise. As the 'Taiwanese nation' they proclaim cannot be separated from China by any historical, cultural, linguistic, literary, or folk-religious criterion, they have set about embracing Japanese colonial culture with enthusiasm in order to mark out a distinction – a move entirely consistent with their pro-Japanese origins in the colonial period. They have restored Japanese colonial-era artefacts and buildings as far as possible, embellishing their significance, glorifying the 'modernisation' that Japanese colonial rule is said to have brought to Taiwan, and even venerating the Japanese emperor. With the Hokkien constituting some 70% of Taiwan's population, the

separatists have wielded considerable electoral influence since the 1990s.

Separatism's Seizure of Power and the Mutation of 'Democratisation'

By the 1980s, Taiwan was making the transition from an era of light industry to one of heavy and chemical industry. Domestic big capital was taking shape, while small and medium capital developed rapidly under the 'three lows' of the 1980s (a low exchange rate, low interest rates, and low oil prices). The economic strength of these new capitalist forces naturally translated into demands for a corresponding voice in political and policy questions. As they sought outlets for their accumulated capital, they grew dissatisfied with the KMT's 'developmental dictatorship'. This was the social ground on which Taiwan's bourgeois democratisation movement of the period grew. The movement entered its mature phase in the 1980s, with its mainstream founding the DPP in 1986. The separatists swiftly took control of the party, and inscribed 'the establishment of a new state, the Republic of Taiwan' in its party platform in 1991.

Separatism's formal entry onto the political stage, its capture of power in 2000, and its dominance during most of the years that followed have been a disaster for Taiwan. It has denied the fact that Taiwan and the Chinese mainland belong to one and the same China, pushing cross-Strait relations – just then moving from Cold War confrontation towards reconciliation – into bitter confrontation. To clash with the mainland on such terms, Taiwan must depend entirely on the US, and the 'independence' that the separatists proclaim is therefore, in reality, total dependence on Washington.

Disregarding the needs of development, separatists have erected barriers across the Strait and obstructed normal economic exchange. Domestically, they have distorted Taiwan's history and culture, promoted a colonialist view of the past, stoked anti-China sentiment, and manufactured internal division and hatred. These have been used to cover their misrule on every front.

A common misunderstanding holds that the separatist forces represented by the DPP led the democratisation movement against the KMT dictatorship, and that the DPP is therefore Taiwan's progressive force. In fact, the democratisation movement that began to germinate in the 1970s, and which by the late 1980s had increasingly come under separatist leadership, ceased at that point to advance democratisation against dictatorship and turned instead to inflaming native-place sentiment and promoting an anti-national separatist movement. As a result, what is called 'democratisation' in Taiwan is exceedingly shallow and without substance. Since the DPP's return to power in 2016, the fascisisation of Taiwanese society has only grown more pronounced.

The Deterioration of Cross-Strait Relations under US Dependency

'De-Sinicisation' and the Escalation of Confrontation

Around 1990, with the New Taiwan dollar appreciating and industry needing to upgrade, traditional Taiwanese industries sought outlets abroad. At the same time, the external environment had been transformed by the dissolution of the Cold War and by the Chinese mainland's Reform and Opening Up, which was actively soliciting foreign investment and offering a series of preferential measures specifically to Taiwanese investors. Although the KMT remained in power, it too was transforming itself under

democratisation and pragmatic economic policy, opening Taiwanese capital to investment on the mainland and permitting cross-Strait family visits and intermarriage. The misunderstandings about the mainland that anti-communist, anti-China indoctrination had instilled in the Taiwanese public began to dissolve, and the historical, cultural, and religious ties that had been severed by isolation were slowly knitted together again. Family clan associations from across Taiwan returned to the mainland to trace their roots and pay respects to their ancestors. Cross-Strait exchange, forcibly walled off by political confrontation, began to be driven from below in an unstoppable surge.

The KMT's shift towards economic pragmatism gave the separatist DPP its opening: the DPP now seized the initiative on 'anti-communism' and pinned on the KMT the labels of 'pro-China' and 'sell-out'.

In the year 2000, with the KMT split between two candidates, the DPP's Chen Shui-bian was elected as the highest leader with 38% of the vote. The end of the KMT's fifty-year hold on power in Taiwan was a major political event, but the larger question was whether the DPP, with Taiwan independence in its party charter, would now move towards independence. In his inaugural address, Chen offered the so-called 'four nos and one without': so long as the CPC had no intention of using force against Taiwan, he would, during his term, not declare independence, not change the national title, not push for 'two-state' language to be entered into the constitution, not push for a referendum on independence or unification that would change the status quo, and there would be no question of abolishing the National Unification Guidelines or the National Unification Council.

In effect, Chen announced that Taiwan independence was impossible. The path to independence imagined by the separatists had been: take power, pass a referendum law, draft a constitution, and declare independence through a popular vote. The passage of a referendum law and the holding of a vote on independence had long been regarded by the separatist movement as a vital instrument. Chen did eventually pass a referendum law as a token gesture, but it directly excluded any matter touching on Taiwan independence from the categories on which a referendum could be held.

Although the Chen Shui-bian presidency demonstrated that the road to independent statehood was a dead end, the anti-communism, anti-China sentiment, native-place discrimination, and colonialism contained within Taiwan-independence consciousness were rolled out on a large scale during that period through the powers of the executive. The history curriculum for students was rewritten; the status of Standard Chinese as the sole official language of Taiwan was downgraded; Japanese colonial rule was beautified; markers and symbols of Chinese culture were stripped out. Cross-Strait intermarriage was obstructed in practice, and a series of discriminatory measures was imposed on spouses from the mainland.

Even with the many anti-China measures of the Chen presidency – including a ban on direct flights between Taiwan and the mainland – cross-Strait trade and investment, and the annual flow of millions of personal visits, exchanges, and family reunions could not be suppressed. In 2008 the KMT returned to power – the opening of direct cross-Strait links was its central pledge, and the corruption scandals of the Chen government had worked in its favour. However, across the eight years of DPP rule, the executive's drive to 'de-Sinicise' and vilify the mainland had had a considerable effect.

Between 2008 and 2016, with the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou in office, the KMT recognised the One-China principle and cross-Strait relations were swiftly improved, with direct cross-Strait flights inaugurating an era of mass exchange. During those eight years, the Chinese mainland and Taiwan signed more than 230

agreements, including the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. Unlike the typical inter-state agreement, which is so often a contest of interests, the mainland – acting on the One-China principle – granted Taiwan unilateral preferences on many points. For the mainland, the priority was not commercial advantage but the drawing-together of the two sides through exchange and economic integration. The preferences extended to Taiwanese agriculture and fisheries were particularly striking, since they directly benefited Taiwanese farmers and fishers.

Although the development of cross-Strait relations under Ma created favourable conditions for peace and prosperity in Taiwan, Ma never set out to undo the anti-China, de-Sinicising atmosphere that the DPP had cultivated in office. He is still criticised for this by those who support cross-Strait peace. In fact, when Ma sought to push the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement further during the late phase of his presidency in 2014, anti-China forces mounted a full-spectrum backlash – the occupation of the Legislative Yuan in the so-called Sunflower Movement. The young students who had grown up under Chen Shui-bian's anti-China, de-Sinicised history textbooks were the core of that movement.

Battered by that wave of anti-China mobilisation, the KMT suffered crushing losses in the local elections of 2014 and the general election of 2016. With the DPP back in office, the One-China principle was at once rejected and 'official' channels across the Strait were entirely severed. Even so, the mainland did not abolish the various trade and investment agreements and preferences already in place. On the contrary, it continued to roll out unilateral 'measures benefiting Taiwan', particularly preferences targeted at ordinary Taiwanese people. The mainland clearly judged that continuing to deliver tangible benefits to the people of Taiwan, and to win their goodwill, would serve the overall cause of reunification.

For the newly installed President Tsai Ing-wen, this was an ideal opening: she could oppose the mainland while continuing to extract enormous gains from cross-Strait trade (including with Hong Kong). During Tsai's presidency, Taiwan's annual trade surplus with the mainland rose from around $80 billion to more than $100 billion. This figure exceeded Taiwan's overall trade surplus with the rest of the world combined. In other words, Taiwan would have run a trade deficit without the Chinese mainland. The phenomenon of Taiwan opposing and resisting the mainland while simultaneously drawing a vast surplus from it – without provoking any objection from Beijing – is unique in the history of world trade. It is explained entirely by the fact that the mainland regards Taiwan as a part of China and accords it special treatment.

In 2018, US President Donald Trump launched trade and technology wars against China, and US–China antagonism intensified. In turn, the DPP seized the moment to intensify cross-Strait antagonism. In 2019, it used the anti-China riots in Hong Kong to stoke anti-China sentiment in Taiwan in support of Tsai's bid for re-election. With six months to go before the election, and with her polling numbers at a level where victory should have been impossible – an outcome of corruption, incompetence, and widening inequality under her government – Tsai turned the anti-China feeling that the Hong Kong 'anti-extradition' movement generated in Taiwan into the springboard of an electoral win. In 2022, the DPP government raised the temperature further by inviting US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi – a figure of high official standing – to visit Taiwan, prompting the mainland to launch large-scale military encirclement exercises around Taiwan immediately after her departure. From that moment on, the military crisis in the Taiwan Strait has only escalated.

From Tsai's inauguration in 2016, Taiwan's military strategy began to change. The old strategy was 'decisive engagement beyond Taiwan's borders' – that is, meeting and destroying the 'enemy' off the coasts of the

island. That strategy was redrawn: the 'enemy' is now to be destroyed at the beach, with the additional preparation of urban warfare. The shift reflects the fact that Taiwan has already lost the capacity to contest the air and the sea around it. All it can do now is wait for the 'enemy' to land and then resist – not in head-on engagement but in small-scale urban combat in the cities. Under such a strategy, a war over Taiwan would have no rear: the whole island would become the battlefield and civilian casualties would be enormous. This strategy – which treats the population as a hostage – is one drawn up under the direction of the US.

Beyond the substantive preparation for war, what matters most for the DPP is its need for an 'external enemy' to consolidate its internal dictatorship and screen out the class contradictions and the corruption inside Taiwanese society. There is a precedent for this in Taiwan: between 1949 and 1987, the KMT built a stable, long-running dictatorship on precisely this kind of external enemy, through the lens of Cold War's anti-communism.

During her time in office, Tsai enacted and revised a series of laws and policies to construct a war footing, escalating cross-Strait confrontation while invoking it to strengthen the repression of dissent at home. The list includes the establishment of Anti-Infiltration Act (2019), the Act of All-out Defence Mobilisation Preparation (2019), and the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area (2022). In addition to these were significant amendments to the National Security Act (1987), the Criminal Code, and the Classified National Security Information Protection Act (2003). Under direction from the US, and in order to overcome a shortfall of conscripts, the period of compulsory military service was extended from four months to one year, along with other related measures.

It is widely known that the military gap between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland is enormous. If war did break out in the Taiwan Strait, how many days – or weeks – Taiwan could hold out on its own is the subject of open discussion in Taiwan itself. That the separatists continue to court tension under these circumstances is wholly a function of US backing – they are firmly convinced that the US would send troops to Taiwan's aid. The separatists must therefore be unwaveringly pro-US, obeying Washington's instructions in foreign policy, defence, domestic governance, and trade. They will not permit the Taiwanese public a moment of doubt about the US. Ordinary Taiwanese people observe that the US has supplied Ukraine with money and arms but not sent a single soldier in the war with Russia. When they began to wonder whether the US would similarly fail to send troops in a Taiwan Strait war, Taiwan's highest leader proclaimed in public: 'There must be no questioning of the United States!'

The DPP's Lai Ching-te, who took office in 2024, is generally regarded as a more committed separatist than Tsai Ing-wen. Alongside his pro-US posture is a pronounced pro-Japanese orientation. In his inaugural address, Lai declared that 'the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to one another'. The statement was widely characterised as a 'new two-state theory'. Three days later, the mainland launched Joint Sword 2024-A – a military exercise around Taiwan.

During her eight years in office, Tsai raised the defence budget from 1.8% to 2.5% of GDP. In his first two years, Lai has pushed the defence budget further upwards to 3.3% of GDP. He has further pledged to increase it to 5% of GDP by 2030 – the figure publicly demanded by Robert O'Brien, the former White House national security advisor under President Trump. Given that Taiwan's annual tax revenue accounts for only about 14% of GDP – one of the lowest rates in the world – a defence budget of 5% of GDP would be a fatal blow to the welfare of the Taiwanese people.

Recently, Sanae Takaichi – a Japanese politician with a strong appetite for military expansion – took office as prime minister of Japan and declared that 'a Taiwan contingency' would constitute a 'survival-threatening situation' for Japan.[1] The remark heightened tensions across East Asia – the Chinese mainland protested vigorously against this interference in China's internal affairs, while Lai issued statements in support of Takaichi.

Lai has firmly endorsed Takaichi's militarist line. His government is using a range of channels to build various forms of 'unofficial' military exchange, contact, and cooperation with the Takaichi government. Examples include joint maritime search-and-rescue drills in international waters south of the Sakishima Islands of Okinawa, conducted in the name of the Japan Coast Guard on the Japanese side and the Coast Guard Administration on the Taiwanese side; the expansion of 'foreign and defence policy exchanges' between Japan's Liberal Democratic Party and the DPP; and the simulation of defence strategy under the guise of 'academic and policy research'. In this context, undisclosed exchanges of military intelligence can be assumed to be taking place.

The Lai government's determination to pursue military cooperation with the Japanese right is unmistakable. The risk that it touches the most sensitive nerves of the Chinese mainland – and triggers a military crisis in the Taiwan Strait and across East Asia – is very real.

Towards Peace in East Asia

Looking at the big picture, Taiwanese separatist forces are pro-US, anti-national, far-right, and fascistic. They have done immense damage to the political life, democracy, economy, and welfare of the people of Taiwan. These forces have plunged Taiwanese people into the terror of war and inflicted a grave injury on peace across East Asia. It is my belief that, in the absence of intervention from the US and other foreign powers, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait can find – on the basis of the One-China principle and through peaceful negotiation – a settlement that best serves the people on both sides. In doing so, they can make a great contribution to peace in East Asia.

Notes

[1] See: Kinoko Beats, 'Sanae Takaichi and the LDP's Pseudo-Democratic Elections', *The Third Asia Newsletter* (2026), Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 18 February 2026, **https://thetricontinental.org/asia/nl-japan-takaichi-ldp-elections/**; Keiko Yonaha, 'Not a Matter of Fate: Okinawa under US-Japanese Rule', *Tricontinental Interventions: Conjunctural Analysis from Asia* no. 11, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 22 May 2026, **https://thetricontinental.org/asia/not-a-matter-of-fate-okinawa-under-us-japanese-rule/.**

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Not a Matter of Fate: Okinawa under US-Japanese Rule



Edited official USMC photograph of a Marine overlooking Naha after the American bombardment during World War II, Okinawa, 1945. Source: Marine Corps Archives & Special Collections (CC 2.0).

By **Keiko Yonaha**

Seventy-nine years ago, on 10 October 1944, the US military launched the 10/10 Air Raid – a prelude to the Battle of Okinawa (1945).

According to an article written in the Japanese newspaper *Ryukyu Shinpo*, Akutagawa Prize-winning author Hino Ashihei recounted how he felt when he had visited Okinawa half a month before the air raid. He was astonished to find Naha, the capital of Okinawa prefecture, transformed from the 'land of poetry and quaint, the island of dreams' into a place of 'pre-war, rough and dusty uproar'. Hearing the news of the air raid back in Tokyo, he wrote: 'I heard the news with a burning sense of grief, feeling the enormous shadow of war approaching the gateway to the homeland.'

What these words so ominously evoke could be said of present-day Okinawa as well, fortified in the event of a 'Taiwan contingency', its future determined by the US military presence. Considering its pre- and postwar history, Hino described Okinawa as 'an island of tragic fate'.

'Fate' is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary as 'a power that causes and controls all events, so that

you cannot change or control the way things will happen', while the Oxford English Dictionary describes it as 'an inescapable, unalterable destiny'. While I believe Hino used the word as a sympathetic literary expression, I would ask, 'Is the suffering seen in Okinawa's history the sad fate of those of us born here? Who makes Okinawa an island of tragic fate?'

This essay seeks to answer those questions by examining Okinawa's suffering in both the past and present.

The Battle of Okinawa and the US Military Occupation

Before the San Francisco Peace Treaty

Okinawa was the only place in Japan where a ground war was fought in the Pacific Theatre of World War II – the Battle of Okinawa was so brutal that it changed the island's entire landscape. Okinawa was the scene of the final battle between the Japanese army and US forces, who had the advantage of long-range weaponry placed on gunboats. The battle came to be known as the 'Iron Typhoon' due to the barrage of bullets and bombs, which were as relentless as the wind and rain. The battle resulted in 200,656 deaths – 28,228 Okinawan soldiers, 65,908 Japanese soldiers, 94,754 Okinawan civilians, and 12,520 US soldiers.[1] It is said that one out of four Okinawans was killed in the war. However, when we include the Okinawans who died of war-related reasons, such as malaria and hunger, the number of people killed rises to one out of three.[2] US educator John Tyler Caldwell, who served as a US naval officer in the Battle of Okinawa, wrote: 'In Tenth Army planning for the operation against Okinawa, a civilian population of 300,000 was assumed. At the conclusion of the fighting on Okinawa, it was estimated that the civilians under military government numbered approximately 196,000'.[3]

Tragically, Okinawans had to experience the brutality of the Japanese army, who they believed would protect them in the battle. In effect, they had to run from two enemies: US soldiers and Japanese soldiers, who were sometimes said to have been more cruel than the former. Some Okinawans were forced to flee from the caves in which they were hiding, and some babies were killed or suffocated when they cried.[4] Others were killed as spies when they spoke native dialects, and many were robbed of their food by the Japanese soldiers.[5] Okinawans discovered that the Japanese army was not there to protect the people.[6] Shunichi Miyagi wrote that his parents told him that, after the war, Okinawans hated mainland Japanese people more than US soldiers because Japanese soldiers had treated locals so brutally. Conversely, since they were given the information that US soldiers are cruel, Okinawans were surprised and appreciative when US soldiers initially provided food, shelter, and even medical treatment to Okinawan surrenderers.[7]

However, that friendly sentiment did not last long. The US occupation had just started, and the people did not realise how bitter and severe the conditions were going to be. US journalist Frank Gibney might have already sensed this when he wrote:

> Though it classified them as "a liberated people", the US has sometimes treated Okinawans less generously in occupation than the Japanese did. The battle of Okinawa completely wrecked the

> islands' simple farming and fishing economy: In a matter of minutes, the US bulldozers smashed the terraced fields which Okinawans had painstakingly laid out for more than a century.[8]

Okinawan journalist Ikemiyagushiku Syuui also noted that, 'They [the Okinawans] like the Americans and openly want their island to become a US dependency':

> For a few years after the war, surely there were many who wanted to belong to America from the bitter feeling against the Japanese army and piled antipathy on Japanese officers since the Meiji era… However, "lax and inefficient Commanders" and "collapsed US military discipline", as Gibney described, had caused the US to lose the support of the Okinawan people as time went by.[9]

Before the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into effect, US soldiers engaged in a range of criminal activities and accidents, from the seizure of land for US military bases to corporal damage and serious impairment of well-being. Okinawan human rights activist Fukuchi Hiroaki notes that 229 illegal acts were recorded in 1948 and 205 in 1947. He commented on the US military's crimes as follows:

> Accidents by US military personnel were rampant at the time, and the number must be enormous. However, most of them were not recorded because police investigations were rarely conducted between 1945 and 1951. It was commonplace for neither arrest nor investigation of criminals to be undertaken. Therefore, no compensation. Deaths and injuries caused by US military vehicles were not included, even in criminal cases at the time.[10]

The rape of Okinawan women by US military personnel was frequent. It is likely that rape was much more common than any other crime. However, neither the US military nor the victims wanted a record made of these cases. A report from the US Military Government states that some soldiers injured local people as soon as they landed, with many of these injuries constituting sexual crimes.[11]

Memorandum #187 (3 June 1947) from the Office of the Governor of the Okinawa Civilian Administration, states: 'Recently forcible entries have frequently been made by Filipino servicemen into the civilian settlements near the places where they are stationed or [where] they maneuver, causing the Okinawans mortal fear'… 'Now the panic-stricken Okinawans are fearful of even farming, resulting in a decrease in agricultural crops, which are the most helpful source of making up for the deficiency of imported food'.[12] Ikemiyagushiku explains that due to the increase in the number of complaints against US soldiers, some units were sent back to the US and replaced by Filipino units. Ikemiyagushiku reports that, 'Young Filipinos were sent to Okinawa to take the place of US soldiers who returned home after the end of the Okinawan war. They turned their bitter feelings caused by the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in the Philippines toward the Okinawan people'.[13] However, for Okinawans who suffered and survived from atrocities by Japanese soldiers

in the war, it was surely unreasonable that they received revenge from Filipino soldiers because of the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in the Philippines. As the report shows, the change in personnel did not solve the problems of crime and violence and worsened the situation for Okinawans. Thus, in addition to extreme poverty, Okinawans faced daily fear in a disordered society. As an educational environment for children, it was a grave situation.

Frank Gibney's article 'Forgotten Island' in The *Times* is well known to scholars who have studied occupied Okinawa; however, he was not the first to use the term 'forgotten island'. Earlier, in an article titled 'Okinawa: Forgotten Island' (1947), the *Lodi News-Sentinel*, based in California, US, had already referred to Okinawa by the same term and expressed concern about the lack of clarification surrounding the island's status. Even though Gibney's article has often been mentioned by researchers, no one has yet considered the *Lodi News-Sentinel* article as a source for understanding the chaotic situation of Okinawa. The *Lodi News-Sentinel* writer, after describing much of southern Okinawa (which still had the appearance of a battlefield) and the once-thriving Naha port (which was simply a mass of ruins two years after the conquest of the island by the US), commented that Okinawa was a symbol of indecision on the part of the US in working out the details of its Far Eastern policy. A leading US citizen in Okinawa told the correspondent, 'When an occasional brass flies through here from Washington en route to Tokyo or Shanghai, he is likely to agree that Okinawa is of vital strategic importance to the United States but, so far as we can find out, he does nothing about it'.[14] The following passage from the article, titled 'Island Unbuilt Two Years after Capture of US', explains why Okinawa was one of the forgotten islands of the postwar period:

> US military leaders are not inclined to speak for publication, but it is obvious that they desperately hope for early clarification of the island's status and an announcement of a long-term American program. The local commanders are doing what they can, but that is little because of a lack of funds and authorisation. The best-kept spots on the island, so far as this correspondent could see in a hasty tour, are the five big military cemeteries in which the war dead are buried.

In these words, the irritation and anger of US military personnel toward the US government, which had no policy for the island, are evident. One of the main causes of the chaos was, as a writer in the *News-Sentinel* described, the 'indecision of the United States in working out the details of its Far Eastern policy'. Officers of the US Military Government in Okinawa shared the view that it was only after the peace treaty came into effect that Okinawa's territorial jurisdiction was determined. Proof of the same can be found in the minutes of the meeting of the heads of the 12 major Okinawan communities, held under the presidency of the US Military Government on 23 October 1945. In response to a question about whether they are going to set up a central organisation from the head of the Taira camp in the northern part of Okinawa, an officer of the US Military Government answered, 'For a while, there will be no central organisation. That will come after Okinawa's political status is decided at the Peace Conference. We cannot set up the government; however, a Military Government can exist'.[15]

As mentioned, 'forgotten island' was also used in the article of the weekly magazine *Time* in 1949 by Frank Gibney. He described it in the following way:

> For the past four years, poor, typhoon-swept Okinawa had dangled at what bitter Army men call "the logistical end of the line," and some of its commanders have been lax and inefficient. More than 15,000 US troops, whose morale and discipline have probably been worse than that of any US force in the world, have policed 600,000 natives who live in hopeless poverty.

He said that Okinawa was a dumping ground for army misfits and rejects from more comfortable posts, citing as an example the number of crimes committed by US soldiers in the past six months (29 murders, 18 rapes, 16 robberies, and 33 assaults).

Okinawa's unstable political status was determined by Article 3 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, signed in 1951. Article 3 was established on the basis that 'Japan agrees to any proposal by the United States to the United Nations to place Okinawa under a trusteeship system with the United States as the sole administering authority', meaning that the fate of Okinawa was decided by the Japanese and US governments. The date the treaty was signed (28 April) was a day of independence for Japan, marking its liberation from the occupation of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. But for Okinawa, it became a day of humiliation as it was placed under US military occupation. In the process leading to the decision of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the so-called 'Emperor's Message' – in which the Emperor recommended that 'the United States acquire long-term rights to US military bases in the Ryukyu Islands within the Japan-US treaties following the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty – played a significant role'. The Emperor's Message was one means of resolving the differences of opinion between the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the State Department regarding the disposition of the Ryukyu Islands.[16]

Furthermore, to support the JCS and others in their dealings with the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency argued that the Ryukyu Islands, particularly Okinawa, were strategically advantageous for monitoring and surveillance of maritime activity by China and North Korea, as well as for extensive aerial surveillance. This demonstrates how the intelligence agencies exerted influence over political decision-making.[17] Subsequently, the US military launched a full-scale campaign of coercive land acquisition using bulldozers and bayonets; construction of military bases proceeded despite the resistance of Okinawans.

After the San Francisco Peace Treaty

Following the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, a situation akin to colonial rule – in which US military bases were given priority under extraterritoriality and fundamental human rights were disregarded – persisted for 27 years in Okinawa until the reversion in 1971. For the author, who was born in US military-occupied Okinawa in 1953, one year after the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into force, the barbed-wire fencing around the bases was a familiar sight. Accidents, incidents, noise pollution, and environmental contamination caused by the presence of the bases were everyday problems. Following the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, the US committed a range of systemic crimes and administrative failures, spanning from the tragic 1955 murder of five-year-old Yumiko-chan to the 1959 Miyamori Elementary School jet crash.

The author recalls crimes that were a daily occurrence, such as taxi robberies, the killing or wounding of drivers, and rapes committed by US soldiers. Given the sheer number of incidents and accidents, as well as

the acquittal of US soldiers, it can be said that the state of chaos that prevailed during the early US military occupation, prior to the peace treaty, continued even after the treaty was signed. It was this situation that led to the 1970 uprising in Koza City. An accident occurred in which a car driven by a US soldier struck a resident; when US military police fired warning shots at protesting citizens, the enraged crowd set fire to more than 80 military vehicles. Although this was a spontaneous outbreak of anger against the discriminatory rule they had endured, not a single US citizen was killed or injured, and the crowd did not set fire to the vehicles of African Americans, who were themselves victims of discrimination.

Amid extreme human rights violations, it was Okinawan teachers who led the movement for reversion, moved by a strong desire to rebuild education for children. In April 1952, the Okinawa Education Federation was reorganised into the Okinawa Teachers' Association, with Chobyo Yara as President, Seitoku Shinzato as Secretary-General, and Shinei Kyan as Deputy Secretary-General. Their main activities included the formation and operation of the Committee for the Promotion of the Reopening of War-Damaged Schools in Okinawa (1952), the establishment of the Okinawa Association for the Protection of Children (1953), the promotion of the movement for reversion to Japan (1953), the holding of educational research conferences (1955), and the construction of the mutual aid hall Yashio-so (1960). The Teachers' Association is described as having 'always played a central role in mass movements addressing issues arising from Okinawa's unique situation of being under foreign rule, such as the campaign to remove military bases and the island-wide struggle to protect land'.[18]

Okinawa after the Reversion to Japan

Problems Arising from the Presence of Military Bases

The hope that Okinawa would become a peaceful island free of military bases upon reversion has not been realised. Currently, 70% of US military facilities in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa, which accounts for only 0.6% of Japan's total land area. In response to arguments that this excessive burden of military bases is unfair, opinions from the mainland are occasionally heard stating that 'since the bases were originally in Okinawa, Okinawa should bear the burden'. However, in 1953, 89% of US troops were stationed in mainland Japan, with only 11% in Okinawa.[19] In 1959, the ratio shifted to 61.8% in mainland Japan and 38.2% in Okinawa. It was the result of anti-military base movements in the prefectures that had US military bases, and US troops stationed across mainland Japan were continuously relocated to Okinawa. This continued to increase after 1959, and by the time of reversion in 1972, the figures stood at 46% for mainland Japan and 54% for Okinawa. Although Okinawa had dreamed of becoming a peaceful island without bases upon reversion, the number of facilities continued to rise even after the event, and the current situation of 30% for mainland Japan and 70% for Okinawa has been maintained. If this ratio is calculated as density (bases divided by territory), the US military bases are concentrated in Okinawa at a density 386 times that of the rest of Japan.[20]

Therefore, despite Okinawa's reversion to Japan, US military-related incidents have continued, including murders of local women (1982 and 2016), the assault of a primary school girl (1995), multiple aircraft crashes (2004, 2016, 2017), and several dangerous incidents involving falling helicopter and Osprey parts near schools and nurseries between 2017 and 2021.

There have also been numerous traffic accidents involving US military personnel; this means that compensation is rarely paid out since most of the personnel aren't insured. US military officials state that, under Article 9 of the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), they are permitted to enter and leave the country without undergoing immigration procedures, making it impossible to verify whether they have actually left. Of the 1,130 incidents and accidents involving US military personnel and civilian employees occurring outside the scope of official duties between 2014 and 2018, only 73 cases saw victims who had not received compensation from the perpetrators file claims for damages against the United States under the Japan-US SOFA.[21] The sheer number of cases where victims simply accept their fate suggests that the people of Okinawa, who are historically aware of the realities of the US military occupation, have felt a sense of resignation from the outset.

Apart from the incidents and accidents that threaten daily life simply because of the presence of the bases, the constant roar of US military aircraft now spreading across the entire island, not just Kadena and Ginowan, is another threat not only to physical but also to mental health. Recent revelations of contamination by 'forever chemicals' – per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances or PFAS – in drinking water in Chatan, Ginowan, and Kin Town continue to threaten the health of the people of Okinawa. A secondary school teacher, who is a plaintiff in the fourth noise pollution lawsuit brought by residents of the eight municipalities surrounding Kadena Air Base, argues that this situation is extremely detrimental to students' future prospects and to their living and learning environments.[22] What residents seek through the noise pollution lawsuit is an environment where they can live and sleep in peace, yet this wish remains unfulfilled, no matter how many times they voice it. Regarding PFAS, a 2020 survey detected levels up to 410 ng/l in six water intake wells supplying Kin Town's tap water, and levels exceeding the guideline value of 70 ng/l were found in the tap water supplied to residents. It has also come to light that while the tap water supplied within Camp Hansen is treated water sourced directly from the Okinawa Prefectural Enterprise Bureau, the residents of Kin Town are supplied with tap water that is a blend of PFAS-contaminated groundwater and treated water from the Enterprise Bureau – an unjust situation.[23]

The preferential treatment of US military personnel at the bases, compared with local residents, is also a problem. Although PFAS contamination around Kadena Air Base is severe, access to the base is not permitted under the Japan-US SOFA. The US military has criticised the Okinawa Prefectural Government, which is investigating PFAS contamination using the US Freedom of Information Act, and the Okinawa Defense Bureau, which requested information from the US military. The US military prefers that discussions take place within the Japan-US Joint Committee, where the content of deliberations is kept confidential, and the US military's views are strongly reflected.[24]

The Japan Problem Entrenched in Okinawa

Those who seek to justify Okinawa's excessive burden of military bases frequently cite the argument that Okinawa's geopolitical location is militarily advantageous. Masahide Ota points out that if North Korea is a threat, then Northern Kyushu is more advantageous from a geopolitical perspective. He states: 'The existence of an excessive number of bases in Okinawa is not based on any sort of geopolitical fatalism, but rather can only be attributed to the government's deliberate policy of discrimination'.[25] On 19 September in 2023, Governor Denny Tamaki appealed to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, stating, 'Despite the public's opposition being demonstrated in the prefectural referendum, the Japanese government

is forcibly pushing ahead with the relocation of the US Marine Corps Futenma Air Station to Henoko in Nago City'. However, the national government responded, 'The stationing of US forces in Okinawa is based on geopolitical reasons and Japan's security needs, and is not based on discriminatory intent. We take the results of the prefectural referendum seriously and are working to alleviate the burden on Okinawa as one of our top priorities.

However, these geopolitical justifications have already been refuted by remarks made in 2014 by former Defense Minister Gen Nakatani, who said, 'Base dispersal is possible if we set our minds to it, but there is significant resistance outside the prefecture'. Former US Secretary of Defense William J. Perry has also stated, 'Anywhere in Japan would be fine, but the Japanese side is extremely reluctant to relocate the base outside the prefecture'. The statement that the Japanese government takes the results of the prefectural referendum seriously contradicts its continued insistence on forcing through the construction of a new base while ignoring the referendum result. The Japanese government's set phrase 'make alleviating Okinawa's burden one of our top priorities' also contradicts the reality of the increased burden of US military bases since reversion, as well as the recent rapid increase in Self-Defense Forces deployments and base expansion. The claim that the construction of the new base will 'enable the complete return of Futenma Air Station as soon as possible' is also at odds with the government's actions: adding eight conditions – including the military use of a civilian airport – to the return terms, and commencing infrastructure development at Futenma Air Station, which was supposed to be returned. It can be said that the Japanese government, with its inconsistency between words and deeds, continues to make false statements to force Japan's security issues onto Okinawa and to make Japan's problems solely Okinawa's problems. A key issue regarding the new Henoko base is that the Administrative Appeal Act (1962) – intended for citizens to lodge appeals against administrative decisions or the exercise of public authority – is being utilised by the Japanese government itself, which is responsible for administration and the exercise of public authority. Furthermore, the greater problem lies in the state of Japanese politics, where the separation of powers does not hold, as the judiciary permits unlawful abuse of administrative law.

The first and most important question for Okinawa at present is regarding the issue of a 'Taiwan contingency' – should Okinawa become a battlefield in the event of a cross-strait crisis between mainland China and Taiwan? Is "Taiwan contingency" a Japanese contingency? Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's statements reflect the view that 'a Taiwan contingency is a Japanese contingency'; however, given that both Japan and the United States recognise the One China principle and acknowledge that Taiwan is Chinese territory, a Taiwan contingency cannot constitute a Japanese contingency. It is impossible to characterise a war triggered by interference in internal affairs as a defensive war for Japan. Despite this fact, without any basis or evidence, many people invoke the 'China threat' – claiming that China will invade Japan – to justify Japan's militarisation.

The next question is why the Japanese government shifted from a purely defensive stance to one permitting pre-emptive strikes by approving attacks on enemy bases, a clear violation of the Japanese constitution? A serious problem behind it is that, in the event of a 'crisis of national survival', an attack could be authorised by the prime minister's decision alone, without passing through the National Diet (Japan's parliament). This could be described as the Japanese version of the Nazis' Enabling Act (1933). Hitler invoked the emergency decree powers under Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which had been praised as a fine constitution, to suspend fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and association. In March, the Enabling Act was passed by the Reichstag. This effectively established a dictatorship through legal means. Former

Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso had commented on this in 2013, 'One day, people realised that the Weimar Constitution had been replaced by the Nazi Constitution. It changed without anyone noticing. Why not learn from that tactic?' It is clear that this is what is being put into practice in Japan today. However, what distinguishes this from the Nazi regime is that Japan is in a state of subservience – it is the United States, not Japan, that determines what constitutes a 'crisis of national survival'.

During the revision of the Japan-US Security Treaty in 1957, both the ruling and opposition parties opposed including Okinawa within the treaty's scope in order to preserve Japan's security and avoid being drawn into war. The ruling party opposed this on the grounds that applying the 'prior consultation system' to Okinawa would restrict the introduction of nuclear weapons.[26] The opposition opposed it for fear of being drawn into a war with the US. This separation of Okinawa was also carried out during reversion. In the final stages of the reversion negotiations, the Japanese government opposed the 'substantial consolidation and reduction of bases' as a condition of reversion, arguing that the US military in Okinawa served the peace and security of the Far East, including Japan.[27]

Okinawa is once again being treated as a frontline of war, just as it was during the Battle of Okinawa. The Act on the Review and Regulation of the use of Real Estate Surrounding Important Facilities and on Remote Territorial Islands (2021) – often referred to as the 'War Preparation Act' – is specifically targeted at Okinawa. Once enacted, it is highly likely to result in the suspension of property rights for the people of Okinawa, human rights violations, and the infringement of freedoms of thought, belief, assembly, and association. Anti-war activist and writer Makoto Konishi argues that the primary purpose of this law is the defense of the straits – that is, 'island warfare' – and points out that its ultimate aim is to turn the islands of Okinawa and Amami, which are already becoming a 'missile archipelago', into 'fortress zones'. He states that this act, much like the pre-war Fortress Zone Act (1899), is designed to expel and evacuate residents from the target areas and to monitor and punish any civilians who 'intrude' into them.[28]

While Okinawans make every effort to avoid war, the Japan-US joint exercise, based on the Japan-US Combined Operational Plan, is carried out every year and has expanded in size. Military fortification is now spreading not only to Okinawa, which has been designated as a battlefield under the Japan-US Joint Operational Plan, but also to western Japan and across the entire country. On Yonaguni Island, Japan's westernmost inhabited island, residents were gathered for the Japanese government's fourth evacuation briefing. Seeing the residents bowing their heads in despair, saying 'we don't want to leave the island', brings nothing but tears to the eyes.[29] Under the euphemistic name of the Civil Protection Act (2004), the Japanese government is relentlessly preparing for US warfare by seizing land, livelihoods, and culture, and using residents as human shields. Meanwhile, Japan's major media outlets are failing to report on the crisis in Okinawa, and the majority of Japanese people view it as someone else's problem.

Provoking a war between Japan and China – justified by the protracted war in Ukraine or a Taiwan contingency – is a desperate attempt by the US to ensure its survival as a superpower. Japanese journalist Takashi Okada points out that the United States is pursuing exactly the same policy towards Taiwan as it did towards Ukraine in the times preceding the Russian intervention.[30]

Needless to say, the history of Okinawa's suffering, and the hardships it faces today as it is turned into a battlefield, are by no means a matter of 'fate'. Rather, they are the direct consequences of political choices by

the US and Japanese governments. The Okinawan people and the people of the region will continue their collective action and resistance for the peace of Okinawa and the region.

Notes

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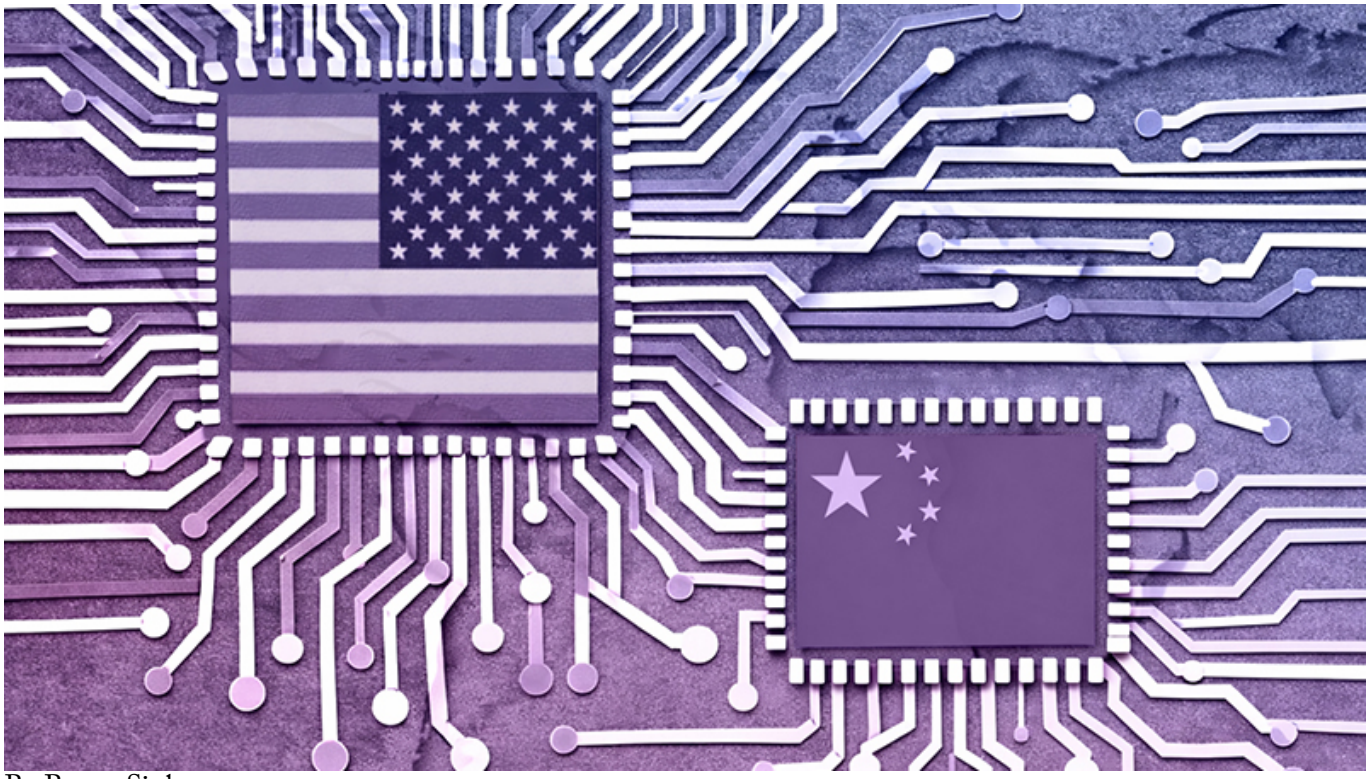
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Breaking the Stranglehold: How China is Shattering US Technological Hegemony



By Bappa Sinha

1. Imperialism, Technology, and the Crisis of Monopoly

For over a century, imperial power has rested not merely on military force or financial dominance, but on

monopolistic control over the most advanced means of production. From the industrial revolution through the age of digital platforms, successive imperial cores have secured global dominance by capturing technological frontiers, extracting monopoly rents, and using those rents to finance further technological leadership. This cycle produced what appeared to be a self-reproducing hierarchy: the imperial core monopolised technology and capital, the periphery supplied labour and resources, and unequal exchange transferred value upward, even in the absence of formal colonial rule. The pattern was encoded in theories of comparative advantage and development stages, and institutionalised through World Bank orthodoxy and IMF structural adjustment.

The rise of China has placed that system under strain. The United States' escalating campaign of export controls, sanctions, and technology embargo against China is widely described as a 'great power competition'. Such framings obscure the real stakes. This is not simply a rivalry between two nations but a confrontation between two fundamentally different logics of technological development: one rooted in monopoly and rent extraction, the other in production, scale, and diffusion. At stake is not only US primacy, but the viability of technological monopoly as the foundation of contemporary imperialism.

Lenin identified imperialism as the monopoly stage of capitalism. Samir Amin specified five controls reproducing this system; control over technology, natural resources, finances, communications, and military force. These mechanisms work together, but control over technology is foundational and enables dominance across all other domains. Intellectual property regimes, standards control, platform dominance, and control over critical chokepoints enable firms based in the imperial core to extract rents far exceeding what competitive production would allow. Over $1 trillion in cross-border intellectual property payments flow annually, overwhelmingly to the advanced capitalist core. These rents finance financialisation, military power, and the next wave of innovation, sustaining the imperial cycle.

This monopoly structure rests on a specific international division of labour. Low-margin, energy-intensive, environmentally damaging, and labour-intensive production was progressively outsourced to the Global South, while the core retained design, branding, finance, and intellectual property. Over time, this produced highly financialised economies in the core, increasingly divorced from production itself. Share buybacks, asset inflation, and rent extraction displaced investment in productive capacity. The result was not only deindustrialisation, but the erosion of the human capital, process knowledge, and industrial ecosystems required to sustain technological leadership.

This monopoly on technology now faces disruption. US leadership in critical technologies has sharply eroded from 60 of 64 areas (2003–2007) to only 7 (2019–2023), while China rose from 3 to 57 in the same period. This marks the first systematic Global South breakthrough of the imperialist technology monopoly. For decades, China's rise was tolerated, even welcomed, so long as it remained confined to manufacturing without control over high-value technological bottlenecks. That equilibrium collapsed when China began compressing the gap between adoption and mastery, not by replicating Western monopoly strategies, but by undermining them.

China's development strategy has been centred on production, not rent extraction. Through long planning horizons, state coordination, mass technical education, and disciplined capital allocation, China has systematically built complete industrial ecosystems across multiple advanced sectors simultaneously. Crucially, the socialist state has prevented domestic capital from consolidating into monopoly forms capable of extracting sustained super-profits. Firms are compelled to compete on cost, quality, and process innovation

rather than relying on intellectual property rents. As a result, China has repeatedly transformed technologies that the imperial core treated as rent-generating monopolies into competitive, low-cost commodities. In doing so, it has attacked the material foundation of imperial power itself.

The US response to this challenge has been to weaponise interdependence. Export controls on semiconductors, restrictions on advanced manufacturing equipment, bans on AI chips, and pressure on allies to align are all premised on a single assumption: that control over technological chokepoints can permanently arrest development elsewhere.

That assumption is false because technology is not a static commodity. It is a productive force embedded in material processes, skills, and industrial systems. Where sufficient productive capacity exists, restriction does not freeze development. Rather, it compels substitution, learning, and indigenous innovation. When the option to buy disappears, the option to build becomes unavoidable.

This issue of ***Tricontinental Interventions: Conjunctural Analysis from Asia*** examines how this dynamic between US technological monopoly and Chinese productivity unfolds across key sectors that define modern production: semiconductors, artificial intelligence and robotics, energy systems, critical minerals, industrial supply chains, and the military-industrial base. We begin with the sector the US believed to be its most secure stronghold: semiconductors.

2. The Semiconductor Battleground

On 17 December 2025, Reuters reported what Washington had spent years trying to prevent. Earlier in the year, Chinese scientists unveiled a working prototype of an extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography machine, capable of generating 13.5-nanometre (nm) wavelength light, the indispensable foundation of advanced semiconductor manufacturing. Classified under national security, the project is being described as China's Manhattan Project, reflecting its strategic significance. Although not yet producing working chips, its very existence demolishes the centrepiece of the US containment strategy: that denying China EUV access would permanently arrest its semiconductor development.

The US treated the EUV lithography capabilities of ASML Holding – a Dutch corporation that dominates the production of lithography machines – as the ultimate chokepoint. The most advanced chips, manufactured at 7 nm and below, require EUV lithography machines. These devices represent the apex of precision manufacturing. Each machine contains over 100,000 components. Only one company in the world had mastered this technology: ASML of the Netherlands. US policy rested on the belief that without EUV capability, China could not produce chips below 7 nm, consigning Chinese semiconductor manufacturing to a permanent technological lag.

The Siege

The formal opening of the chip war came on 7 October 2022, when the US Bureau of Industry and Security announced the most sweeping semiconductor export controls in decades. The regulations targeted three 'chokepoints': advanced computing chips needed for AI and smartphones, the lithography machines used to manufacture chips, and the electronic design automation (EDA) software required to design them. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan described this as the 'small yard, high fence' strategy, promising

targeted restrictions while preserving broader commercial ties.

The semiconductor siege did not emerge fully formed. It evolved through an escalation cycle. The foundation was laid during the campaign against Huawei by the first administration of President Donald Trump. The first shots were fired in 2018, when Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Canada on a US request. In 2019, Huawei was placed on the Entity List, cutting off its access to US technology. Through 2021, these restrictions were expanded by President Joe Biden's administration to cover hundreds of Chinese companies.

Modern semiconductors are perhaps the most complex manufactured objects in human history. The most advanced chips contain billions of transistors etched at scales measured in nanometres, billionths of a metre, using machines that cost hundreds of millions of dollars and require decades of accumulated expertise to operate. The entire supply chain depends on a handful of firms: ASML in the Netherlands for EUV lithography machines, TSMC in Taiwan for the most advanced foundry services, and a small cluster of US, Japanese, and European companies for design software and manufacturing equipment. The US believed that controlling these chokepoints could permanently arrest Chinese semiconductor development at a level two or three technological generations behind the frontier.

However, within months of restrictions, the 'small yard' began expanding. Controls initially focused on advanced AI chips extended to manufacturing equipment, servicing agreements, third-country re-exports, and even the movement of technical personnel. The fence kept rising. The yard kept growing.

Within two years, over seven hundred Chinese entities would be added to the Entity List. The Foreign Direct Product Rule was extended to ensure that chips manufactured anywhere in the world using US technology could not be sold to restricted Chinese companies. Allied nations were pressured into alignment: the Netherlands restricted ASML's sales, Japan limited exports of semiconductor manufacturing equipment, and South Korea's chip giants found themselves caught between their largest customer and their security guarantor.

The silicon siege represents the most ambitious peacetime economic warfare apparatus in modern history. Its scope exceeds the Cold War-era Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls restrictions on the Soviet Union, goes beyond sanctions regimes imposed on Iran or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and targets not an isolated economy but the world's second-largest economy and largest manufacturing base. The expectation was clear: the costs would fall on China.

The Breakout

On 29 August 2023, Huawei quietly launched the Mate 60 Pro smartphone. There was no fanfare, no press event, no keynote presentation. The timing was deliberate: US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo was in Beijing that very day, meeting with Chinese officials to discuss the semiconductor restrictions her department had imposed the previous year. The launch was a message delivered not in words but through silicon.

The phone's processor, the Kirin 9000s, was manufactured by China's Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC) using a 7nm process. This was not supposed to be possible. SMIC was expected to be stuck at 14 nms, lacking the EUV lithography equipment and EDA software necessary to advance further. Yet there it was, etched in silicon, working inside millions of smartphones: proof that

Chinese engineers had found a way.

The Mate 60 Pro revealed only the surface of a deeper shift. Behind it lay the rapid construction of the entire domestic semiconductor ecosystem. Semiconductor manufacturing requires dozens of specialised machines: lithography systems that project patterns, etchers that carve those patterns into silicon, deposition systems that add layers of material, inspection systems that detect defects, and testing systems that verify functionality. Export controls forced Chinese foundries to replace foreign equipment from US firms like Applied Materials, Lam Research, and KLA, along with Japanese and European suppliers, with domestic alternatives. Firms such as Naura, Advanced Micro-Fabrication Equipment (AMEC), and SiCarrier expanded rapidly, backed by state support. In early 2025, Naura and AMEC recorded revenue growth of 30% and 44%, respectively. SiCarrier unveiled more than 30 tools covering nearly the entire manufacturing process. The report of the working EUV prototype became the symbolic culmination of this trajectory.

The calculation that had sustained decades of Chinese technology procurement, that it was cheaper and faster to buy than to build, had been eliminated by US policy. When the buy option disappeared, the build option became not just viable but necessary.

China's semiconductor investment programme, already substantial through two prior phases of the 'Big Fund' totalling over $50 billion since 2014, was dramatically escalated. By May 2024, Beijing launched Big Fund III with $47.5 billion, the largest single allocation in history. Provincial governments followed and universities expanded semiconductor engineering programmes. Thousands of engineers who might have joined foreign firms were recruited into the national project of technological self-reliance. The scale of mobilisation was staggering.

China's mature-node semiconductor production, chips at 28nm and above, expanded rapidly, reaching 31% of global capacity by late 2024. While these were not the cutting-edge chips, they represented the bulk of semiconductor demand and applications: automotive systems, industrial controls, consumer electronics, and telecommunications infrastructure. This strategy aligns with China's broader manufacturing model: consolidating dominance where scale and cost matter most rather than chasing monopoly rents at the frontier.

The economic consequences for US industry mounted rapidly. By 2024, the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) estimated annual revenue losses of $77 billion for US semiconductor firms from the Chinese market. The US Chamber of Commerce projected $83 billion in losses and 124,000 US jobs at risk. Reduced revenue translated directly into reduced research and development. Full decoupling, ITIF warned, would cut US semiconductor research and development investment by 24%, roughly $14 billion annually. In a cutting-edge industry where technological leadership depends on enormous ongoing investment, the US was choosing to defund itself.

The Collapse of Containment

Early in 2025, the Trump administration imposed a near-total ban on Nvidia's AI chip sales to China, including the H20, a deliberately downgraded chip designed to comply with earlier restrictions on H100 and H200 by the Biden administration. The goal was to close every remaining loophole. Nvidia's stock fell sharply as China had accounted for roughly 13% of its revenue. By mid-year, the company had written down $4.5 billion in unsold H20 inventory. Chinese buyers turned increasingly to Huawei's Ascend chips, while NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang lobbied desperately for relief.

On 29 September 2025, the Bureau of Industry and Security implemented the '50% Affiliates Rule', in a direct attack on China, extending export controls to any foreign entity majority-owned by blacklisted companies. The rule affected more than 20,000 firms worldwide. The next day, the Dutch government invoked a Cold War-era law to seize control of Nexperia, whose Chinese parent, Wingtech, had been Entity-Listed months earlier. China's response was immediate. Nexperia's China operations, responsible for 80% of its global production, were blocked from exporting components. European supply chains seized and automotive manufacturers warned of critical shortages. Nearly half of Europe's carmakers, most medical device producers, and much of the defence industry faced disruption. Volkswagen, BMW, and Stellantis announced production shutdowns.

On 9 October, Beijing retaliated against the 50% Affiliates Rule itself. The Ministry of Commerce imposed export controls on rare-earth elements – materials essential to chips, motors, and weapons systems. China controls roughly 70% of global rare-earth mining and 90% of processing. The restrictions included extraterritorial provisions and a Chinese version of the 50% rule. Prices surged and global supply chains seized. Defence contractors in the US and Europe faced shortages. Three weeks later, at a bilateral meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the US capitulated. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced a one-year suspension of the 50% Affiliates Rule in exchange for a parallel suspension of China's rare-earth controls. The empire had discovered that chokepoints cut both ways.

On 8 December 2025, the US approved Nvidia H200 sales to China, which had been previously restricted by the Biden administration. Chinese firms placed orders exceeding two million chips for 2026. Nvidia rushed to expand production. However, Beijing acted again, with the Cyberspace Administration restricting H200 use in state-backed data centres and directing them toward domestic chips. At the same time, China formalised a mandate requiring new semiconductor fabs to use at least 50% domestically manufactured equipment, forcing structural transformation away from US dependence.

The pattern was unmistakable. China's retaliation to US restrictions was starting to seriously hurt the US, forcing it to capitulate, while China itself was becoming increasingly confident about cutting its cords of dependency on the US.

The End of Illusions

The semiconductor siege reveals a deeper misunderstanding. Technological leadership is not maintained by hoarding artefacts. Technology is a productive force. Its value lies in application, not scarcity. A society with industrial depth, scientific capacity, and organisational coordination can reproduce most technologies when compelled to do so. Restriction provides the compulsion.

Semiconductors were meant to be the unbreakable stranglehold. Instead, they became the first clear demonstration that monopoly logic fails when confronted with organised production at scale. The lesson reverberates far beyond silicon and set the pattern for what followed in artificial intelligence, energy, materials, and war.

3. Embodied Intelligence vs. Algorithmic Rent-

Seeking

On 20 January 2025, a small Chinese AI startup called DeepSeek sent shockwaves through Silicon Valley by releasing an AI model that matched the most advanced US models built by Google, OpenAI, and Anthropic – systems that had required tens of billions of dollars and the most advanced chips.

DeepSeek accomplished this feat using Nvidia H800 chips, deliberately crippled versions that the US government had mandated for export to China. The result was a model that cost a fraction to train and run, achieving comparable results with inferior hardware. More jarring still: the company released it as open-source, with Application Programming Interface (API) pricing orders of magnitude times cheaper than OpenAI. Within days, Nvidia's stock began cratering, wiping out $600 billion in market capitalisation on 27 January, the largest single-day loss in stock market history.

This was the predictable outcome of US export controls. Denied access to cutting-edge chips, DeepSeek engineers were forced to innovate in efficiency, as opposed to brute force tactics used by US AI Labs. The containment strategy had produced its opposite: accelerated innovation under constraint.

Competing AI Visions

The dominant US narrative centres on pursuing Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) or human-like intelligence – the so-called 'holy grail' of AI. The belief was that simply scaling up model size would unlock new emergent capabilities and deliver a decisive global advantage. This approach aligned neatly with venture capital logic: raise billions, entrench early movers, and extract monopoly rents through platform monopolies and proprietary models. Focus on speculation, not deployment.

China has taken a different path. Its firms have focused on engineering efficiency, open-source development, and cost discipline. DeepSeek demonstrated that high-performance models can be built without massive capital expenditure. The emphasis was on distribution and integration, producing competitive models at radically lower prices, making them attractive across the Global South and even among Western AI startups.

A partner at the leading venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, admitted publicly that nearly 80% of AI startups pitching for funding were running on Chinese open-source models. If this trend continues, China will become the default supplier of global AI infrastructure, while US firms remain burdened by debt structures that assume monopoly pricing in markets they may no longer dominate.

In the US, hollowed out by decades of deindustrialisation and financialisation, AI has been channelled largely into content creation, advertising, platform lock-in, and white-collar automation – algorithms that write, recommend, and trade. AI serves capital's appetite for profit without production. However, in China, AI is embedded directly in the material base of production. Factories hum with 'embodied intelligence', robots guided by sensors and algorithms that weld, assemble, and package with precision. This application is not automation of office work, but transformation of manufacturing itself.

Robotics and Embodied Intelligence

In Xiaomi's 'dark factory' in Beijing, the future of manufacturing has already arrived. The factory floor is silent except for the hum of machinery. There are no voices, no footsteps, and no shift changes. The lights are

off; there is no need for illumination when no human eyes are watching. In the darkness, robotic arms move with inhuman precision, assembling components, testing connections, and packaging finished products. A smartphone emerges every three seconds, around the clock, seven days a week.

Opened in 2023, the 81,000 square metre facility produces ten million flagship devices annually. The system self-diagnoses problems, optimises processes, and 'evolves by itself'. Eleven production lines operate continuously with zero human involvement on the production floor. This factory is not a demonstration but a functioning facility producing goods at scale.

The Robot Surge

China deployed 2.027 million industrial robots by 2024, comprising 54% of global installations. Robot density surged to 470 units per 10,000 workers in 2024, surpassing Germany and Japan, nations synonymous with industrial automation. Since 2023, Chinese factories have installed more robots than the rest of the world combined.

Meanwhile, the US lags dramatically. Despite having among the world's highest manufacturing wages, the US ranks only tenth in robot density, approximately 49% below what wage levels would predict. China has built over 30,000 basic-level smart factories as part of nationwide industrial digitalisation, alongside 1,200 advanced-level and 230 excellence-level smart factories. State-led initiatives such as 'AI Plus' and '5G plus Industrial Internet' integrate connectivity, sensors, and automation across entire manufacturing ecosystems.

Beyond industrial robots bolted to factory floors, a new frontier emerges: humanoid robots for general-purpose tasks. Unitree's G1 humanoid reached the market at approximately $16,000, one-sixth the price of comparable Western offerings.

Compounding Advantages

The result of these developments is a distinct model of socialist industrial modernisation. Rather than treating AI as a speculative asset, China deploys it as a tool for upgrading productive forces. By lowering costs, improving quality, and increasing capacity through automation, China is positioned to outcompete rivals globally. The ability to iterate product development rapidly, enabled by nearby manufacturing capacity and affordable costs, represents a critical advantage. Robotics systems increasingly manufacture other robotics systems, generating a production flywheel that continuously compounds advantage.

This dynamic rests on a deeper material foundation: energy. Training models, operating datacentres, and running automated factories require vast and reliable power. The US already faces grid constraints and rising electricity costs. China's rapid expansion of renewable generation and grid capacity places it in a far stronger position to sustain energy-intensive AI deployment. This energy foundation, the material base of intelligent production, is the subject of the next chapter.

4. Powering Production in the 21st Century

In late 2024, datacentres across the US states of Virginia, Texas, and Oregon began hitting power supply limits. Regional grid operator PJM Interconnection announced a $9.3 billion increase in capacity costs, sending electricity prices soaring. Meanwhile, China added 277 gigawatts of solar capacity in a single year,

more than the entire cumulative solar capacity built by the US over decades. The contrast reveals a fundamental asymmetry: while the US struggles to power its AI ambitions, China has systematically transformed energy into a strategic advantage.

Energy is not simply an input to production. It is the material foundation upon which all advanced technology rests. AI, datacentres, semiconductor fabs, and automated factories depend on abundant, affordable power. The country that solves the energy equation gains compounding advantages in technological competition. Yet the US and China have pursued radically different paths: China through state-coordinated renewable transformation at unprecedented scale, and the US through fragmented markets paralysed by financialisation and fossil fuel lock-in.

China's Renewable Revolution

China's renewable revolution is nothing short of breathtaking. Beyond the 277 GW solar capacity added in 2024, its 520 GW of wind capacity exceeds that of Europe and the US combined. By 2024, nearly half of its clean-tech exports – EVs, batteries, and solar panels – were headed to the Global South, and clean-tech investment had surged to $940 billion, with green industries contributing a tenth of China's GDP.

China's socialist planning system identified renewables as strategic industries, directed massive subsidies and cheap finance, absorbed early failures, and scaled up successes. State enterprises, public banks, grid overhauls and industrial policy allowed coordination on a national scale. The result is not just speed, but coherence: factories, grids, research, and supply chains all developed together. A whole ecosystem of companies – BYD in EVs, CATL in batteries, Goldwind in wind turbines, and Longi in solar panels – has been nurtured. The result is historic: Chinese companies produce 97% of solar wafers, 85% of solar cells, and 80% finished panels globally. This domination extends to 80% of batteries and 70% of electric vehicles. Their solar panels cost less than half of US or European panels due to massive scale, vertical integration, and lower input costs. China is now not just leading, but dominating every corner of clean energy.

China's State Grid Corporation invested $84 billion in grid infrastructure in 2024. 42 ultra-high voltage projects have been constructed, enabling long-distance electricity transfer from renewable-rich western regions to coastal centres. Grid reserve margins of 80-100% treat overcapacity as essential redundancy. Integration of 1,889 GW renewable capacity requires coordinating generation, transmission, storage, and grid management – a transformation achievable only through state coordination. China builds nuclear reactors in 6.4 years through standardised designs and continuous construction that maintains workforce expertise, compared to the decades wasted on fragmented US nuclear projects. Even in long-horizon fusion energy research, China has positioned itself ahead of the US, committing more than $2 billion in 2025, compared to approximately $800 million in US federal funding.

Financialisation, Fragmentation, and Fossil Lock-In

US energy policy remains mired in fossil fuel interests. The oil and gas industry spent over $124 million on federal lobbying in 2023 alone, with political action committees distributing another $32 million to sympathetic legislators. Even modest clean energy policies spark immediate backlash from fossil fuel companies, automotive lobbies, and politicians dependent on their campaign contributions. The result is policy incoherence: renewable subsidies undermined by continued fossil fuel tax breaks, grid modernisation stalled by regulatory capture, and even modest climate commitments abandoned when political winds shift.

The US grid crisis has multiple dimensions. The physical infrastructure is ageing: over 70% of transmission lines are over 25 years old, with many still operating after over 50 years. Over 3,000 utilities operating under 50 state regulatory regimes with no central coordinating authority create system-wide paralysis. Each utility optimises individual returns rather than enabling system transformation.

In 2022, investor-owned utilities distributed 86% of earnings directly to shareholders, averaging $25 billion annually, even as infrastructure aged and climate risks intensified. Between 2020 and 2023, the top five US utilities spent $43 billion on share buybacks and dividends while deferring critical grid upgrades. This is financialisation in its purest form: extracting value rather than building capacity, prioritising shareholder returns over infrastructure investment that generates no immediate profit.

The Schneider Electric analysis projects that by 2033, US electricity demand will exceed available supply by 175 GW, roughly equivalent to the output of 175 large power plants. This shortfall threatens not merely economic growth but the technological ambitions that US strategy depends upon. The grid crisis is also an AI crisis.

Energy and Imperial Power

Imperial control has historically operated through energy scarcity – restricting hydrocarbon access, controlling shipping routes, and manipulating prices. The US faces a deepening contradiction: imperial control requires energy scarcity, but climate commitments and technological development require abundance. Reshoring renewable manufacturing while maintaining cost competitiveness proves economically impossible without Chinese-scale state coordination. Each mechanism preserving scarcity-based control contradicts abundance requirements. The impossible choice is whether to maintain an energy monopoly or enable technological development.

For the Global South, renewables offer energy sovereignty. Chinese equipment at 20-40% discount enables transitions previously prohibitive at Western monopoly pricing. Material possibility exists for energy independence rather than permanent fossil fuel dependence mediated through imperial supply chains.

Energy operates as a microcosm of broader competition. The country solving energy abundance, making it cheap, available, and scalable, gains a foundation for all technological development. By that measure, China has established a strategic advantage that the US, absent systemic transformation, cannot overcome.

Yet energy abundance is not self-contained. Solar panels, wind turbines, batteries, electric motors, and grid infrastructure depend on vast quantities of processed materials, from lithium and cobalt to rare-earth elements and advanced magnets. Control over energy systems depends on control over the material inputs that make them possible. It is here, in the hidden layers of minerals, processing, and refining, that the next critical chokepoint emerges, and where China's advantage proves even more consequential. That material foundation is the subject of the next chapter.

5. The Rare Earths the West Forgot

On 9 October 2025, Beijing deployed what analysts immediately recognised as China's most consequential weapon in the escalating trade war. The Ministry of Commerce announced sweeping export controls on rare-earth elements. Foreign companies would now require special approvals from Beijing to export any product

containing more than 0.1% of Chinese-sourced rare earths, or manufactured anywhere in the world using Chinese extraction, refining, or magnet-making technology. This extraterritorial reach marked China's first deployment of its own Foreign Direct Product Rule, turning the US weapon back against its creator. Applications for military purposes would be automatically rejected.

President Trump threatened, within hours, to impose an additional 100% tariff on all Chinese goods and restrict exports of critical software. Three weeks later, at a hastily arranged meeting in the Republic of Korea, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced a one-year suspension of the US '50% Affiliates Rule' in exchange for a parallel suspension of China's rare-earth controls – the empire capitulated.

The Ultimate Chokepoint

The term 'rare earths' misleads. These 17 elements, 15 lanthanides plus scandium and yttrium, are not particularly rare in Earth's crust. The challenge lies not in extraction but in separation and refinement – requiring over 50 chemical stages involving over 2,000 chemical reactions to isolate individual elements at 99.99% purity. The process generates toxic waste: acidic slurries, radioactive thorium byproducts, and heavy metal contamination.

China has a near-global monopoly over rare-earth processing and the downstream supply chains underpinning critical industrial and military applications. While they have about half the world's rare-earth reserves, they control roughly 70% of global rare-earth mining, 90% of separation and processing, and close to 100% of the heavy rare-earth processing.

Every wind turbine depends on neodymium-dysprosium permanent magnets for its generator. China produces 93% of these magnets. Electric vehicle motors, smartphone screens, hard disc drives and industrial robotics – all rely on these rare earths most people have never heard of. Each F-35 fighter jet contains 417 kilograms of rare-earth elements. An Arleigh Burke-class destroyer requires 2.4 tonnes, while a Virginia-class nuclear submarine requires 4.2 tonnes. Tomahawk missiles, radar systems, night vision devices, Predator drones, and precision-guided munitions all rely on rare-earth magnets and alloys. The material base of advanced imperial warfare runs through Chinese processing plants.

Advanced semiconductor fabrication requires specialised rare-earth compounds. They improve transistor performance in advanced nodes, polish silicon wafers, and host lasers for lithography equipment. These applications consume smaller volumes than magnets but demand extreme purity. Even trace contaminants destroy chip functionality. China's share of these specialised heavy rare earths is close to 100%.

The Contradiction That Imperialism Built

China's dominance in rare earths emerged not through geological accident but through deliberate industrial strategy combined with Western abandonment. During the 1990s and 2000s, US and European rare-earth processing facilities closed due to environmental compliance costs and the neoliberal logic of offshoring industries to the Global South. Mountain Pass mine in California, once the world's largest rare-earth producer, ceased operations in 2002. Western capital retreated to high-margin design while leaving the 'low-end' industrial base to China.

The Chinese state embraced what Western capital rejected. Through patient capital investment and

systematic supply chain integration, China built processing capacity from mining through magnetic alloy production. By 2024, China processes rare earths at volumes and purities that Western facilities have not matched in decades. Western attempts to rebuild non-Chinese supply chains will face years of capacity development, billions in required investment, and the fundamental challenge that processing expertise cannot be purchased.

Rare earths are not merely an accidental chokepoint; they are a node within a far larger production network. It is this systemic integration, spanning from mines to factories to final assembly, that defines the next terrain of competition.

6. Industrial Supply Chains: The Material Basis of Power

In April 2025, BYD announced a stunning price cut. The Seagull electric vehicle, offering up to 252 miles of range, would sell for just $7,800, roughly one-sixth the price of comparable Western electric cars. For US and European automakers struggling to produce EVs profitably even at $50,000, BYD's pricing appeared impossible. Yet the company remained profitable, maintaining a 6.4% operating margin despite slashing prices by as much as 34% across 22 models. BYD doesn't compete on price alone: its premier model touts 400 km charging in five minutes compared to roughly 100 km under comparable conditions from the top US EV-maker, Tesla.

The explanation lay not in labour arbitrage or state subsidies alone, but in something far more structural: complete supply chains. BYD controls or coordinates every major stage of production, from lithium extraction and battery chemistry to power electronics, final assembly, and logistics. These activities are geographically clustered, enabling design changes, supplier coordination, and production scaling in weeks rather than years. Cost reductions are cumulative, systemic, and difficult to replicate.

This completeness, the integration of raw materials, intermediate goods, specialised tooling, logistics, energy, and accumulated skills across entire industrial ecosystems, represents China's most formidable competitive advantage. It marks the first time a Global South country has mastered system-level production across multiple advanced sectors simultaneously.

EVs, Batteries, and Materials

Consider the 'New Trio' of exports that now defines China's industrial emergence: electric vehicles, lithium batteries, and solar panels. In EVs, BYD sold 4.6 million vehicles in 2025, surpassing Tesla in both unit sales and revenue. BYD's secret lies in 'vertical integration' – the company manufactures approximately 75% of its vehicle components internally, compared to just 46% for Tesla's China-made Model 3.

In batteries, Chinese manufacturers CATL and BYD together control 55% of the global market. Chinese factories produce 80% of the world's battery cells, and crucially, China commands 98% of LFP cathode production that goes into these batteries. The battery pack that costs $139 per kilowatt-hour in Europe costs just $94 in China.

The solar industry presents perhaps the starkest picture. Chinese companies control 97% of global wafer

production, 85% of cell production, and 80% of module assembly. Chinese-made solar panels cost 50% less than European and US equivalents.

Chemicals, APIs, and Pharmaceuticals

The same pattern appears in chemicals and pharmaceuticals. China produces over 40% of global chemical intermediates and roughly 80% of global generic active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) supply. This dominance is not accidental. By expanding chemical manufacturing, China preserved the material base upon which pharmaceuticals, polymers, fertilisers, and advanced materials depend.

Shipbuilding, Drones, Robots, and Tools

China's dominance in shipbuilding underscores the same logic. Chinese yards now account for 70% of global ship output by tonnage, outproducing the US by more than 200 times. Shipbuilding requires steel, engines, electronics, logistics coordination, and skilled labour. Once lost, such capacity cannot be reconstituted quickly, regardless of defence budgets.

In drones and robotics, Chinese firms benefit from proximity to electronics manufacturing, motors, sensors, and precision tooling. Chinese company DJI dominates the global civilian drone market with a 70% global market share. Chinese robotics firms now command 40% share of the global robotics market and dominant shares in collaborative robots, service robots, and mobile robots.

Precision tools themselves – computer numerical control (CNC) machines, industrial sensors, bearings – form another critical layer. China is now the world's largest producer of machine tools, producing around a third of the global production, a sector that underpins every other industrial activity. Mastery of tooling determines who can manufacture advanced goods at scale. Here too, China's advantage is systemic.

Imperialist Response to the 'Second China Shock'

The imperialist bourgeoisie understands the stakes. Western pundits' repeated warnings about 'overcapacity' reveal the class interests at play. *China already accounts for 30% of the world's manufacturing output. It cannot rapidly grow that share without causing displacement globally*. The displacement they fear is not of workers but of profits.

The policy response has been instructive. The US imposed 100% tariffs on Chinese EVs. The EU followed with tariffs reaching 45.3%. Policy documents now explicitly invoke the 'Second China Shock', warning that, unlike the first shock of the early 2000s, this one threatens to 'hollow out advanced manufacturing' in the imperialist core.

Yet tariffs cannot solve the fundamental problem. Decades of financialisation have hollowed out the supplier ecosystems and skilled workforces that Chinese industrial policy systematically cultivated. The industrial flywheel, production driving innovation, innovation driving production, has no equivalent in the West's financialised capitalism centred on share buybacks and financial engineering.

Industrial prowess and technological development are dialectically linked. China's ability to break technology strangleholds in semiconductors, AI hardware, and energy systems rests on its industrial depth. Production

capacity enables experimentation, learning, and substitution when access is denied.

This material base shapes geopolitics, not the other way around. Imperial powers cannot fully decouple because alternative supply chains do not exist and cannot be rebuilt on meaningful timescales. Infrastructure, skills, and ecosystems cannot be sanctioned into existence. In the military-industrial domain, manufacturing capacity translates directly into strategic power. It is there we turn next.

7. The Military-Industrial Complex and the Question of War

In July 2024, the bipartisan Commission on the National Defence Strategy delivered its **report** to Congress. Buried in the technical assessments was a startling admission: in a conflict with China, the US would exhaust its munitions inventories in as few as three to four weeks, with anti-ship missiles lasting only days. Meanwhile, a single Chinese shipyard has more capacity than all US shipyards combined. The report concluded with unprecedented candour: 'The United States last fought a global conflict during World War II, which ended nearly 80 years ago. The nation was last prepared for such a fight during the Cold War, which ended 35 years ago. It is not prepared today'.

The report revealed the fundamental hollowing out of US military-industrial capacity despite spending more on its military than the next ten countries combined. Modern warfare is fundamentally industrial – it consumes material at staggering rates. Thousands of artillery shells daily, hundreds of drones destroyed weekly, and naval vessels requiring years to replace. Industrial capacity, not military budgets, determines outcomes when nations mobilise for sustained conflict. By this measure, the United States confronts its most dangerous contradiction: an empire built on military dominance whose industrial foundation has crumbled beneath it.

The Pentagon's Industrial Nightmare

A leaked US Naval Intelligence briefing revealed that China's shipbuilding capacity exceeds the US by 232 times, 23 million tonnes versus less than 100,000. A single Chinese shipbuilder, China State Shipbuilding Corporation, constructed more commercial vessels in 2024 than the entire US industry has built since 1945. The US Navy struggles to maintain 290 ships while the People's Liberation Army Navy operates over 370 vessels and adds 25-30 to its fleet annually.

The ammunition crisis exposes even deeper rot. US artillery shell production crawled from 14,500 rounds a month before 2022 to just 40,000 by mid-2025, still 60% below target. No domestic TNT production has existed since 1986. All artillery propellant comes from a single Canadian plant. The combustible cartridge cases essential to every 155mm round are manufactured at one facility. A July 2025 Government Accountability Office report found only one foundry in the entire country capable of producing the large titanium castings required for weapons systems.

Washington's dependency on the very nation it designates as an adversary compounds this fragility. 41% of Pentagon weapons systems rely on Chinese semiconductors. Each F/A-18 fighter contains 5,000 Chinese semiconductors; each destroyer nearly 6,000. When Lockheed Martin discovered Chinese-origin magnets in F-35 supply chains, production had to be halted. Raytheon's CEO publicly admitted that decoupling from

China would be 'impossible' given thousands of Chinese suppliers. The Govini 2025 defence report concluded bluntly: 'The US defence industrial base is dangerously unprepared for the demands of great power competition'.

China's Integrated Military-Industrial Capacity

China's military strength must be understood not as separate from, but as emerging from, its manufacturing dominance. Commercial shipyards building container vessels can produce destroyers. Drone factories supplying global markets manufacture military systems at one-fifteenth to one-twentieth the cost of US equivalents. A Chinese Wing Loong II combat drone costs $1-2 million; the comparable US MQ-9 Reaper costs $30-35 million.

The shipbuilding advantage illustrates the pattern. China's 13 major shipyards operate with continuous workflow, skilled workforces retained across projects, and supply chains optimised for speed. US yards struggle with sporadic orders, workforce attrition between contracts, and fragmented supplier networks. China can surge production; the US cannot. This is not a problem money can solve, it requires industrial capacity that takes decades to build.

The Closing Window and the Danger of War

Here we arrive at the dialectical core of imperial crisis. US ruling circles recognise this industrial gap cannot be closed through 'reshoring' initiatives that would take decades. This creates what strategists call 'closing window' psychology. The dangerous calculation that acting now, before the gap widens further, represents the only hope to preserve US hegemony. Washington's response reveals desperation rather than confidence. The danger of war in our era does not arise from miscalculation alone, but from the collision between declining industrial foundations and an imperial system unwilling to accept material limits. Such a war risks nuclear escalation, which RAND Corporation assesses as 'always a plausible scenario', threatening human civilisation itself.

8. Breaking the Stranglehold

China's development represents not an episodic challenge but a historical rupture. Across semiconductors, artificial intelligence, energy systems, materials, and manufacturing, Chinese firms have demonstrated that advanced production can be mastered, scaled, and deployed without monopoly pricing. Technologies long treated as rent-extracting chokepoints have been transformed into commodities. Each such transformation removes a pillar of unequal exchange. Each cost reduction narrows the space for imperialist monopoly.

This rupture is only intelligible in systemic terms. A capitalist firm cannot rationally invest billions to build industries that yield only average profits. Monopoly is not a distortion of capitalism but its condition of survival at the frontier. A socialist state, by contrast, can invest to expand productive capacity even when monopoly rents disappear. What appears as 'overcapacity' within capitalist logic is, from the standpoint of socialist logic, simply sufficient capacity to meet social needs at an affordable cost. By preventing domestic capital from consolidating into monopolies, the socialist state structurally blocks the transition to the monopoly stage of capitalism and, with it, the material basis of imperialism. The conflict, therefore, is not between two nation-states but between two organising principles of production: scarcity for profit versus

abundance for development.

The imperial response has been predictable. Sanctions, export controls, tariffs, and military encirclement were deployed to arrest this process but ultimately failed. Technology denial accelerated indigenous capability. Tariffs redirected production rather than stopping it. Decoupling exposed dependence rather than eliminating it. Coercion revealed the extent to which industrial ecosystems, once dismantled, cannot be reconstructed on command. Monopoly was defended by force, but force could not recreate the material foundations that monopoly requires.

What emerges from this breakdown is the possibility of a rupture from imperialism. For the Global South, access to affordable technology and infrastructure expands the horizon of development beyond permanent subordination. More importantly, China's trajectory demonstrates empirically that technological sovereignty is possible. The ideology of inevitability, the insistence that there is no alternative to the existing global division of labour, has been shattered.

For the imperial core, the loss of monopoly entails the erosion of the surplus that sustained post-war social compromises. As unequal exchange weakens, stagnation, inequality, and political instability intensify. This crisis is not imposed from outside. It is the consequence of an accumulation model that externalised production while clinging to monopoly rents.

This does not mean the end of imperialism, nor the end of conflict. The imperial core retains immense military and financial power and will not relinquish dominance voluntarily. The danger of war is real. But the foundations of the existing order are shaking as the productive forces of the Global South increasingly outgrow the limits imposed by monopoly capitalism.

The multipolar world is not a future aspiration. It is a present condition. For the first time in five hundred years, liberation for the Global South from the Western-dominated order built on genocide, slavery and loot, and later sustained through unequal exchange, appears to be materially possible.



Bappa Sinha

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Contemporary Challenges for the Malaysian Left



By Jeyakumar Devaraj

To understand the current situation in Malaysia we need a brief overview of the history and political and economic development of the country. The Portuguese first came to Southeast Asia in the early 16th century. They, and the Dutch who came about 130 years later, had mercantile interests – they wanted to control the trade routes so that they could acquire the commodities that were in demand in the European market. Hence, they wanted control of the shipping routes and main ports, but were not interested in controlling the hinterland.

The industrial revolution in Europe created a hunger for raw materials such as tin, coffee, sugar, and rubber. The colonial powers needed control over the land in South East Asia to be able to mine, and to open plantations. They also needed cheap labour for the production of these commodities. The local population was not too inclined to slave in difficult conditions for low wages[i]. Also, the British thought it best to not disrupt the indigenous Malay population, but instead relied on labour from India and China to develop the colonial economy. This led to a massive influx of Indians and Chinese to the Malayan peninsula starting in the mid-19th century.

Malaya, being colonised by the most 'virile' industrial power of that time, experienced the fastest development of mines, plantations, roads, railways, and ports, compared to Indonesia, Indochina, and the Philippines. This resulted in massive demographic changes – at Independence in 1957, the immigrant population of Chinese and Indians was actually slightly more than half the total population of Malaya. The class character of Malayan society had changed dramatically in the colonial period. Prior to 1800, the vast majority of the

population were peasants and fishermen engaged in a subsistence economy. The colonial economy generated a large working class in the plantations, tin mines and the railways, and this in turn sparked off a network of supporting economic activities – market gardening, import of food and other basic necessities, retail trade, local production of some consumer products, transport, etc.[ii]

In the meantime, the native Malay population was shielded from the colonial economy, and their lifestyle and economic activities did not change much. The British were outwardly 'respectful' of the Sultans of the various States and provided handsomely for them, as this helped sustain the myth that the British were benevolent 'advisors' to the native rulers. Land was plentiful in Malaya, so the British had no cause to deprive the Malay peasants of their land. But they enacted a law that forbade the Malay farmers from converting their rice fields to plantations of rubber or other commodities for export.[iii] Rice was the staple grain for the Malays as well as the immigrant Chinese and Indians. The British needed a sufficient supply of inexpensive rice for immigrant labour.

The only strata within the indigenous community which resented British rule were the Malay chieftains and lesser royalties whose sources of income – levies on the produce of the peasants, contributions for the use of rivers, etc. – were compromised when the British took over the administration of land in Malaya. There were, therefore, a series of revolts by these chieftains in the late 19th century, but they were not able to get the support of the peasants (whose way of life had not been much affected by the colonial economy) or the Sultans who were well looked after by the British.[iv]

The Malayan Communist Party and the Independence Struggle

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was founded in 1930 in Singapore. The MCP retreated into the jungle in early 1942 and resisted the Japanese occupation of Malaya as the Malayan People Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). The MPAJA was largely ethnic Chinese as the Japanese had a pronounced anti-Chinese bias. The MCP was recognised by the British post-World War II, with its leader Chin Peng receiving the Order of the British Empire in London. The MCP opened offices in several towns in post-World War II Malaya and continued organising the population.

Independence was in the air in Asia, spurred by vibrant independence movements in China, India and in Indonesia by the end of World War II. Though many of the Malay and Indian nationalists had been on the opposite side during the Japanese occupation, the MCP managed to set up a broad-based coalition called the All Malayan Council of Joint Action (AMCJA).[v] It comprised the trade union movement, the MPAJA, the Malayan Democratic Union (a party set up by urban English educated Malayans), the Malayan Indian Congress, some Chinese business interests, and others. The AMCJA formed a pact with PUTERA, a coalition of Malay nationalists comprising the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya, Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API), and the Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS).

The AMCJA-PUTERA coalition had a series of discussions that resulted in the 'Peoples Constitution' detailing how the nation would be governed post-Independence. However, the British rebuffed the efforts of this coalition to initiate negotiations for independence. The AMCJA-PUTERA coalition called for a Hartal

that was carried out on 20 October 1947. All activity in Malaya was stopped for a day – a nationwide strike where even businesses did not open.

The British struck back. API was banned in July 1947 and several of its leaders including the charismatic Ahmad Boestamam was detained and imprisoned. The British then passed legislation to control the militant trade union movement. Unions had to limit themselves to specific sectors of the economy. The then-existing General Labour Unions had to reorganise themselves into smaller sector-based unions and register with the Registrar of Trade Union (RTU). The RTU however refused to recognise many of the re-organised unions. When they attempted to continue to organise the workers, these unions were deemed illegal criminal organisations and their leaders detained. Strikes were met with brutal repression with instances of workers being killed by the authorities.

On 17 June 1948, a unit of the MCP assassinated three British planters in Sg Siput Perak. The British declared the Emergency, arrested thousands of activists and outlawed the MCP, which took to the jungles. In the initial period, MCP units were able to prevail, over-running small rural police stations and even briefly taking over the administration of a rural town, Gua Musang. The British High Commissioner of Malaya, Sir Henry Gurney of Malaya was assassinated on 6 October 1951.

The British countered with the Brigg's Plan in 1950 to deny food supplies to the communist forces. All the Chinese farmers scattered in the peri-urban regions were forced to move into 540 security camps, with barbed wire fencing all around, and a single-entry point guarded by the military or police. The farmers were allowed to tend to their crops during the day but were under curfew from dusk to dawn. Plantation workers were not permitted to buy rice. The management of estates gave each family a daily ration of cooked rice depending on the size of the family. The indigenous community, the Orang Asli, too was similarly confined in security camps.

The communist insurgency, deprived of food, was not able to sustain larger units. A decision was taken in 1952 to retreat to the Malayan-Thai border.[vi] The British also had a propaganda blitz where they painted the MCP as Chinese dominated and injurious to the long-term welfare of the Malay population.

Meanwhile the British set up Legislative Councils with representatives from the elites of Malayan society – the Malay aristocracy and non-Malay business leaders. They recognised United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) that was set up by Malay aristocrats and elites in colonial civil service. A national election was called in 1955 in which the Alliance Party, a coalition led by UMNO, won 51 out of the 52 seats contested. It had campaigned on the pledges of Amnesty for the MCP and Independence within two years. The leader of UMNO, Tunku Abdul Rahman was designated as the Chief Minister of Malaya.

The MCP responded to the 1955 election pledges by indicating that it was interested in Amnesty. The MCP could see by then that winning the armed struggle would be near impossible. They wanted access to the people and the electoral space. A talk was held between Alliance leaders and the MCP in Baling, Kedah in December 1955. The MCP were prepared to lay down arms and even dissolve the MCP. They wanted the right to return to Malaya and participate in the political process.6 The Tunku insisted on surrender, detention, and rehabilitation. An agreement could not be reached. The MCP leaders felt that Tunku had to take a strong stand to impress the British so as to win independence. They hoped that negotiations would resume after independence, but the MCP had to wait 30 long years for that. In August 1957, the British granted independence to Malaya helmed by the Alliance government.

The Economic Development of Post-Independence Malaysia

Malaya was primarily a producer of primary commodities during independence (1957). Rubber was its biggest export, and tin was the second largest. The plantation companies have since diversified to oil palm – now 5.6 million ha out of the 8.4 million hectares of agricultural land in Malaysia is dedicated to oil palm cultivation, while rubber is grown on 1 million ha of mainly smallholder farms. In the 1980s, the government managed to acquire a majority of shares in the plantation companies listed on the London Stock Exchange and currently more than 60% of plantation land is held by government-linked companies.

In the 1970s, the Chief Minister of Penang then, Dr. Lim Chong Eu, pioneered special economic zones catering for multinational electronic companies looking for lower costs of production. Many multinational corporations opened factories in Penang and a network of supporting factories have evolved over the years. Electronic components are now the largest export commodity of Malaysia, dwarfing oil palm. Employment in the manufacturing sector now accounts for about 18% of total employment, but wages are at about the minimum wage level, and around 30% of all workers in manufacturing are foreign workers. Much of our manufacturing is linked to global chains.

Post-independence, large petroleum deposits were discovered in Malaysia. The government enacted the Petroleum Development Act in 1974 which vested ownership of all petroleum discovered in Malaysia in Petronas, a company fully owned by the Ministry of Finance. Any foreign oil company which discovers petroleum in Malaysia has to negotiate an income sharing agreement with Petronas. Petronas has been contributing between 20 to 40% of the federal revenue for the past 30 years.

On the social front, the following significant steps have been taken:

- Rice farmers (around 200,000) and traditional fishermen (80,000), predominantly ethnic Malay, receive subsidies of various sorts. But they still constitute one of the poorest sectors of Malaysian society.
- 110,000 rural families have been allocated ten acres of land each under the Federal Land Development Authority land schemes. Slightly less than a half a million ha of land has been utilised for this scheme. Oil palm is the main crop.
- The Employment Provident Fund (EPF), that was set up in the late colonial period has now grown to cover about twelve million members (out of a labour force of sixteen million) and has total assets of RM 1.2 trillion (Malaysia's GDP in 2025 is RM 1.875 trillion).
- The Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) was set up in 1971 pursuant to a 1969 Act of Parliament and currently covers about nine million workers. It compensates workers for workplace injuries, and provides a life-long pension if a worker becomes disabled for any reason. SOCSO recently initiated schemes to cover gig riders and housewives.
- The government has set up a network of hospitals and clinics such that 95% of the population is within three km of a health care facility. Childhood immunisation is at 99% of the eligible population. Life expectancy increased from 66.5 years at independence to 75 years currently. Mortality under five is now 7.8 per 1000 live births.
- Schooling is free up to the secondary level – thirteen years in total.

Malaysia's GDP has increased 24-fold, in real terms, between 1970 and 2020. The population's access to modern conveniences – refrigerators, cars, washing machines, gas cookers, televisions, handphones, etc. – has increased tremendously. However:

- Wages are about 1/8th of the wages in Europe for work of a similar nature.
- Household debt is about 200% of total household income. The ratio is higher for the lower decile of the population.
- Many working people work more than 48 hours per week to try and make ends meet.
- 21% of children under-five in Malaysia are stunted.[vii]
- House prices are exorbitant, and housing loans are a major component of household debt.
- Old age poverty is a sad reality in Malaysia. 75% of the retirees aged 65 and above do not have any savings to draw upon.
- While highly subsidised health care is available for all, the public health care system is underfunded, receiving only 2.4% of the GDP. Waiting lists are long, and so, many families take out private insurance so that they can go to private hospitals if there are delays in the public health care system.
- 50% of the rice consumed in Malaysia is currently imported. As wheat cannot be grown in Malaysia, we are totally dependent on wheat imports. Malaysia is a highly food insecure country!

In addition, since the 1990s, Malaysia has entered a number of Free Trade Agreements which threaten the economic sovereignty of the country and seriously impair the ability of the Malaysian government to manage the national economy. For example:

- The ASEAN Free Trade Agreement has tied us to a zero-tariff policy for over 98% of goods vis-à-vis ASEAN countries. This constrains us from raising our minimum wage by a larger quantum as then, cheaper manufactured goods from ASEAN would devastate our manufacturing sector. And our food producers are subject to dumping of excess produce from the neighbouring ASEAN countries.
- The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and other agreements grant foreign investors numerous rights including the right to enter any economic sector that is open to local businesses, freedom from any requirements to enhance local technical capacity or use local inputs, and freedom from any form of capital controls.
- The Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) provisions exist in several of these FTAs.[viii]

Malaysians are living better in material terms, but are under severe economic stress as incomes are generally low, and the cost of living is high. There is a high level of insecurity and uncertainty and therefore stress. This needn't be so. Our analysis (Table 1) shows that too large a portion of national income accrues to the owners of capital!

Table 1: The share of national income accrued to various social groups in Malaysia.

Social Strata	**Share of National Income**
16 Million Working People	29%
Government	16%
Owners of Capital & Top Managers (0.3 million individuals)	55%

The Parliamentary Left

The radical Malay nationalists who were detained in 1947 were released in 1955 before the national elections. Some among them, including Boestaman, set up the Parti Rakyat (Peoples Party) while others entered the Parti Buruh (Labour Party). These two parties contested the general elections of 1959 as the Socialist Front and won eight seats in the 104-member parliament. They also did well in the Municipal elections winning a majority of seats in the Penang City Council and the position of Mayor.

The Alliance government abolished Local Council Elections and used the Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain more than a thousand Socialist Front leaders and activists in the 1960s, seriously impeding the expansion of the Front.[ix] Issues involving language and the nature of Malaysia also divided the Chinese and the Malay members of the Socialist Front. The Chinese members, largely in the Parti Buruh, wanted equality for all nationalities in Malaysia, with three official languages. The Malays, largely in the Parti Rakyat, wanted Malaysia to be recognised as part of the Nusantara Melayu (the Malay homeland); while the languages and religions of the immigrant communities would be respected, Malay language and culture should be the bedrock upon which the Malaysian nation should be based. These issues led to the break-up of the Socialist Front in 1966.

The Parti Buruh, weakened by the detention of many of their leaders and disillusioned with the electoral process, decided not to contest the 1969 elections. A significant number of them went underground and linked up with the MCP. The Parti Buruh was then de-registered. The Parti Rakyat won two state assembly seats in Pahang in 1969, but the two elected members spent their terms under detention under the ISA. These were the last election victories of the Parti Rakyat.

Ethnic Imbalances in Malaysia

For reasons that have been elucidated in the section on the colonial period, the Malay community was economically disadvantaged during independence. As they had remained outside the modern economy, the academic achievement of Malays and their representation in the professions was far below their population ratio.

This was recognised by the Malaysian leaders at that time, and a special provision (Article 153) was included in the Federal Constitution empowering the Constitutional Monarch to grant special quotas for Malays in educational institutions and permits for businesses. Many special residential schools and junior colleges were set up to enable the Malay population to catch up academically. Many scholarships and business permits have been awarded. Intake into government jobs such as clerical staff, teachers, and nurses have witnessed a very high proportion of Malays resulting in our 1.6 million civil service now being more than 85% bumiputera.[x]

This affirmative action premised on ethnicity – termed the New Economic Policy (NEP) – has seen the creation of a large Malay middle class and has stabilised Malaysian society considerably. But, as the Table 2 shows, there is still a significant imbalance – the Malay community hasn't reached their population ratio in some key professions.

Table 2: Bumiputera participation in selected professions

Profession	1973	2014	2023
Engineer	13.5%	32%	
Medical doctor	7.6%	46%	
Veterinary doctor	30.8%	42%	
Dentist	8.4%		52.8%
Accountant	17.9%		32.3%
Lawyer	20.3%		38.9%

The Malay community constitutes about 60% of the population of Malaysia. The indigenous populations of Sabah and Sarawak make up another about 10% of the population. They are collectively termed bumiputera (sons of the soil) in some government documents. The Chinese community makes up 23% of the Malaysian population while the Indians constitute 7%, and the Orang Asli are around 200 thousand strong. The figures in the Table 2 attest to the fact that even 60 years post-independence, the bumiputera are lagging behind in several occupations.

The bumiputera communities are still over-represented in agriculture which is a low-income sector. Even in the formal sector, the available data indicates that they are earning much less than non-Malay workers as their median EPF savings were significantly lower than the non-Malay population (as Table 3 shows). Also, they did not have other financial assets to rely on during the Covid-19 lockdown and had to withdraw a large portion of their already meagre retirement funds.

Table 3: Median EPF savings (in Malaysian Ringgit) before and after the Covid-19 lockdowns, by ethnic group.

Race	Savings (April 2020)	Savings (December 2022)	Decline
Bumiputera	15,541	4,937	-10,604
Malay	16,938	5,529	-11,409
Othe Bumiputera	10,591	3,302	-7,289
Chinese	45,756	45,162	-594
Indian	25,724	14,929	-10,795

Class Differentiation of the Malay Community and the Reformasi Movement

Malay society has undergone a massive change in the past 65 years. Now, the majority of them are wage-earners in urban areas. The feudal ties that bonded them to their rural villages have been weakened. They are part of the urban working class and are struggling financially because of low wages and high cost of living.

UMNO, the party that led the nation to independence and that oversaw the implementation of the ethnic based affirmative action favouring the Malays has also transformed from a grassroots-based party of school teachers, journalists, and religious leaders into a party of businessmen, contractors, and corporate bosses. Much of the financial allocations meant for the Malay poor is now captured by this stratum of Malay business people.

The financial crisis of 1997-1998 led to a severe crisis within the UMNO elite. There were too many crony capitalists who needed funds, and there was disagreement on who to save, whether to accept IMF loans, etc. The then Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, sacked his deputy Anwar Ibrahim citing sexual impropriety. This sparked the Reformasi movement. Ibrahim campaigned on the issue of governance, corruption, and the fattened Malay elite who had hijacked funds meant for uplifting the Malay poor. He utilised his Islamic credentials to strengthen his criticism. A significant part of the Malay urban population joined the movement.

Ibrahim was imprisoned in 1999.[xi] Mohamad stepped down as Prime Minister in 2003. In 2009, Najib Bin Razak became the Prime Minister. Then, the 1MDB scandal erupted in 2016. This reignited the Reformasi movement. The corruption associated with the UMNO elite had become common knowledge by then. The mighty UMNO party began losing ground and the Pakatan Harapan, Ibrahim's coalition, formed the government in 2018.[xii]

The Current Status of the Malaysian Left

The Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia or PSM) is currently the most visible and active left party in Malaysia. However, because of our origins as student activist groups working among plantation workers (largely Indian), currently about 60% of PSM members are Indian. The PSM began working with non-Indian ethnic groups in the late 1990s and our Chinese and Malay membership is increasing gradually. We need many more cadres of all ethnic groups.

Apart from the PSM, there are several other left parties in Malaysia:

1. The veterans of the MCP and the Parti Buruh. These veterans outnumber the PSM. The former members of the MCP who were allowed back into Malaysia after the Haatyai Peace Accord of 1989 have formed the Kawan Karib (Close Friends) and the 21st Century associations. They have regular dinners and social gatherings. But they are not politically active apart from publishing several memoirs and biographies that detail their role in the struggle for independence. Some among them support our fund-raising dinners.

2. The Parti Rakyat. It is a shadow of its former self. It still puts up a few candidates at each general election, but does little in the intervening periods except for the occasional press statements. The PSM is trying to persuade them to join us in forming a progressive third force coalition.

3. The Socialist Alternative. The Socialist Alternative is a small group that is affiliated with the Committee for a Workers' International. They come out with periodic analyses of the current situation. Their analyses are good, but lacking in concrete ideas of how to move forward given the current reality. They still practice 'entryism' which makes it difficult to include them in joint activities. In any case, they believe that the PSM is leading the working class astray with our reformist policies and participation in elections.

4. Left-leaning individuals in media, NGOs, academia, and civil society. There are quite a large number of such individuals. They are supportive of our campaigns and other activities. The PSM is keen to get them onboard as there is a lot of work to do.

Challenges Facing the Left in Malaysia

The left in Malaya/Malaysia has been beaten down twice in the past 80 years. The British managed to neutralise the armed insurrection of 1948. By 1952, the MCP was effectively excluded from Malayan society. The Alliance government used the ISA to detain hundreds of Socialist Front leaders and union activists in the 1960s, and crippled the parliamentary left. History, they say, is written by the victor. The left has been vilified by official propaganda for the past 80 years, both in the print media as well as in the text books.

As a result, the public perception of the left is rather negative. Many Malaysians feel that the left is innately authoritarian, anti-democratic, and violent. The armed insurgency of the MCP, the authoritarianism of the Soviet Union from 1930 onwards, the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge, and Western propaganda have all contributed to this fairly entrenched view.

Religion has a great influence over the Malaysian population. About 80% of Malays surveyed a few years ago said that Islam was the most important component of their identity, only then ethnicity, and nationality. Some Malays fear that joining the PSM would make them too 'secular' and impair their 'Aqidah'. Conservative religiosity isn't confined to Muslims. In the recent by-elections for the state seat of Ayer Kuning (on 26 April 2025), our candidate Bawani was attacked by opponents for being an atheist.[xiii]

The PSM has responded to these two perceptions and fears by arguing that:

1. We believe in democratizing society – at the workplace through unionisation, at community level through the formation of community level councils, and by re-instituting local government elections.
2. We contest elections, we organise campaigns as permitted by the laws of the country.[xiv]
3. We have been involved in so many community struggles for the past 30 years. There hasn't been an instance where we initiated any violence.

As for the perception that the left is against religion and faith, we state that we are not anti-religion. There is no requirement to renounce religion in order to become a PSM member. The PSM believes that religion is a personal matter and there should be no compulsion on anyone to follow or leave any particular religion. There are people of all faiths in the PSM. There are also atheists and agnostics. It is their right to not believe. We also point out that socialism, which is based on solidarity with all, including the poor and the marginalized, is much more in line with the principles of religions than capitalism.

There are quite a number of people who believe the left does not have the capacity to manage a modern economy. Unfortunately, there is some truth in the general perception that parties left of the social-democrats are idealistic and out of touch with current reality. Too many in the left have not given sufficient thought about our programme for the first five years after taking power should be. We need to move from critiquing capitalism and imperialism to explain, in layman terms, how we will transform the current reality into something that is better for all the citizens. We need a realistic transitional programme that the ordinary person can understand, and identify with. It cannot be just an article of faith!

In the Malaysian context we need to have positions on the following issues (among others):

- Our stance on foreign capital already invested in Malaysia? At present our economy is export oriented and we need market access. The value of Malaysia's exports is equal to 75% of GDP. Disengaging too abruptly from the global system would result in high unemployment rates and economic misery.
- Are we thinking of working towards a planned economy like there was in the USSR, or of a well-regulated market economy that allocates resources through a system of prices set by supply/demand mechanics (as has developed in China)?
- What is the role of small and medium sized firms in the economy we are envisaging? Many of them are owned by Malaysian Chinese. Would we want to develop a strategic partnership with them to enhance Malaysia's industrial and technological self-reliance?
- How would we reduce the tendency of the leaders of our movement being over-influenced or even bought over by business interests?
- Would we want to put up tariffs to protect domestic manufacturing industries which are obliged to implement the higher wages we would legislate? If so, how would we disentangle ourselves from international trade and investment agreements that Malaysia has signed on to? These agreements tie us to a low or zero-tariff regime.
- Or would we keep wages relatively low, so that our industries remain competitive, but increase the social wage (subsidised health care, public transport, free tertiary education, residences for rent, etc.)? Or would we implement a negative income tax that would level up the income of all working Malaysians to a basic minimum?
- How would we handle the fiscal deficit and the RM 1.2 trillion debt that the government has accumulated?[xv] Debt repayment is now RM 56 billion or 17% of total government revenue. Would we increase corporate taxes unilaterally or would we try to do this in conjunction with ASEAN and other countries?
- Could we use the modality of debt financing? If so, to what extent?

These are some of the issues that we need a clear understanding of if the left intends to take over the management of a modern economy that is closely integrated into the global capitalist economy. The PSM is working on several of these issues in our Policy Research Bureau, but there are many issues that we still do not know enough about.

There is thus a basis for the comment, 'you people are good activists who speak up for the marginalized. Stay as an NGO and continue the good work'. In other words, they do not trust us to manage the economy and fear that we would crash it by causing capital flight, unemployment, and social unrest. We need to address these fears by clarifying our own understanding of these issues, and achieving a consensus about the pace of progress towards socialism.

Apart from all the negative perceptions of the left in the Malaysian public, the left faces a very ethnically polarised society. After the demolition of the left at the end of the 1960s, all the main political parties – both in government and opposition – were ethnic or religious based. Fifty years of ethnicised politicking has created a highly polarised society. The Malay population (60% of total population) are still the poorer compared to the Chinese (23% of the total). The Malays are anxious that the affirmative action they have enjoyed would be withdrawn. They fear becoming 'second class citizens' in their own country.

The Chinese business class's grouse is that they are creating wealth for the nation, but are being unfairly

treated. Communities of Chinese farmers who have been tilling state land since before independence keep getting evicted with scant compensation whenever nearby urban centres need houses or industrial sites. The Chinese fear that their vernacular schools will be closed, and that Islamic dress codes and other restrictions will be enforced on them.

The indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak – the Kadazan, Murut, Sulu, Bajau, Iban, Bidayu, Kenyah, Kayan, Penan, and several others (10% of the total Malaysian population) – feel that they are being neglected by the government, and that their land rights are being trampled upon. The Indians (7% of total population), are resentful that they are left out of most affirmative action programmes and denied government jobs, though there are many Indians who are in need. They also are afraid that some of the 500+ Tamil primary schools in the country will be closed down. Hindu Temple demolitions are another sore point.

The PSM is trying to impress on the people that:

1. The grievances and fears of all the communities are valid and have to be dealt with in a spirit of solidarity. The Malaysian Constitution presents well-balanced formulae for handling most of the outstanding issues. However, certain issues are exaggerated and played up by politicians vying for power.
2. The working people of all ethnicities need to be united to demand a fairer share of the economy.
3. The main political parties which play up and exaggerate ethnic conflicts are actually traitors to the working people, for they divert attention from the crucial issue – 55% of the wealth created by our collective effort is going to 3% of the population leaving 97% of the population with only 29% of the wealth.

Apart from the above challenges, repression by the authorities is a persistent danger. This was consistently used to cripple left movements in the past.[xvi] The likelihood of this being used against us is high if we succeed in rallying more people to our side and appear as a threat to the status quo.

Undoubtedly, the Left in Malaysia faces several tough challenges. However, the PSM believes that we have the ideas that can take this nation forward. And we are working hard to build a movement that will bring a progressive coalition of political parties and people movements to power.

Notes

i The annual mortality rates for immigrant labour in some estates were as high as 10% for certain years due to malnutrition, malaria, other infections, and snake bites.

ii Kevin Henison and Jim Glassman, 'Class in Southeast Asia', in Class, Economy and Politics in South East Asia (University of Philippines and Journal of Contemporary Asia, 2024).

iii Rice Land Enactment (1917).

iv Dato Maharaja Lela assassinated James W. W. Birch, the British Resident of Perak in November 1875,

launching the Perak War against the British. He was executed by the British in 1877. There are several other noblemen e.g. Mat Kilau and Dato Bahaman, who also rebelled and resisted British colonial rule.

v The Japanese encouraged Indian nationalists to set up the Indian National Army under Subash Chandra Bose. This army fought alongside the Japanese in the Burmese – Indian border.

vi Chin Peng, Alias Ching Peng: My Side of History (Media Masters Pte, 2003).

vii UNICEF.

viii ISDS provisions provide for foreign investors to by-pass national courts and refer disputes with the host government to a private Tribunal in Hong Kong, Europe or in the US.

ix The ISA empowered the Minister of Home Affairs to detain persons suspected of being a threat to the security of the Nation for a period of two years, without the requirement to charge the persons in Court. The period of detention could be extended for another two years if the Minister deemed it necessary. Individuals have been held for up to 20 years under this Act. This Act was repealed in 2013.

x Bumiputera means 'son of the soil'. It refers to ethnic Malays who make up about 60% of the population of Malaysia and indigenous Sabahan and Sarawakians who make up another 10% of the population of the country.

xi On sodomy charges. These were reversed in 2004 and Ibrahim was released.

xii Results of the General Elections in Malaysia. The Barisan Nasional is the coalition led by UMNO. Should be noted that some coalition members left after 2018 and others left in 2022. The total number of seats in the Malaysian Lower House is 222.

Year	Seats won by the Barisan Nasional
2004	198
2008	140
2013	132
2018	79
2022	30

xiii We only obtained 6.3% of the votes cast, as we had anticipated. But we achieved our targets – exposure in the mainstream media as well as several dozen videos about our analyses and work in social media.

xiv The PSM organises campaigns highlighting major issues affecting the people. Our last campaign was for universal old age pension to address old age poverty. An 18-month long campaign. We are just beginning a campaign to defend and improve the public health care system which is chronically underfunded and under assault.

xv Malaysian GDP was RM 1875 billion at the end of 2024.

xvi Six senior members of the PSM were arrested under the Emergency Ordinance in 2011 and investigated for 'attempting to rekindle the armed struggle'. The Emergency Ordinance allows detention without trial for an indeterminate period, just like the ISA. The PSM conducted a vigorous campaign and managed to release us after a month.



Jeyakumar Devaraj

Jeyakumar Devaraj
Chairperson, Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM)

Is Asia Possible?



Art created by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

By Vijay Prashad

Asia now refers merely to geography, to the vast terrain that stretches across the globe from one end of Japan to the other end of Lebanon, looking almost as if it might rip from the tension. There are eleven, out of a total of twenty-four time zones in Asia out of a total of twenty-four, and about a third of the total landmass is in Asia making it the largest continent.

Even the geography is unclear. Russia is the country with the largest landmass in Asia; it is almost twice the size of China. Yet, there is fleeting consciousness of Russia as being part of Asia, even though more than three quarters of Russia is in Asia. It is typically seen as a European country or – at best – as a Eurasian state (this is largely because three quarters of Russia's population lives west of the Ural Mountains, the traditional dividing line between Asia and Europe). During the war in Ukraine, the isolation of Russia by the Global North led to its pivot away from Europe and toward Asia. A 'no limits' partnership with China and its increased trade with other Asian countries saw a shift in Russia's place on the planet (China is now Russia's largest trading partner). But it is still not entirely rooted in Asia.

Large parts of West Asia – from Palestine to the border of Afghanistan – are generally thought of as the Middle East and not as part of Asia (this applies to the Arabian Peninsula as well). Various geopolitical concepts (Orient, Near East, Middle East, MENA) have defined this region from Morocco to Iran as something other than African and Asian, with north Africa broken away from another concept, Sub-Saharan Africa, and West Asia treated as separate from the rest of the massive Asian landmass.

The Himalayas rise like massive walls and have – over the centuries – blocked the easy traffic of ideas and customs between India and China. Buddhism had to travel through Afghanistan and then turn right to head

into China and Japan. It could not easily cross the mountains. But the pioneering Buddhist monks whose journeys have been recorded from India – Kumarjiva (350 to 409 CE) and Bodhidharma (5th century to 6th century) – and from China – Zhang Qian (2nd century BCE), Xuanzang (602-664 CE), and Faxian (337 to 422 CE) – went around the mountains to bring open channels for trade and intellectual interactions between the two large civilisations. They not only traded in silk and spices, but in the development of mathematics and astronomy as well as in medicine and military technology.[1]

Some countries – like India – are continental themselves, comprising hundreds of languages and, thousands of cultural worlds.[2] Other countries – like Indonesia – are broken up by hundreds of islands that are separated by over 5000 kilometres from one end to another. The highest point on the earth is in Asia (Mount Everest) and the lowest point on the earth is in Asia (the Dead Sea). The old Mongols would have ridden along the steppe for four thousand kilometres, going from the Uvs Nur basin to the Don River, passing all kinds of people, speaking all kinds of languages, growing all kinds of crops, nurturing all kinds of dreams of the afterlife and the purpose of life. They did not know that they were riding across Asia.[3] The continent existed, of course, but consciousness of it as an entity would have to wait until more modern times.[4]

It is impossible to imagine 'Asia' as a simple word, a word that refers to something definitive. There are a hundred etymologies of the word 'Asia', most of them going back to the ancient Greeks or even the Goths. None of these stories come from within the continent itself. There is an Assyrian wooden slab (a stele) which calls the western side of Assyria (*Ereb*) the 'country of sunset' and the eastern side of Assyria (*Asu*) the country of 'sunrise'.[5] This is a mere obvious fact for the Assyrian people, where the sun rises and sets, and not a real definition of the continent and its name.

Each of our continents in the Global South are devised in the majestic world of colonial science. They are not entities with a deep endogamous history. Every place is a construct. No place is natural, even if it is an island. If an island were a naturally bounded country, what to make of an archipelago (such as Indonesia with 17,504 islands) or an island divided into two countries (such as Hispaniola divided into the Dominican Republic and Haiti)? No boundary is natural, no nation is rooted in anything other than human history and politics. That is a lesson being learned every time a new war breaks out, terrible wars in the Horn of Africa or in the steppe of Ukraine or in the Palestinian territories.



Gulammohammed Sheikh, *The Mappamundi Suite*, 2003.

Asia Is Anti-Colonial

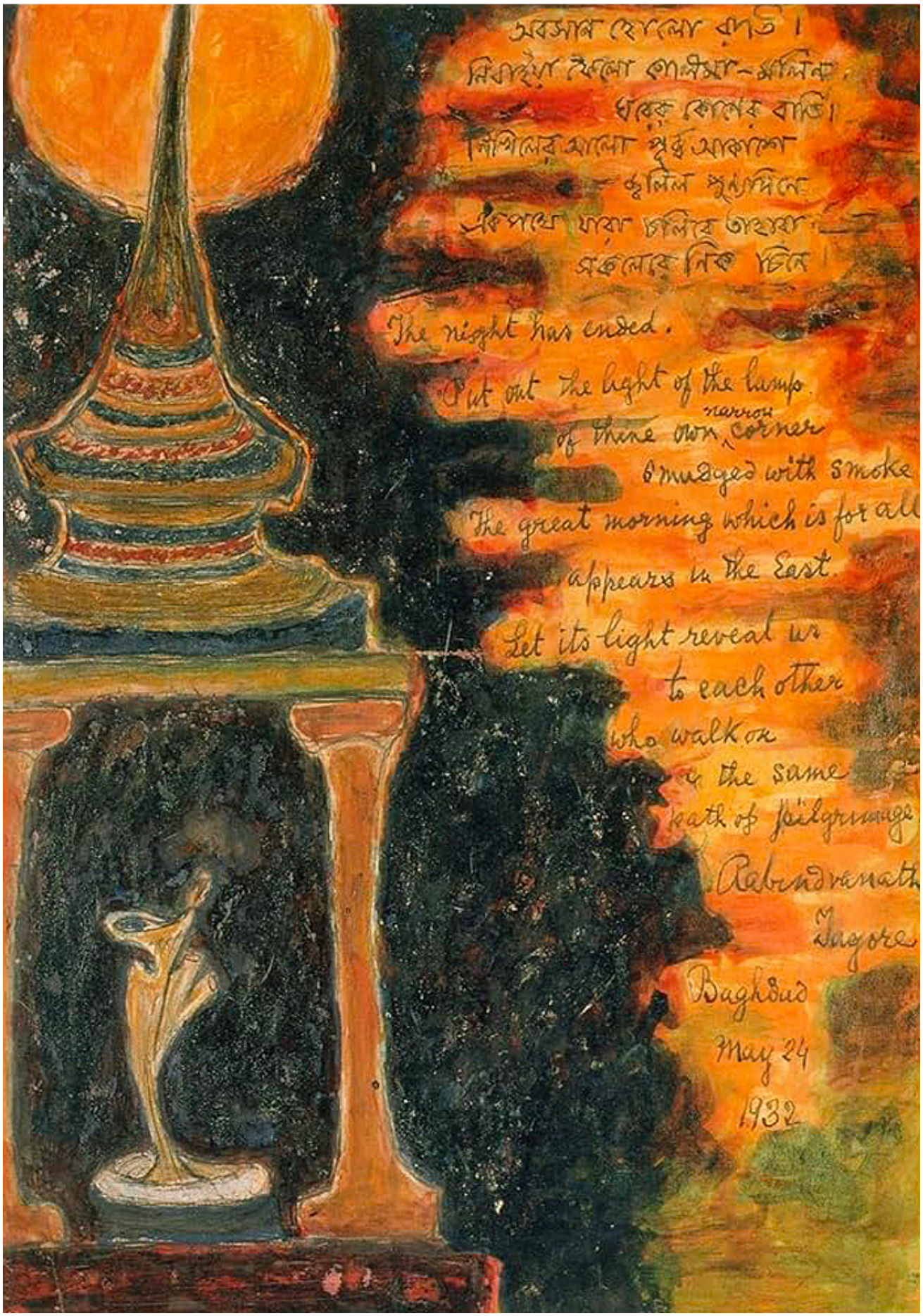
This is why we seek the meaning of Asia not in ancient times, in a Greek word, but in its modern history, when it became clear that the people of this vast area were prepared to find political unity for a definitive use.[6] When was this unity necessary? It was necessary to confront imperialism, the extra-economic force used largely by the advanced industrial states of their age (Great Britain and the United States) to subordinate the land and the labour of the people who lived on this grand and, vast landmass. It was in this struggle against imperialism that 'India' was born, that 'China' was born, that 'Indonesia' was born, that the 'Philippines' was born. Forms of right-wing nationalist history writing – often by politicians as much as historians – turn backwards, seeking to legitimise their national stories in the ancient world. But their frameworks are fabrications that draw in older stories that are indifferent to the modern concept of nation and insert them against their own meanings. This is perhaps necessary to make people feel like their patriotism and their nationalism is old, when in fact it is not so old, not so natural, not so rooted in antiquity and race. For the people inside this vast landmass, nations were born in struggle against an oppressor, against an invader. It was

the invader who partly helped shape the conditions for the creation of the nation. The people themselves, in their anti-colonial struggles, reached backward to their history and their geography to design the actual shape of their nationalism – sometimes a nationalism rooted in the patriotism of the poor, but often a nationalism soured by the ugliness of profit for the few.

The idea of India, for instance, is shaped by the struggle of the freedom movement against British colonialism, and it was this struggle that tried to bring all the peoples of the subcontinent into a vital unity.[7] That act of unification suggested that cultural diversity was a detriment to national unity, that cultural or ethnic or linguistic nations by themselves can be unified into a federation against colonialism. So that the Tamil-speaking people and the Bengali-speaking people could see themselves as *Indian* not because of ancient cultural ties but because of their unified struggle against colonialism and for the creation of a federated republic. The values of India, despite the claims that might be made for them in older traditions, had to be shaped by the freedom struggle for the new multi-national republic. The Indian nation, therefore, was not ontological (being) but it a process (becoming). This is exactly the shape of the emergence of most nations, whether in the Americas or in Africa and Asia.

If that was the case of anti-colonial nationalism, that was equally the case of anti-colonial pan-nationalism or continentalism. The idea of Pan-Asia was the cognate of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism, of Patria Grande in Latin America – Ideas of political unity for a people who had been subjugated by imperialism. There was no Pan-Africanism that predated the fight against colonialism, no Patria Grande without the anti-imperialist sensibility, no pan-Arabism without the deep humiliation of colonial domination. The desire for continental and global unity came from the deep longing to defeat imperialism. This is why people came from far and wide to Moscow to attend the meetings of the Communist International from 1919 – and especially from 1920 onwards as far as Asian delegates were concerned – and it is why so many Asian radicals and nationalists came to Brussels in 1927 – 28 for the League Against Imperialism meeting. It was clear that the Great War of 1914 – 1918 and the Revolution in the Tsarist Empire that produced the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had dented the invincibility of the imperialists. It was equally clear that the tepid promises of independence made by the League of Nations would not be honoured and that matters had to be taken in hand.

That was the sensibility at the first Pan-African conference of 1919 held in Paris.[8] It was the sensibility of Sharif Hussein, who took on the name King of the Arab Countries in 1916 and called for the freedom and unity of the Arab lands.[9] It was this emotion that led Manuel Ugarte, an Argentinian, to write the 1924 book *La Patria Grande*, a call for the unification of the Spanish-speaking lands of the Americas against imperialism.[10] It was this same spirit that animated China's Sun Yat-Sen to call for 'Greater Asianism' in a famous speech from 1924. What was the reason for the call towards Greater Asianism or Pan-Asianism? 'We advocate Pan-Asianism in order to restore the status of Asia', said Sun Yat-Sen.[11] It was precisely the motivations of all projects for unity in the colonised world, whether in Africa, Asia or Latin America. They wished to 'restore the status' of their fallen lands. There was no real continental or national aspiration before the anti-colonial, revolutionary era of the 20th century.


অবসান হোলো রাত।
নিবাইয়া ফেলো কালীঝুলি-মলিন
ধূমকুণ্ডলীর বাতি।
নিশীথের আলো পূর্ব আকাশে
ধূলিল সুপ্তদিনে
একপথে যারা চলিবে তাহারা
সকলেরে নিক চিনে।
The night has ended.
Put out the light of the lamp
narrow
of thine own corner
smudged with smoke
The great morning which is for all
appears in the East.
Let its light reveal us
to each other
who walk on
the same
path of pilgrimage
Rabindranath
Tagore
Baghdad
May 24
1932

Rabindranath Tagore (India), *Untitled,* 1932.

Burned to a Crisp

Every project of unity in the colonised world had a continuous history – Pan-Africanism continues till this day, as does Patria Grande and Pan-Arabism. The dents and scuffs of internal tensions – and the pressures of imperialism – prevent the realisation of any of these concepts, but the ideas remain intact. Pan-Asianism is different. The idea burned to a crisp because of Japanese expansionism, with its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and its use of the concepts of Asian unity for its domination of large parts of Asia. In 1943, the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo brought together heads of states of various effective colonies of Japan, where the Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo – a Class A war criminal at the Tokyo war trials, who was executed in 1948 – praised the 'spiritual essence' of Asia.[12] Tojo used the same kind of emotional and romantic language that had marked the world of people such as the Japanese art historian Kakuzo Okakura and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Okakura had lived in Tagore's Kolkata house for almost a year in 1902.[13] It was here that Okakura wrote *The Awakening of Asia* (1904), and it was here that he began *The Ideals of the East* (1903). 'Asia is one', begins *The Ideals*. All this was charming. But then, in *The Awakening of Japan* (1904), Okakura supported his country's annexation of Korea (Japan, he wrote, had no ambitions over Korea or Manchuria, 'If China and Russia had respected the independence of Korea, no wars would have taken place' – this is a fanciful interpretation). It is in this book that Okakura bemoans the reputation of Japan – 'so eager to identify ourselves with European civilisation instead of Asiatic that our continental neighbours regard us as renegades – nay, even as an embodiment of the White Disaster itself'.[14]

Tagore tired of the 'White Disaster', of imperialism disguised as something high-minded – the domination of Western Civilisation or Japanese culture. When he visited Japan in 1916, Tagore gave a stinging rebuke to nationalism, which was really to the kind of expansionary behaviour of the Japanese Empire. Accused of being soft-hearted, Tagore wrote a poem – *The Song of the Defeated* – at the request of a Korean student in Japan, Choy Nam Sun.

> My master has bid me while I stand at the roadside
> To sing the song of defeat
> For that is the bride whom he woos in secret
> She has put on the dark veil, hiding her face from the crowd
> But the jewel glows on her breast in the dark.

Tagore gave the poem to a Korean student – Chin Hak-Mun – who was studying in Japan. Chin Hak-Mun, who would later become a well-known writer, visited Tagore at the Yokohama home of the art collector and banker Hara Tomitaro. Tagore's gift suggested another kind of Pan-Asianism, a unity of the defeated who hoped one day to overcome defeat not with empires of their own but with something more precious than that – solidarity among peoples for the mutual well-being of each and all. It is not defeat that is shameful, suggested Tagore, but subordination of others.

In 1917, Tagore published *Nationalism*, in which he wrote, 'nationalism is a great menace'.[15] What he meant

was that the European form of the nation – rooted in the illusion of social cohesion and of industrial progress – would leave countries such as Japan and India struggling with the 'borrowed weapons of civilisation' and unwilling to harness their own inheritance. Political independence was necessary, settling accounts with the wretchedness of social hierarchy was necessary, but so too was a generous attitude to one's own past and to what one might learn from one's neighbours. India, Tagore suggested, needed to surmount the challenges of caste hierarchy (as the United States needed to deal with its ugly racism, he pointed out); but then India and other Asian countries should not turn inward, but need to learn from each other to advance the project of human development.


Nursultan
ZAKHSTAN
Bishkek
KYRGYZ.
TAJIK
ASIA
CHINA
Islamabad
NEPAL
New Delhi
INDIA
NORTH KOREA
Tokyo
JAPAN
Seoul
SOUTH KOREA
TAIWAN
HONG KONG (S.A.R.)

Abhinav VK Satheesh, *Untitled*, 2025.

A Great Design

After World War II ended, the dream of Pan-Asianism remained gently intact. The Asian Relations Conference of 1947 opened with India's Jawaharlal Nehru calling for a new project, something miles away from the Japanese empire. 'We have no designs against anybody', Nehru said, 'Ours is the great design of promoting peace and progress all over the world'.[16] Japanese delegates – eager for a fresh start – wanted to come to the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 but were prevented by US occupation authorities. There is a straight line that goes from the Asian Relations Conference to the Asian-African Conference of 1955 at Bandung and to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961.[17] Calls for an Asian Federation in 1947 were rebuffed by South-East Asians who had just come out of the terrible experience of Japanese expansionism, and they were set aside by the countries around Asia that had joined one or the other US military alliances (CENTO and SEATO). The vicious wars by the new imperialist powers against Korea, Vietnam, Malaya, and Indonesia set the dial for Asian unity at zero. British concentration camps for the communist insurgents in Malaya, and US carpet bombing of the Korean north sent a strong message across Asia for the old notables and the new bourgeois nationalists to hide under the umbrella of Western power against their own people. Border conflicts between India and China and between Pakistan and India as well as across South-East Asia made dreams of unity appear distant.

In this context, to think of 'Asia' was an illusion. While Kwame Nkrumah championed Pan-Africanism and Gamel Abdul Nasser pushed for Arab unity, no political force in Asia could legitimately drive a Pan-Asian agenda. There simply was no intellectual or political resource generated during the Cold War that developed a progressive pan-Asian platform.[18]

The tentacles of US imperialism and the malignancies of the Cold War undermined any possibility of a renewed Pan-Asianism. The hub and spokes system of US power encircled the USSR and China, reducing countries such as Japan and the Philippines, Pakistan and Iran into military bases, dependencies with their own flags, paranoid old notables carrying buckets for the White Disaster, as Okakura called it. What could have flourished after Bandung faltered, border wars and trade wars engulfed the energy for unity and progress. The clarity of Kwame Nkrumah did not make itself felt on the Asian continent – Nkrumah warning, five decades ago, 'If we do not formulate plans for unity and take active steps to form political union, we will soon be fighting and warring among ourselves with the imperialists and colonialists standing behind the screen and pulling vicious wires to make us cut each other's throats for the sake of their diabolical purposes in Africa'.[19] There is no such ideological seam in Asia, no such political direction that puts at the forefront the importance of unity against division.



Shahzia Sikander. *Oil and Poppies,* 2019-20.

Renewals

Nostalgic returns to Asian spiritualism, crafted by the Singaporean intellectual Kishore Mahbubani and championed by Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad in the 1990s, stressed Asian cultural superiority as a way to explain the rise of the Tigers. This was a facile theory, absent any real economic content, that sought an explanation for the global commodity chain in Asian values. The locus was East Asia, bewilderment being the sense in the literature about South, Central, West and North Asia. For in India half the population lives in poverty – over 700 million people. No cultural explanation is sufficient for its condition. This sentiment – Asian values – was merely an inaccurate description of why the Tigers flourished, not a hope for Asian unity. In fact, Asian unity was not on the cards at all.

Hard-nosed pragmatic policies have emerged to unite certain countries in Asia. In 2018, the US government announced that its War on Terror was over and that it would focus attention against its two main adversaries, China and Russia, the 'near peer' contestants for power. Old Cold War fantasies of encaging China provide other platforms for unity – such as between India, Singapore and Japan (with India and Japan along with Australia and the US as part of the Quad, although this has largely been superseded by the Squad with the Philippines replacing India). But these are ugly platforms, alliances thrust upon states that are the hubs for a faltering US hegemony over Asia. Even relatively small-scale unities – the halting negotiations on the Korean peninsula – are forbidden to this kind of process. Japan and South Korea must remain client states of the West, aircraft carriers for its necessary encirclement of China's return to the world stage. No 'Asia' is possible here, only poverty and war.

The fragility of US hegemony after the 2003 illegal war on Iraq and the 2007 world financial crisis brought to the forefront the BRICS project, a platform to claim the need for a multilateral system as the unipolar system fell apart. But the BRICS dynamic, created to pivot the large factories of the world away from the floundering Atlantic markets that are no longer the buyers of last resort, is largely commercial. The political weight of the BRICS has not been fully identified, nor is there a compelling cultural vision for some kind of Southern Renaissance or even regional, continental unities to build the strength of the Global South. Feelings of unity on a continental or regional basis emerge here and there, but they are fleeting.

Arab unity at the inter-state level has been deeply wounded by the Israeli genocide (with the Arab League absent for the entirely of the atrocity); Pan-Africanism was dented after the NATO war on Libya in 2011, but there are seeds of it growing in the new formation called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger; the advance of the far right of a special type in Latin America (from Argentina to El Salvador) has certainly confounded the calls of Patria Grande, but that idea remains in the social movements that are trying to regroup in an adverse situation.

For Asia, the question of the US-imposed New Cold War that divides China from Japan and the Philippines, the Korean peninsula, and South Asia remains at centre-stage. Nonetheless, it is important to register that the Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, former Ambassador to China, said that India does not subscribe to the 'NATO mindset' (a repeat of Nehru's rejection of the US military pacts of the 1950s, the 1954 Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation and the 1955 Central Treaty Organisation) or that Chinese's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, former Ambassador to Japan, has openly championed the ideas of Asianism that

come to us from Li Dazhao and Sun Yat-sen. These are returns to the source that are important to elaborate.



Cao Fei, *Asia One*, detail, 2018.

Return to the Source

There is a need to travel deep into our histories, to recover older dreams of Asia that spluttered into world history a hundred years ago.

a. **Socialist Asia.**

A factual story should begin in 1904, when news began to spread around the world that Japan – an Asian country – had defeated the armies of the Tsar of Russia – then seen entirely as a European country. This military defeat not only inspired young people across Asia to consider their own rebellions against the forces of imperialism, but it also moved people within Russia to overthrow their wretched monarchy. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, sitting in South Africa, watched events in northern Asia and in Russia with great interest. He wrote a series of articles for *Indian Opinion* on Leo Tolstoy and on Maxim Gorky, as well as on the relevance for India of the Japanese defeat of Russia and the 1905 Russian revolution. In November 1905, Gandhi wrote:

> 'The present unrest in Russia has a great lesson for us. The Czar of Russia today wields the most autocratic power in the world. The people of Russia suffer numerous hardships. The poor are crushed by the weight of taxes; the soldiers put down the people, who have to submit to all the whims of the Czar. Intoxicated with power, the officers do not care for the welfare of the people. Their only function, they think, is to add to their own power and wealth. Entirely against the people's will, the Czar declared war against Japan, causing a river of blood of

> Russian soldiers to flow. The wealth acquired by the sweat of thousands of labourers was thrown into the sea of Japan.'

The Russians, however, did not adopt the old strategies of assassination and sporadic rebellion (often in the name of the Tsar). Instead, Gandhi wrote, 'The Russian workers and all the other servants declared a general strike and stopped all work'. The essence of the Russian Revolution of 1905, Gandhi saw, was when even the Tsar had to concede to some of the demands since, 'even the powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled'.[20] The 1905 Russian Revolution thrust the entire population into a frenzy against a system that had long held them down: from sailors in the Black Sea to dispirited troops on the front line of the Russo-Japanese war, from workers in the cities to peasants in the fields. The combination of Japan's victory over Tsarist Russia, and of the rising of the Russian people against the Tsar's massive apparatus sent a frisson across the colonised world. Jawaharlal Nehru, then a teenager, felt this thrill. 'Japanese victories stirred up my enthusiasm, and I waited eagerly for the papers for fresh news daily. I invested in a large number of books on Japan and tried to read some of them…. Nationalistic ideas filled my mind. I mused of Indian freedom and Asiatic freedom from the thraldom of Europe. I dreamed of brave deeds of how, sword in hand, I would fight for India and help in freeing her'.[21]

Lenin, in exile outside Russia, looked not only to the Russian Revolution but to the range of political unrest in the colonised world: the 1906-1908 Majlis movement in Persia, the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, and the revolutionary developments in the Balkans – all motivated by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. 'A powerful impetus to the political awakening of the Asian peoples was given by the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian Revolution', Lenin wrote in October 1908. But because this revolution moved so slowly, it allowed the forces of reaction to coalesce. 'Essential, what we see now going on in the Balkans, Turkey, and Persia is a counter-revolutionary coalition of the European powers against the mounting tide of democracy in Asia', Lenin reflected.[22] The colonised would not be held back for long. In 1911, two revolutions, on two continents, showed the power of national liberation and of the workers and peasants: the Mexican Revolution and the Chinese Revolution. In May 1913, Lenin wrote: 'World capitalism and the 1905 movement in Russia have finally aroused Asia. Hundreds of millions of the downtrodden and benighted have awakened from medieval stagnation to a new life and are rising to fight for elementary human rights and democracy' with the geography of struggle including the 'growing fermentation in British India' and the 'revolutionary-democratic movement' in the Dutch Indies.[23] Asia is on the move, Lenin wrote, and 'all young Asia, that is, the hundreds of millions of Asian working people, has a reliable ally in the proletariat of all civilised countries. No force on earth can prevent its victory, which will liberate both the peoples of Europe and the peoples of Asia'.[24]

Internationalism, out of this tradition of national liberation and Marxism, understood the need for Pan-Asianism in a capacious way: open to the great alliances with the working-class in the colonial core and to other peoples in other colonised parts of the world to build a new world, a socialist world. There was no room for racism here or exclusion of any kind. This was a powerful imaginary, a horizon for Pan-Asianism as a building block not for Asian supremacy but for a broader humanity. This vision, which is shared with national liberation leaders across the colonised world, inflamed the imagination of Ho Chi Minh, M. N. Roy, Tan Malaka, Daw Mya Sein, Ichikawa Fusae, Ayna Sultanova, and Nadzhiya Hanum – some better known than others (and biographies of them, particularly the women, are long overdue), but each of them throwing themselves into the work of building more and more genuinely democratic societies. Somewhere at the edges

of these desires would exist the socialist and anarchist Asiatic Humanitarian Brotherhood (1907) and eventually the Communist International (1919), and then later the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference (Hawaii, 1928) and All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931).[25]

It was clear to these Communists that a demand to end colonialism and to seek sovereignty would lead to two kinds of questions: how does the new state relate to its own internal hierarchies and inequalities, and how should the state relate to its neighbours and the rest of the world. A genuine anti-colonial and sovereign state would seek to erase wretched hierarchies and therefore to move in a socialist direction, and it would defy any calls for chauvinism and build bridges with neighbours and the rest of the world. In other words, the defiance against chauvinism would be the bedrock of Pan-Asianism of this kind, and it would therefore be a building block for the realisation of a full humanity.

b. **Japanese Asia.**

Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh was a mysterious figure who oscillated between a veneration for the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the potential of Pan-Asianism. In 1919, he visited Lenin in his Petrograd study but then hastened off to Japan to participate in the first Conference of Asian Peoples, held in Nagasaki in 1926. The Conference, which had been organised by the All Asia Society (founded in Japan in 1924), was not widely attended but it made some grand demands: for the creation of an Asian Bank, for the establishment of an Asian media, for the formation of an Asian university, and principally for the building of an All Asian League to defend Asia against European colonialism. These broad aims would have attracted Lenin and the Communists, as they did Singh and others like him such as the Japanese Communist journalist Ozaki Hotsumi, who was executed by the Japanese state in 1944 as a Soviet spy.

Behind all these events was the growth of a new kind of Japan. After the Meiji Restoration and the emergence of capitalism in Japan, the growth of its industry expanded beyond its territory and – like other capitalist powers (such as the Europeans and the United States), Japan sought external colonies to ensure its competitiveness and dynamism. Japanese annexation of territory can be traced back into the 19th century, but its more reasonable beginning is around the time of the very war that the left-wing celebrated, the Japanese defeat of Russia. That war provided the left-wing with the sense that imperialism can be vanquished, but for sections of the Imperial Japanese state, the victory taught them a different lesson: that they could seize large parts of Asia, starting with the formal annexation of Korea that took place between 1904 and 1910, which led to the invasion of northern China and the creation of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1930. A range of Japanese intellectuals – and some from elsewhere – began to fantasise that Pan-Asianism would emerge from the end of a Taishō 14 machine gun rather than from joint struggles of the masses to create sovereign, national states that would work in unison with one another.

The strand of Pan-Asianism that was supported by the Japanese Imperial state collapsed fully into collaboration at the Assembly of the Greater East Asiatic Nations, held in Tokyo in November 1943. It was here that Prime Minister General Hideki Tojo announced the formation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, an abomination to the idea of co-prosperity since it was an instrument for Japanese imperialism.[26] The international class struggle is a messy, ugly terrain, which is why several important Asian political leaders – from India's Netaji Subash Chandra Bose to Indonesia's Sanoesi Pané and Asmara Hadi – wished to use the extent of Japanese power against European colonial power to first eject the Europeans and then later settle accounts with their allies. Neither Bose nor Pané and Hadi wanted to exchange British and

Dutch rule for Japanese rule, but they saw this new Asian military power as a potential ally despite its wartime atrocities in China and Korea. They set aside the warnings from Tagore for the hard realities of politics and the class struggle.

The potential of the Socialist Asia envisaged by Lenin and Nehru was damaged by the actuality of the fascist menace of the Japanese armies. But Japanese imperialism did not destroy the potential of Asianism of a socialist kind. That would reappear at the Asian Relations Conference (Delhi, 1947) and at the Asian African Conference (Bandung, 1955), the agenda – in fact – being totally against the racial supremacy of imperialism (whether of the European or Japanese form). The residue of Japanese imperialism has not yet been removed, but it was not capable of totally wiping out the possibilities of Pan-Asianism. At its source, Pan-Asianism's socialist project was stronger intellectually and morally than the project of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Into the Present

It is tempting to imagine there is a cultural unity across Asia, but Asia is too big for such a fantasy. Talk of Confucianism or other religious traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam) are too vague to make sense for a continent that has almost every known religion. Neither does it make sense to lodge the basis for Pan-Asianism in culture, ideas of filial piety, for instance, because these are not unique to Asia, and they are certainly not widespread in a capitalist system that has dislodged the anchors of social life. Nor does it make sense to believe that the remarkable economic growth rates in East, Southeast, and South Asia are reflective of something Asian rather than the laws of motion of capitalism, the export of industry to these parts of the world in the 1990s phase of globalisation, and the enormous populations in Asia that could build domestic markets through the pent up demand of generations of deprivation. High growth rates are not Asian.

Returning to the source helps us understand the political basis of Asian unity. Building institutions around this unity of Asia could produce the confidence building measures in society and in the inter-state system to settle conflicts without war and the threat of war. There is no such thing as an African Union for Asia for the inter-state system, nor are there many high-level Pan-Asian bodies to bring people of the continent together based on common interests and professions (apart from a few exceptions, such as the Asiad Games, first held in Delhi in 1951). There are some Pan-Asian bodies, the Asian Development Bank (established in 1966) and the networks of trade unions, such as the International Trade Union Confederation-Asia Pacific (created in 2007 when the ICFTU from 1951 merged with the Brotherhood of Asian Trade Unions from 1966). Building a full list of such Pan-Asian bodies would be an important task for the advancement of any present Pan-Asianism. To know the full map of such networks and circulations will build a new consciousness of what is already taking place and what gaps remain to be filled, as well as how to bring these various networks and circulations into a broader conversation about a 21st century Pan-Asian agenda that goes from the source to the future without a detour into the hideousness of fascism and imperialism.

It would be good to breathe in our limitations: the rigidities across the Himalayas, the impossible tensions in the South-China Sea and in the Indian Ocean, the old toxic competitiveness that has leaked into our world without any answers to the fundamental problems of our times. It would be good for artists and intellectuals to open a serious conversation about a new progressive Pan-Asianism, a continental vision of a new kind of socialist world that looks beyond greed and towards the wider palate of human experience and emotion.

If there is to be an Asia and if there is to be solidarity, let these words have some meaning.

Notes

[1] Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, AD 1-600* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2004).

[2] K. S. Singh, *People of India* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1992).

[3] René Grousset, *L'empire des steppes: Attila, Gengis-Khan, Tamerlan* (Paris: Payot, 1939).

[4] There are some wonderful new books that try to capture this expansive idea of Asia, some of it drawn from Asian intellectuals and not from a colonial image of Asia. See, in particular, Nile Green, *How Asia Found Herself*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022; Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian Waters. Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022; and most importantly, Wang Hui, 'The Twentieth Century, the Global South, and China's Historical Position' (Dossier no. 81, October 2024) [https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-the-twentieth-century-the-global-south-and-chinas-historical-position/]

[5] Tanehisa Otabe, 'Making a Case for a Cultural Exchange of Aesthetics between Europe and Japan: The Three Stages of Cultural Globalisation', *The Journal of Asian Arts & Aesthetics*, vol. 2, 2009.

[6] A range of new books from different perspectives, nonetheless, make this point authoritatively. See, for instance, Sugata Bose, *Asia after Europe. Imagining a Continent in the Long Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2024; Viren Murthy, *Pan-Asianism and the Legacy of the Chinese Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023; Craig A. Smith, *Chinese Asianism, 1894-1945*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021; *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism, and Borders*, ed. Sven Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann, London: Routledge, 2007.

[7] Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997 and Sitaram Yechury, *Praxis of a Socialist*, ed. Sudhanva Deshpande and Vijay Prashad, New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2025.

[8] Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History*, New York: 1804 Books, 2023.

[9] George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938.

[10] Manuel Ugarte, *La patria grande*, Madrid: Editora Internacional, 1924.

[11] Sun Yat-sen, 'Pan-Asianism', *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History, Volume 2: 1920-Present*, eds. Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011, p. 84.

[12] W. G. Beasley, *The Rise of Modern Japan*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 206.

[13] Indra Nath Choudhuri, 'The Conflict between the Other Asia and the New Asia: Rabindranath Tagore, Liang Qichao and Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura and the Politics of Friendship and a Love Story', *Indian Literature*, vol. 60, no. 3, May/June 2016.

[14] His writings have been collected in three volumes by Tokyo's Heibonsha in 1984. The only full-length consideration of his political and aesthetic work and legacy is by the art historian Torao Miyagawa, published in Japanese in 1956.

[15] Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: MacMillan, 1917).

[16] Vineet Thakur, 'An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947', *The International History Review*, vol. 41, issue 3, 2019.

[17] Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2007).

[18] This is a polemical statement that does cover over significant attempts by intellectuals in the immediate post-war years to construct a new kind of Asianism. A significant voice was that of the Japanese Sinologist Yoshimi Takeuchi, whose 1963 book *Asianism* captures some of the residues of Pan-Asianism from the previous era. For a taste of his writings, see *What is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, ed. Richard Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[19] Kwame Nkrumah, 'African Socialism Revisited', *African Forum*, issue 1, 1967, p. 9.

[20] M. K. Gandhi, 'Russia and India', *Indian Opinion*, 11 November 1905, *Collected Works*, volume 5, pp. 131-132.

[21] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Towards Freedom*, New York: John Day Company, 1942, pp. 29-30. There is a precursor to this fascination, which goes back to the Meiji Restoration. One finds it in one of Bharatendu's poems, where he had written that *Bharat* cannot even match ´weak and backward' Japan, *Bharatendu Samagra*, Varanasi: Pracharak granthavali pariyojana, 1987, pp. 253-254. A few decades later, the Congress leader G. Subramaniya Iyer told his colleagues to watch the Meiji Restoration, which was 'of the greatest interest to leaders of Indian economic thought', while others, such as Gokhale and Romesh Dutt suggested it for emulation. Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House), 1991, p. 114.

[22] V. I. Lenin, 'Events in the Balkans and in Persia', *Proletary*, no. 37, October 1908. *Collected Works*, vol. 15, pp. 220-221.

[23] Lenin, 'The Awakening of Asia', *Pravda*, 7 May 1913, *Collected Works*, vol. 19, p. 86.

[24] Lenin, 'Backward Europe and Advanced Asia', *Pravda*, 18 May 1913, *Collected Works*, vol. 19, p. 100.

[25] Sumita Mukherjee, 'The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian women and their leadership of a pan-Asian feminist organisation', *Women's History Review*, vol. 26, issue 3, 2017.

[26] Jessamyn R. Abel, *The International Minimum. Creativity and Contradiction in Japan's Global Engagement, 1933-1964* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 215, pp. 194-217.



Vijay Prashad

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Neoliberalism Against Revolution: Iran's Challenges for Resistance



Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

This essay, **authored by Ali Abutalebi**, was produced in collaboration with the House of Latin America.

The 46th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, celebrated in February 2025, unfolded against a backdrop of profound geopolitical shifts in West Asia that have challenged Iran's position in the region.

Following President Ebrahim Raisi's tragic death in an air crash last May, Iran held a snap election that ushered in a 'moderate' government, accelerating developments that have weakened the anti-Zionist resistance front. A series of devastating events followed: the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran during the inauguration ceremony of the new Iranian president in August; the martyrdom of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed by an Israeli air strike using a US-supplied 2,000-pound bunker-buster bomb in late September;[1] and the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in Syria in December. This chain of events has led many analysts, particularly in mainstream media, to suggest that the 'Axis of Resistance' was approaching its end. Chatham House, an influential think tank in the Global North,

presented Iran with two stark options: pursue nuclear weapons or negotiate a comprehensive agreement with the United States.[2]

Despite these significant setbacks faced by Iran and its regional allies, two realities remain unchanged. First, the core power structure in Iran, headed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, maintains an uncompromising stance against the Zionist regime and its primary supporter, the United States. Second, Iran retains substantial military capabilities for self-defence. In a recent address, Ayatollah Khamenei said: 'We must understand correctly that negotiating with the US has no effect on solving the country's problems … negotiating with such a government is unwise, unintelligent, and dishonourable, and there should be no negotiation with it'.[3] This message is directed not only at the current government in Tehran, which advocates negotiation with the US as the sole solution to national challenges, but also at the second Trump administration. However, following a shift in diplomatic dynamics, Iran and the United States began indirect talks in April, mediated by Oman.

While the threat of imperialist military action, alongside sanctions against Iran, should not be underestimated, the primary danger to Iran's independence may stem from within Tehran itself: the advancement of a neoliberal agenda.

The Background: Dependent Capitalist Development

The 1979 Iranian Revolution stands as the last major revolution of the 20th century in Asia, with some analysts referring to it as the final classic revolution. Regardless of the terminology used, the Iranian Revolution was a significant geopolitical event that transformed not only West Asia but also influenced dynamics across the Third World.

The revolution decisively ended the Shah's regime – the United States' most crucial ally in West Asia – and inaugurated a new era of anti-Zionist resistance in the region. Organisations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in Palestine were directly influenced by Iran's Islamic Revolution and have played important roles since the 1980s. Iran's revolutionary impact extended beyond religious organisations; even the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, a secular resistance organisation, has received substantial support from Iran. This broad-based support demonstrates the revolution's profound influence that transcends ideological and religious boundaries, leading to the formation of a diverse coalition of resistance movements united in their opposition to Israel and Western imperialism in the region.

While Iran's regional anti-Zionist initiatives developed with relative clarity, internal developments have followed a more complex trajectory due to various social, economic, and cultural factors.

Following the US-British orchestrated coup d'état of 1953, Iran became a strategic base for US imperialism, strategically positioned along the borders of the Soviet Union. This coup – meticulously planned, funded, and supervised by CIA and MI6 operatives – targeted Mohammad Mosaddegh, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran. Mosaddegh was an anti-colonial patriot despite his aristocratic heritage as a prince from the Qajar royal family, bravely nationalised Iran's oil industry and implemented an endogenous economic programme to counter British sanctions.[4]

Mosaddegh represented Iran's national bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the Qajar dynasty's fall and the

subsequent violation of the Persian Constitution of 1906. This constitutional subversion was perpetrated by Reza Khan, who gained power through a British-supported coup in 1921. The overthrow of Mosaddegh not only marked the suppression of democratic governance but also the derailment of an independent national development path that had posed a threat to Western economic interests in the region.

Following Mosaddegh's removal, the Shah's regime systematically reversed Iran's progress toward economic independence. The 1954 Consortium Agreement returned the nationalised oil industry to Western companies. Development strategies then focussed on foreign investment in assembly industries and implemented a flawed land reform programme.[5] Despite establishing some foundational industries with assistance from the socialist bloc – such as iron smelting and tractor manufacturing – and achieving impressive growth rates, Iran's economic structure remained fundamentally dependent due to the formation of a comprador class closely aligned with the political elite.

At the same time, cultural oppression and the imposition of a superficial modernisation programme – one that reflected comprador class values rather than organic social development – created significant societal divisions. Although never formally colonised, these factors effectively transformed Iran into a semi-colonial state operating under what could be accurately described as a colonial mode of production.[6]

The oil price surge of the 1970s enabled the Shah to pursue an ambitious economic agenda that was fundamentally disconnected from Iran's economic realities and capacities. While ostensibly following the US Point Four Program (announced by US President Harry Truman and based on the tenets of modernisation theory) with the stated goal of transforming Iran into a developed nation, the reality was starkly different. The country suffered from severely uneven development, characterised by extreme inequality, endemic corruption, and massive capital flight to Western nations, particularly the United States.

By the eve of the 1979 revolution, Iran exemplified the consequences of dependent and distorted development: an infant mortality rate of 80 per 1,000 births, a staggering 70 percent illiteracy rate (exceeding that of India), and an average life expectancy of just 51 years. This system was maintained through brutal repression facilitated by SAVAK – the secret police trained by the CIA and Mossad – and a military establishment that consumed between 25 to 40 percent of Iran's GDP.[7]



Kazem Chalipa, *Basiji*, 1985.

An Outburst of Light

Thirteen months after US President Jimmy Carter described Iran as an 'Island of Stability', the Shah's regime collapsed. The victory of the revolution unleashed tremendous energy not only within Iran but also throughout the Third World. French philosopher Michel Foucault notably observed: 'It is perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane'. Similarly, Fidel Castro remarked: 'The [Iranian] revolution has an enormous popular force. It was able to defeat the Shah, who had one of the most powerful and best-equipped armies in that area, practically without weapons. The people fought with tremendous courage, losing thousands and thousands of lives. I think the revolution is going to cling to its strong religious and nationalistic accent'.[8] Castro's assessment provides a concise yet comprehensive description of the Iranian Revolution.

The revolution emerged from a multi-class coalition that comprised diverse social elements: the urban poor (largely displaced rural non-owner workers), the religious petty bourgeoisie threatened by foreign capital, clerics and intellectuals, and the working class, which functioned as the 'battering ram' of revolutionary change.[9]

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's famous characterisation of the Iranian Revolution as an 'outburst of light' carries profound significance when viewed through the lens of class struggle. This metaphor aptly captures how the revolutionary triumph illuminated the deep-seated contradictions embedded within Iranian society.

The success of the revolution acted as a powerful spotlight, exposing the fundamental class tensions that had long been present beneath the surface of Iran's social structure. As revolutionary fervour swept away the *ancien régime*, it simultaneously revealed the conflicting class interests that had been obscured under the Shah's autocratic rule. This process of illumination made visible not only the historic contradictions between traditional sectors and modernising forces but also the emergent tensions between different revolutionary factions, each with divergent visions for Iran's future. The revolution thus served as both a culmination of pre-existing class struggles and the genesis of new contestations over economic structure, political power, and cultural identity in post-revolutionary Iran.

Post-Revolutionary Ideological Contestation

Despite the widespread mobilisation under Ayatollah Khomeini's religious leadership, class struggle persisted after the revolutionary triumph as various segments of society pursued their own agendas and sought to consolidate their gains. Two major competing visions emerged:

> Islamic 'Free Market' Proponents: This faction aimed to restrict social changes primarily to the superstructure and cultural programmes while preserving the capitalist economic framework.
>
> 'Social Justice' Advocates: This group sought to establish a mixed economy oriented toward 'Islamic autarky' with Islamic wealth redistribution mechanisms.

Nevertheless, those advocating for an Islamic capitalism persisted in their efforts to marginalise lower-class participants who sought substantive participation beyond being recipients of charity. At the same time, the new government's suppression of both established and emerging working-class organisations created space for the emergence of a 'New Class'.



Hannibal Alkhas, *Revolution*, 1978.

The Formation of the Post-Revolutionary 'New Class'

After the 1979 revolution, the comprador bourgeoisie – closely linked to the royal court – ransferred significant capital abroad but left substantial assets within Iran. The nascent Islamic Republic confiscated these assets, including the royal family's wealth. In the autumn of 1979, a new constitution was approved by an overwhelming majority, explicitly establishing a mixed economic system.

The post-revolutionary constitution guaranteed free healthcare, education through high school, and

provisions for employment and housing as national rights. Article 44 specifically designated the banking system, major industries, and large mines as state-controlled entities under public ownership, allowing the private sector to play only a 'supplementary role' to the public and cooperative sectors.

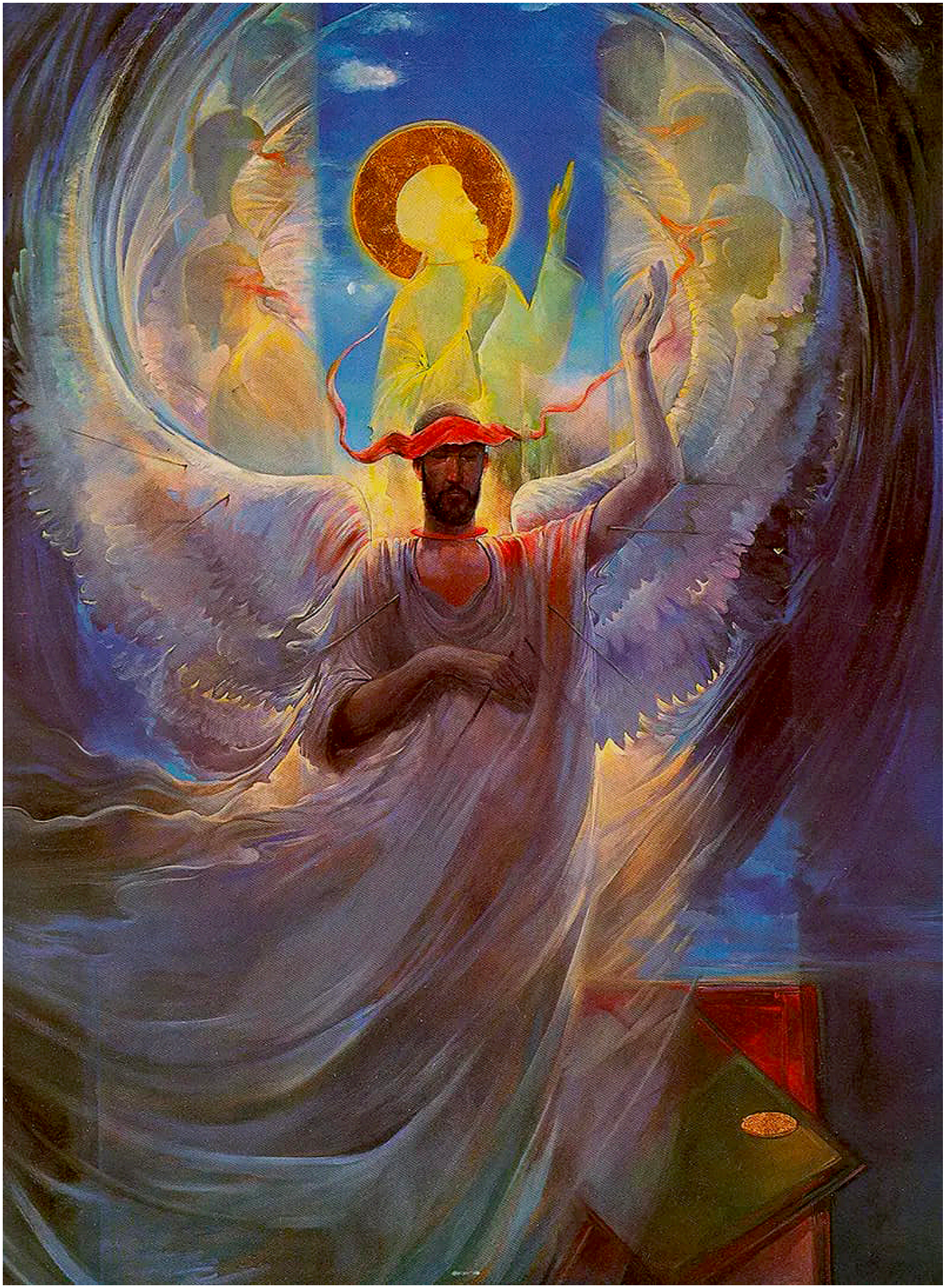
However, implementation diverged significantly from constitutional provisions. In the years following, a segment of the bourgeoisie aligned with the new establishment expanded private credit and financial institutions while securing control over the import and distribution of essential goods that were rationed during the Iran-Iraq War.[10] This group marginalised justice-oriented forces, primarily from the radical petty bourgeoisie.

Simultaneously, many confiscated assets were transferred to government-affiliated individuals or 'Revolutionary Institutions', effectively circumventing their 'nationalised' status. These transfers facilitated the emergence of a new social class in post-revolutionary Iran. Meanwhile, justice-oriented forces within the government leveraged revolutionary momentum to implement grassroots initiatives like the 'Jihad of Construction', which reduced poverty and distributed wealth more equitably among lower social classes. The establishment of healthcare services in remote villages and nationwide housing cooperatives represented significant achievements of these initiatives.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), instigated by the US-backed Ba'athist regime in Iraq, played a decisive role in shaping Iran's post-revolutionary class structure. Ezzatollah Sahabi, a member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, documented how individuals with close ties to the political elite amassed enormous profits by purchasing imported goods at government-subsidised rates and reselling them at inflated prices in the free market.[11] Throughout the 1980s, an intense struggle persisted between two competing visions: those seeking to reintegrate Iran into the global capitalist system and those advocating for an indigenous, heterodox, and independent economic model. This conflict manifested across multiple domains, including:

- The boundaries of state economic intervention
- Wealth redistribution mechanisms
- Labor law reforms
- Land reform initiatives
- Public housing policies

By the final days of Ayatollah Khomeini's life, the free-market faction had gained significant advantage. His death in 1989 presented these forces with an unprecedented opportunity to advance their agenda. The watershed moment came in the winter of 1991, when Iran's Plan and Budget Organisation – a governmental department under presidential authority – released a 'secret' document that would define Iran's economic trajectory for the following years: The Economic Adjustment Program. This initiative represented Iran's version of the Structural Adjustment Programme typically imposed by the IMF and World Bank on developing economies. This moment marked the official beginning of the neoliberal era in post-revolutionary Iran, fundamentally altering the revolutionary economic vision and setting the stage for profound transformations in Iranian society and political economy.



Habib Sadeghi, *Such a Dance...*, 1993.

Resistance, the Working Class, and Battles Ahead

Recent currency fluctuations, reminiscent of the changes that followed by Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear deal, have precipitated a sharp decline in the value of Iran's national currency. This volatility has severely impacted wage earners, who have been consistently threatened by the dual pressures of international sanctions and domestic neoliberal policies for over three decades.

Contrary to what should be done, the government has repeatedly adjusted the official exchange rate, ostensibly to 'confront rentiers'. However, the reality reveals a different pattern: the private sector – both importers and exporters with close ties to the political elite – has consistently benefited from preferential exchange rates, tax exemptions, low-interest loans, and, most importantly, extensive privatisation programmes. Despite some heterodox policies intended to protect working-class living standards during the past three decades, the hegemony of neoliberal ideology has pushed Iran toward converging economic, societal, and environmental crises.

In February 2017, former Vice President Eshagh Jahangiri revealed how privatisation accelerated in violation of constitutional provisions during his tenure as Minister of Industries and Mines (1997 2005). He said:

> Article 44 of the Constitution was really a serious obstacle to economic development. When I was the Minister of Industries and Mines, on every trip we took abroad and talked to investors about making direct investments in Iran, they would say that your constitution does not allow us to invest in your country. They would say that your economy is state-owned and how can we invest? They would say that if we invest in an industry and then you determine that this industry is large and according to the constitution it should be state-owned, what should we do and until these ambiguities are resolved, we will not be able to invest … In my opinion, the Supreme Leader made a brave and great decision. However, according to Article 44 of the Constitution, which states that no sector can hinder the development of the country by focusing on one sector, they said that this concentration in the government sector has hindered the development of the country, and they used this phrase and transferred everything to the private sector. This action was a big step and decision for our economy, and a big ambiguity was removed from the Iranian economy, and such transfers began.[12]

This statement clearly illustrates how constitutional principles were reinterpreted to facilitate privatisation, fundamentally altering the revolutionary economic vision in response to external investment pressures and internal ideological shifts toward market liberalisation.

The initiation of these 'transfers' coincided with the rise of a powerful oligarchy that seized opportunity amid crisis. These emergent elites developed mechanisms to circumvent the harsh imperialist sanctions by operating as agents selling 'nationalised' oil, thus generating enormous profits in the process. Ironically, this arrangement created a peculiar economic dynamic where sanctions, while officially damaging to the national economy, became lucrative opportunities for well-connected intermediaries.

The entrenchment of neoliberal ideology and policies has systematically undermined the government's capacity to develop effective economic strategies to shield the working class and small craftsmen from the devastating effects of sanctions. Rather than adapting policies to protect vulnerable economic sectors, the establishment has doubled down on two core positions:

1. Accelerating neoliberal policies, justified by neoliberal academics and politicians who insist that privatisation remains fundamentally sound but has simply been 'implemented incorrectly'. This argument shifts blame from the policy itself to its execution, preserving the ideological framework while acknowledging practical failures.
2. Pursuing compromise with US imperialism, primarily to attract foreign investment. This approach frames capitulation to external demands not as abandonment of revolutionary principles but as a pragmatic economic necessity.

This policy orientation represents a profound shift from the revolutionary vision of economic independence and social justice toward integration into global capitalism on terms shaped largely by external forces. The contradictions between revolutionary rhetoric and neoliberal practice have created a system where public assets are systematically transferred to private entities while the economic burden is disproportionately borne by those who have nothing to sell except their labour. Samir Amin was correct in his classic 2007 essay, Political Islam in the Service of Imperialism, where he expressed scepticism about what Iran's 'national bourgeois project' would achieve. Iran's neoliberal bourgeoisie now pose the most serious internal threat to national sovereignty.

In October 2018, Ismael Hossein-Zadeh, Professor Emeritus of Economics at Drake University, wrote:

> The Iranian economy is mired in a deep recession. The real or productive sector of the economy is paralysed, largely by out-of-control (and often illicit) imports that have replaced domestic production. Rent seeking, corruption and the looting of national resources is pervasive. Both unemployment and inflation are extremely high. National currency is on the verge of collapse, and financial resources of the country are disproportionately invested in unproductive or parasitic activities such as buying and selling of precious metals, foreign currencies, real estate, and the like.[13]

One year later, the events of the autumn of 2019 marked a critical juncture in Iran's post-revolutionary trajectory. Following an abrupt increase in gas prices implemented without public explanation, Iran experienced an urban poor uprising reminiscent of Venezuela's *Caracazo* in 1989. While the establishment ultimately contained the unrest, the violent suppression of impoverished protesters generated profound anger, disappointment, and distrust toward the government. This social rupture had immediate political consequences: the 'moderate' political faction lost subsequent elections, but the 'principalist' government under President Raisi continued to pursue neoliberal economic policies. Following Raisi's death in a controversial air crash, Masoud Pezeshkian, a social democrat reformist, won the snap election with promises to avoid economic shock therapy. However, his administration has maintained policy continuity with its predecessors.

In this context, working-class organisations have launched a campaign demanding a 70 percent increase in the

minimum wage from the new Persian year, that began on 21 March. This movement has attracted attention from other social forces committed to resisting 'The Great Satan Arrogance', potentially forming a justice-oriented coalition dedicated to revitalising the original ideals of the revolution.

As Hezbollah and Hamas rebuild their organisational structures and military capabilities in the regional resistance front, a parallel revitalisation of Iran's domestic revolutionary coalition is becoming increasingly crucial. This movement, with the working class at its centre, could serve as the vanguard of revolutionary forces. The working class, having functioned as the 'battering ram' during the triumph of the 1979 revolution, represents the only social force capable of serving as an impregnable fortress against both external pressures and internal compromises in defence of national sovereignty.

This emerging class-based movement potentially represents the most significant challenge to the neoliberal transformation of the Iranian economy and the erosion of revolutionary principles over four decades of post-revolutionary development.

Regardless of how current diplomatic talks unfold, the Iranian revolution's ideals will ultimately have to tackle neoliberalism gripping the country.



Niloofar Ghaderinejad, *Untitled*, 1979.

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Ali Abutalebi

Ali Abutalebi has been the executive director of Mazmoon Books since 2005. He founded the Iranian Campaign for Solidarity with Cuba, worked as publication director at the House of Latin America (HOLA), and authored numerous articles for the Iranian press and political websites – primarily focusing on Latin America's progressive movements. Ali also published a book on Cuba titled *Rest in Peace, Ernesto*.

Imperialism's Hold on West Asia: A Case of Defence Purchases

Numerous attempts have been made to understand the persistent turmoil in West Asia. Western scholars have frequently attributed it to the region's culture and religion.[1] This approach, however, is deeply flawed. Treating the people and the local ruling classes as completely independent actors in a region such as West Asia is not only misleading and ahistorical but also intellectually dishonest. It is pertinent, therefore, to reasonably explore the role of imperialism, foreign interventions, and the global political structure in shaping the events in the region and defining its fate.

The region's persistent turmoil is inextricably linked to the cycle of external interventions. While the direct old style colonial rule formally ended, most of the countries remained subject to geopolitical rivalries in the Cold War era, and the emergence of the United States (US) as a hegemonic power post 1990s entrenched a neocolonial dynamic.[2] The rent-seeking, overdependent ruling classes in the region heavily rely on external support for their political survival is well documented.[3] The imperialist powers, recognising this peculiar political scenario, actively exploit it to deepen dependency, using them for geostrategic and geopolitical interests.

The dependency is most visibly knotted through defence cooperation. Most of the countries in the Arab region are heavily dependent, both directly and indirectly, on the military collaborations with the US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies. Such relationships, once established, are nearly impossible to end making it an effective tool for the US to influence the crucial political decisions as we see in the Gulf monarchies.

The Emergence and Consolidation of Neocolonialism in West Asia

For imperialism, having "friendly regimes" in the Arab region is a must due to its geostrategic location, rich deposit of natural resources such as oil, and to guard the key international trade routes. Additionally, it guarantees the existence of Israel, which serves as the only reliable outpost in the region for the empire.

Israel serves not only as an ideological implant, but also as the central tool in the imperial strategy for the region. It perpetuated insecurity among Arab republics in the Levant, which had socialist regimes after their

independence from colonial powers in the post-war period and had close relationships with the Soviet Union.

Israel continued to receive heavy military hardware, funding, and technology from the US and other European allies, forcing other countries in the region to upgrade their weapon supplies through imports from the Soviet Union. This arms race and polarisation around ideological divides made sure that the region embroiled in conflict throughout the Cold War period.

In the 1970s, Egypt joined the Gulf monarchies as ideological allies of the US. However, they gradually fell into a neocolonial relationship. Their existence was heavily dependent on maintaining good relations with the US, which was defined in terms of uninterrupted oil supplies to the West and security for Israel.

The US and its NATO allies exploited the Iranian revolution of 1979 to deepen the Gulf monarchies' threat perception, as they feared the rise of political Islam.[4] This, along with the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) fuelled another round of arms race in the region, with the Persian Gulf countries emerging as the largest buyers of the US and European weapons further institutionalising their dependence on the US and NATO.

The fall of the USSR and the rise of the US as the sole superpower further cemented the dependence of the West Asian regimes on the US and its allies. The unlimited and mostly unrestricted capability of the US and its allies had a devastating impact on the already vulnerable Gulf monarchies. Thus began an era of uninterrupted exploitation of the region's vast natural resources, which also emerged as the main US military base following the first Gulf War.[5]

The Iraq war in 2003 erased all doubts about the US intentions in the region, if any. It wanted full and direct control. However, the resistance, both in Iraq and in the broader Arab world in the form of the popular movements for accountable governance forced the US to change its tactics. The US shifted its gear to try to exploit these popular uprisings to penetrate further into countries like Libya,[6] Syria, and Yemen to gain a much better control hitherto resisting its interventions. Although it failed to establish a clear hold in these countries due to strong resistance, the interventions served as a warning to the monarchs in the region, further facilitating their submission to the US.

However, the rise of China as the world's second largest economy, its growing closeness with Russia, and its interventions through BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to create a multipolar world order has attracted the attention of a large number of countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two of the most important monarchies in the region. BRICS attempts to create a multipolar world order and challenge the neocolonial model has shaken the post-Cold War unipolar system. Due to the interventions of BRICS, a growing desire for autonomy and independence has emerged in the region.

China facilitated Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran, and Iran's subsequent joining of both BRICS and SCO created a challenge to the US's hegemonic presence in the region. The creation of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)+ mechanism and its role during the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards in determining the price of oil was an example of how exercising limited autonomy can harm the interest of the empire.[7] This required an urgent reaction to save the empire and re-assert its authority in the region.

Recent developments underscore this urgency. Trump, after resuming office, unilaterally declared the death of

BRICS, clearly warning countries like Saudi Arabia not to venture in that direction. The empire has realised that allowing the countries in the region to be independent, even symbolically, would be detrimental to its interests. The renewed emphasis on security and growing adoption of war rhetoric indicate a reversion to Cold War mentality and a desperation to prevent the course of history.

The empire's striking capabilities have been demonstrated in the regime change in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad, after surviving a war for over a decade, was forced to exile, surrendering the country to pro-Turkish, extremist groups. The ex-al-Qaeda leader heading the interim government in Syria is aware that he cannot practice what he really believes in and must submit to the US and Israel if he wants to retain power for long. This explains why he chose not to oppose Israel's invasion of Syrian territory immediately after the fall of al-Assad.

The example of Syria shows that an increasing number of political regimes in the region are threatened by the empire's age-old tactics of regime change, exacerbating frozen conflicts within or near their territories, and declaring direct or indirect threats of wars. Only the states that have established legitimacy by strengthening their domestic institutions and making the state responsive to the citizen's needs may still assert their independence and risk discussing autonomy. However, such regimes are still rare in the region. Iran, since the Islamic revolution in 1979, has been the sole representative to this camp. Those who still rely on their security apparatus to survive have no option but to fall in line, at least for the time being. The best way to stay out of trouble is to, at least, refrain from antagonising the empire.

The vulnerability of the Arab states explains why none of them dared to take any meaningful action in the Israel's genocide against Gaza, which has lasted over fifteen months. They convened the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meetings in Riyadh twice over the issue as a collective response, but that remained more as an attempt to pacify the domestic outrage.[8] Instead, the Arab states took firm steps to repress all potential outbreaks of popular resentment at home, doing so with complete impunity and blessings of the empire. They even continue to entertain Donald Trump's fantasies of taking over Gaza, if needed by force, employing similar tactics of mild reactions to appease domestic outrage. None of these states have announced any programs to rebuild Gaza, perhaps in anticipation of Trump's plan.

Saudi Arabia's inability to accept the invitation to formally join BRICS grouping as a permanent member is another example.[9] The delay indicates a re-evaluation of Saudi Arabia's interests following US pressure.

Weapons Trade as a Source of Neocolonial Control

Donald Trump's move to occupy Gaza might have seemed eccentric to many, but those familiar with the empire's influence in the region understand the severity of such a threat. In the Palestinian context, Trump's threat exposes the fact that most of the countries in the region are not sovereign, independent states.

This neocolonial relationship is rooted, among various other aspects, in the monarchies' need to remain in power, given the lack of democratic institutions in the region. A minimal share in the rent through basic services and fear of state force[10] are the only two sources of stability for most of the Gulf monarchies. Even this stability is heavily reliant on the US and NATO in more than one way.

Short of outright military intervention, imperialism exerts its power through various means. We are not going

to discuss all of them here except one; the discourses around security and defence and how it creates dependency. Apart from having an almost direct control over the defence in certain sub-regions in West Asia, for example Jordan, the empire has tremendous control over regional security apparatuses through arms trade and military contracts. It also becomes a constant source of extraction of surplus generated through oil and gas trade.

In 2024, the US had nineteen military bases in the region, eight of which were permanent. Over 40,000 military personnel were deployed, some stationed at bases and some more on warships around the region.[11] Qatar has the regional headquarters of US Central Command while Bahrain is home to the fifth fleet of the US Navy. No country, except Syria under the Ba'ath Party, had any objection to US military deployment on their soil.

In 2020, the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution demanding withdrawal of all foreign troops from their country, following the Trump administration's assassination of Iranian Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and deputy chief of the Iraqi militia Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike in Baghdad on January 3.[12] However, the resolution remains unimplemented, till date, due to lack of political will.

Iran has consistently demanded unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops deployed in the region. They have repeatedly accused the US troops in the region of supporting anti-Iranian forces and providing shelter to Israel's spy agencies to carry out cross-border attacks.

West Asia is the second-largest buyer of weapons in the world, after the Asia Pacific region. Countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Turkey allocate a significant portion of their national income annually to purchase weapons from the US and European countries such as France and Germany.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI),[13] Europe, where Russia-Ukraine war is ongoing, observed a 94% increase in the annual arms imports in 2023. However, it still trailed the West Asian region in terms of total arms import that year.

Despite registering a 12% fall in overall arms imports between 2014-18 and 2019-23, West Asia remained the second largest importer of weapons during the same period purchasing more than 30% of all weapons traded globally and over 28% if one excludes Israel, says SIPRI report.

According to the SIPRI report, Saudi Arabia and Qatar collectively bought over 23% of all weapons exported by the US between 2019 and 2023. Most of the weapons supplied by the European countries were also destined to the West Asia buyers. The US, France, Italy and Germany collectively supplied over 81% of all the weapons purchased by the West Asian countries during the 2019-23 period.

The countries in the region spent collectively over $220 billion on defence in 2024, accounting for 15.6% of the region's total budget and around 9.5% of all global defence expenditure. According to the World Bank, West Asia's total GDP was approximately $4.3 trillion in 2024.[14] If considered a single country, their defence expenditure would be close to China's ($224 billion) and ranking third globally. We should not forget that China's GDP in 2023 was approximately $18 trillion.

Saudi Arabia with a GDP of nearly $1 trillion had a defence budget of over $75 billion in 2024. This was as big as India which had a GDP of over $4 trillion.[15] Saudi Arabia was the second largest arms importer after India in 2023, with a global share of over 8.4%. Qatar recorded a substantial jump in arms imports to nearly 400% between 2019 and 2023, making it the third largest importer, with a global share of 7.6%, according to SIPRI.

Saudi Arabia was the world's largest weapons buyer between 2014 and 2019. It purchased approximately $16 billion worth arms from NATO countries during the same period. The West Asia accounted for 35% of all the weapons sold across the world during that period, with 90% of those weapons imported from NATO countries.[16]

For most West Asian countries, the US and its NATO partners remain the primary arm suppliers, with over 80% of all weapons delivered to the region.

This trend is not new. Since the 1980s, the region has been the largest arm importer globally. Historically, both Saudi Arabia and Iran were significant buyers of American weapons. Other countries in the region purchased weapons from the Soviet Union and various European countries.

Between 1950 and 1975, Iran and Saudi Arabia were the largest buyers of US weapons. They together purchased more than half of all weapons exported by the US during the period.[17] These purchases included technical support services, with hundreds of US technicians working in both countries.

According to the Pentagon's own estimates, cited by Klare (1976), approximately 350,000 US workers were involved in export production of the US defence industry in 1975. Between 1970 and 1975, the US sold arms worth $23.4 billion, triple the total amount of all US arms exports worldwide between 1950 and 1965.[18] In 1974-75, the Gulf kingdoms were the largest buyers of US weapons, which amounted to $10.8 billion. The West Asian region alone accounted for almost 75% of all US arms sales to the Third World between 1977 and 1984, which was only a quarter of the total arms sales to the region during the said period.[19]

Political Economy of Arms Sales

There is a direct link between arms trade to the Arab region and perpetuation of human rights violations and war crimes in the region. The constant wars and conflicts in the region can easily be attributed to the unhindered supply of weapons and military support provided to most of the regimes in the region, including Israel, by the US and its NATO allies.[20]

The so-called Congressional restrictions, often cited as examples of human rights concerns of the US and democratic control over the country's arms industry, are shams. These restrictions are frequently bypassed as per the convenience of a particular administration, through various tactics, as described by Paine long back.[21] The wars in Afghanistan, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, have further exposed the truth of congressional control. Congressional restrictions have been repeatedly violated to supply weapons to Israel during the recent war on Gaza.[22] In reality, Congressional restrictions on arms sales serve only as a public relations exercise. Their only utility has been to protect the security interests of Israel.

The arms sale is a money-making business, and nothing except the interests of Israel hinder the US arms sale to the West Asian countries. The economic reasons behind the US arms sales have been consistently confirmed by the high ranking US officials on various occasions.

In 1973, William P. Clements, then Deputy Secretary of Defense of the US, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that there were compelling reasons to sell American weapons to the third world: "[T]o help reduce America's mounting balance-of-payments deficit, second, to ensure full production (and thus full employment) in the aerospace industry and third, to extend the production run of US weapons and thus to diminish the price the Pentagon for its own military hardware."[23]

Clements opposed Congressional restrictions on the sale of weapons as it "decreases the potential contributions of sales to strengthening both free world security and the US economy and balance of payments position."[24]

The American greed to monetise its weapons industry, even at the cost of fuelling an arms race in the third world and slashing social spending, is reflected in the FMS program constituted by Robert McNamara in the 1960s. "In order to ensure that even the poorest countries could participate in the FMS programme McNamara established an elaborate system of loans and credits to supplement the regular sales programme."[25]

The extra petrodollars accumulated through the sale of oil and gas in the Arab world have been the primary target of an enhanced US arms trade in the region. "[S]ince most of the oil-producing countries are unable to invest these funds domestically, they are accumulating a huge reservoir of unallocated petrodollars."[26]

The US authorities were well aware that a growing export of weapons to the underdeveloped nations will strengthen the rule of authoritarian, military regimes while diverting a significant part of their revenue away from social and economic development projects to unproductive activities, perhaps disrupting the central source of peace and stability in those poor countries.

Since the end of the Second World War, the weapons industry has been used by the capitalist economies in the West to expand their economies and exploit the developing countries. The growth in this industry creates domestic demands, builds supply units, and provides more employment at home just like any other industry.[27] It is an additional advantage for the arms supplier. The arms sales remain a primary foreign policy for the empire as it gives the empire tremendous power to control the defence and security apparatuses of the importer country.

The broader region relies heavily on the US for the supply of spare parts, technological assistance, and, sometimes, even the basic know-how to use those sophisticated weapons. Thousands of American engineers and armed forces have been deployed in the region throughout the year in order to provide training or other assistance to the local forces. This security assistance is part of the dependency apart from contributing to the overall economic stress, as these personnel are paid by the host. It becomes more crucial in maintaining the neocolonial relations, because deployment of troops and other staff provides justification for permanent bases as has happened in Iraq and in other Gulf countries.

The rulers in the host countries seem to enjoy the connections which their country's close defence relations

create the opportunity for. They see it as a way to gain some influence in the West and therefore act as puppets in foreign policy domains. The reality of dependency and neocolonialism are brushed under the carpet of friendship and cooperation, providing much needed ego boost for the members of the ruling families.

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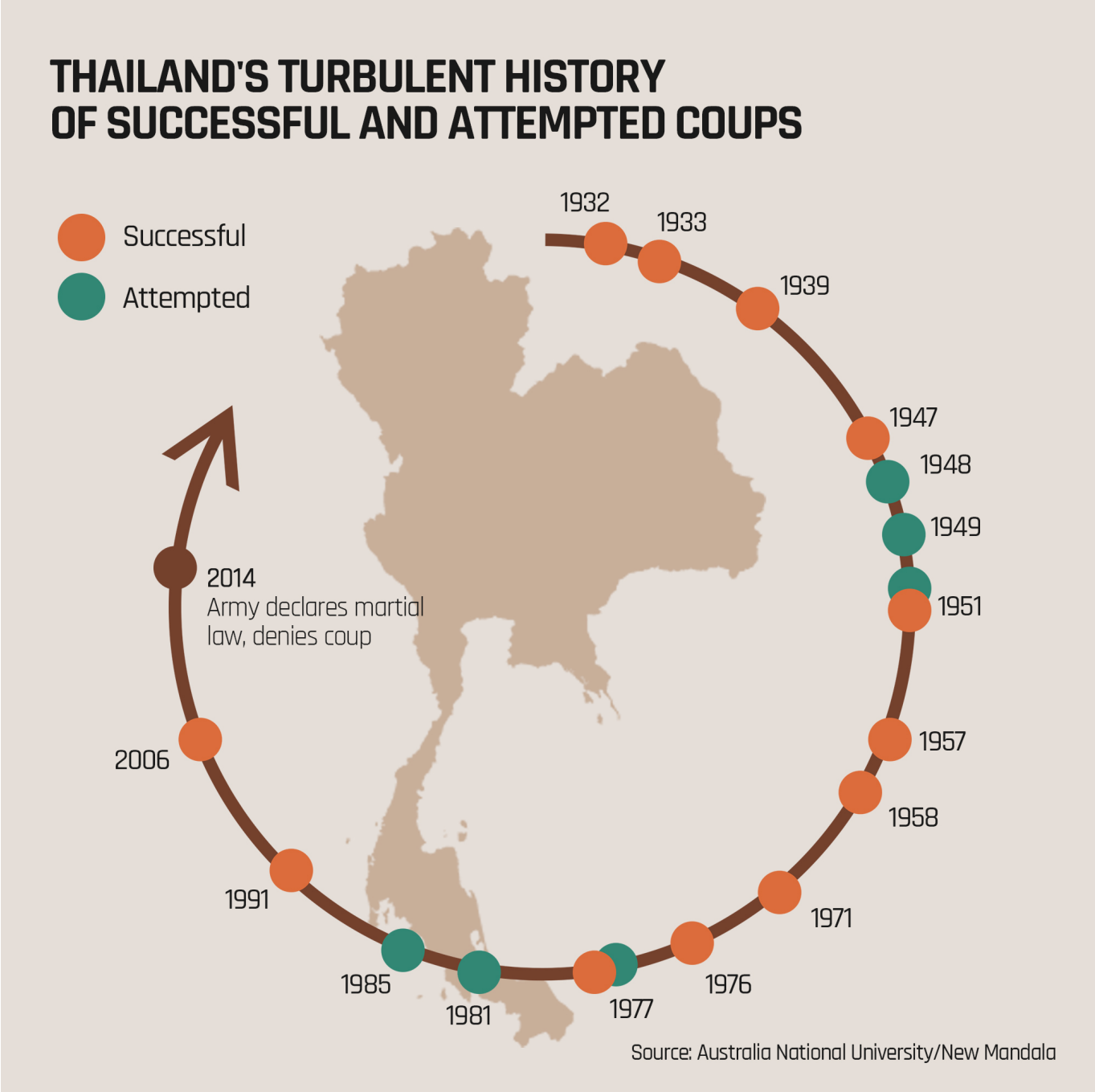
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Abdul Rahman

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The Thai People's Struggle for Democracy Amidst Deep State and Coup D'etats

As Thailand's elected government navigates its complexities, it's clear that the kingdom's long standing democracy problem is at a crossroad. *The familiar cycle of coup d'etat, election, and another coup d'etat* has evolved beyond the traditional bi-partisan red/yellow [1]. However, the foundational issue persists: the functional class divide between the rural and the urban, with the kingdom always under the thumb of the elite classes and their military enforcers. The limitations of parliamentary democracy have been exposed time and time again, with Thailand holding the ignominious record for having the most coup d'etats in modern history. The Thai people now face a daunting challenge: break out of the coup d'etat cycle and challenge the elite while navigating a post-coup era [2].



The Thai state, established on the foundations of big capitalists, the military and the monarchy after WWII was a conscious anti-peasant, anti-worker, and anti-communist project led by the United States and colonial powers at the onset of the Cold War. This led to the formation of a tight cabal of the deep state powers, the big capitalists, the military, and the monarchy – against the progressive and revolutionary forces within the Kingdom.

This project was initiated by William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the founding father of the CIA. In 1953, as the ambassador to Thailand, he played a crucial role in establishing and supporting a vast network of counterrevolutionary forces; militaries, militias, mafias, and drug runners loyal to the Thai state [3].

During the cold war, this reactionary cabal was legitimised by its opposition to the threat of global

communism in the region, namely the communist states of Laos and Vietnam, as well as insurgencies both foreign and domestic: The Communist Party of Burma, Malaya, and Thailand [4].

However, decades after the cold war has ended, the deep state's tentacles still remain entrenched, controlling the barriers in which political power can be wielded, on both the national and local level. Thailand has had around 13 coup d'etats since WWII, with the most recent one occurring in 2014. All these coups have been carried out by reactionary forces to ensure that political power remains within the tight confines they permit. Herein lies the problem for progressive forces in Thailand in the 21st century: how to challenge such a deeply rooted power structure that still operates as if *The Reds* are still at the gates.

Thailand at The End of History – Thaksin and Phue Thai

The Communist Party of Thailand surrendered in 1983, marking an early "End of History" for Thailand, where liberal capitalist *democracy* no longer faced an existential threat. Over the decades, the presence of the Communist insurgency had forced the state into providing relief for peasants and workers through social security, state infrastructure, and land ownership, acting as a form of non-parliamentary leverage for the poor. However, after the communists surrendered, the deep state remained unchallenged, and capital was abounded as foreign companies began heavily investing in and extracting Thailand's natural resources and labour capacity. This economic boom inevitably served only the elite classes, while the poor were forced into sweatshops, had their land confiscated, and witnessed as the state infrastructure crumbled.

It was under these conditions that the Tom Yung Gung financial crash took place, as Thailand's economic bubble burst further decimating the lives of the working class and plunging millions of families into debt [5]. This crash paved the way for the first and only real response to the deep state since the surrender of the Communists: The Phue Thai party, led by billionaire populist Thaksin Shinawatra.

The Thaksin coalition, later known as the Red Shirts, was an unlikely alliance of peasants, the urban working class, high ranking police officers, elite capitalists, former communist insurgents, western-educated academics, and even former anti-communist counter insurgents [6]. Thaksin appealed to the overlooked poor for their votes, who had been silently suffering for decades.

When Thaksin was elected in 2001, he and his coalition performed an economic miracle. They cleared the Kingdom's bail out debts with the IMF and rapidly reinvigorated the country's economy transforming it from complete collapse to one of the fastest-growing and most stable economies in the region. He combined leftist inspired social democratic welfare programs with neo-liberal privatisation and international trade. There was also a huge wealth transfer out of Bangkok to the far under-developed smaller cities and rural areas, which had been completely neglected by the capital for decades.

At times, Thaksin's tenure could be seen as highly punitive, marked by his *war on drugs* and his channelling of post-9/11 Islamophobia, notably at the Tak Bai Massacre, where around 85 Muslims were killed by the military under his watch. Furthermore, Thaksin sent an envoy of Thai troops to support the US invasion of Iraq. However, Phue Thai governments have also taken seemingly contradictory stances, supporting the decriminalisation of marijuana and small quantities methamphetamines, recognising Palestinian statehood, and maintaining good diplomatic relations with states like Iran and Russia.

Whether the Phue Thai project was Left or Right populist is hotly contested to this day. While the rich got

richer, the poor were undoubtedly empowered. It cannot be argued that the material lives and political engagement of peasants and the urban working class did not significantly improve under his tenure. During his first term, he became an unexpected billionaire hero of the poor, and his party became an institution with devout local cells across the country, particularly in the poorer Isaan and Northern regions.

In 2005, Thaksin became the first Prime Minister in Thai history to win re-election and complete his term without being ousted by a coup d'etat. Ironically, he became a victim of his own success, as the aforementioned deep state, rooted in reactionary cold-war dogma, could not tolerate any form of empowerment of the poor, even if it was achieved through capitalist means.

Despite all bar charts going upwards– higher employment, higher household income, higher GDP, greater access to healthcare, the deep state considered their power under threat during Thaksin's rule. Within the first year of his second term, Thaksin was ousted by a military coup d'etat and forced into exile.

The next 15 years were marked by intense *anti-Thaksinisation* campaigns by reactionary powers, the mass protests by the Red Shirts, counter-protests by the reactionary Yellow Shirts, and occasional resurgences of the Phue Thai party, led by Thaksin's proxies. Phue Thai comfortably won three general elections during this period but all three elected governments were removed from power by the deep state.

During the *anti-Thaksinisation* period, the old coalition began to split apart, with former loyalists starting their own parties so as to take a similar pragmatic approach to politics, while vocally expressing support for the monarchy. The most successful of these parties was Bhumjaithai.

While the opposition to Thaksin, that broadly coalesced in the Yellow Shirt movement, lacked the voter numbers to challenge Phue Thai, they were massively overrepresented in their political power. Electorally, they were dependent on urban centres and the southern region, who viewed Phue Thai supporters as ignorant uneducated peasants whose votes should, **quite literally**, be worth less than the more educated urban elites [7].

The Yellow Shirts perceived popular democracy as a failure and eventually would call for the abolition of the parliament and reinstatement of an absolute monarchy. Their protests were wildly bold and egregious, with their leaders facing little to no recrimination from the elite judiciary. For instance, in 2008, during a Phue Thai tenure, they stormed Government House and several other ministries, and Suvarnabhumi Airport, with little legal repercussions. Meanwhile, crackdowns on Red Shirt/Phue Thai supporters grew increasingly violent. In 2010, over 100 Red Shirts were killed by the military at a protest encampment in central Bangkok [8].

Despite facing tremendous political violence, lawfare, disappearances, and assassinations of Red Shirt members, Thaksin's sister, Yinluck Shinawatra, was elected Prime Minister of a Phue Thai government in 2011. This, however, seems to have been the final straw for the reactionary forces of the deep state. The coup d'etat that ousted her government three years later marked Thailand's transition into a new era of politics, the one we are stuck in today.

Liberal Democrats

The post-Thaksin years saw a huge economic downturn for Thailand, as the country lurched from one

political crisis to another. Household debt skyrocketed, and land tenancy rates surged. After the 2014 coup, a new crisis was on the horizon, the declining health of King Bhumibol, the figurehead of the nation, the mandate for the Yellow Shirts movement, and the ultimate commander of the military.

Following the 2014 coup, martial law was declared, and the military took complete control over the judiciary. Political organising was essentially made illegal, from parliamentary level to the regional and local politics. A new constitution sailed through the courts, including a key provision of a 250 member junta-appointed senate to ensure the deep state's stamp of approval on any future elected government [9].

The economic downtown was even more pronounced by the military government's lack of response to the many crises brewing across the country. Nationwide, infrastructure was crumbling, people were suffocating under debt, and homes and small businesses were being repossessed and left abandoned. Even in central Bangkok, empty shop fronts lined the wide, cracked boulevards, bought by developers but never developed.

Thaksin was no revolutionary, but he was a revolutionary force within the Thai economy, aiming to redistribute the wealth, not from rich to poor per se, but from urban to rural. Although his policies still solidly served the bourgeois class, he was deemed too much of a threat to the deep state, proving their inability to adapt to the pace of global capital.

The deep state's ultimate goal after the 2014 coup was to finally *de-Thaksinise* Thailand ahead of the succession of the new monarch, Prince Vajiralongkorn, who lacked the diplomatic, social, and religious virtues that King Bhumipol had upheld. The deep state was wary of the moment of succession being exploited.

After King Bhumiphol's death in 2016 and the eventual coronation of King Vajiralongkorn in 2019, however, a window began to emerge. In 2020, following the first COVID lockdown, student protests began against the new monarch, who was wildly unpopular with the younger generations. For the youth, King Vajiralongkorn embodied everything that was wrong with Thailand, with their bitterness focused primarily on the country's aged military leadership and widespread corruption in both government and business.

Due to the mass *de-Thaksinisation* campaign, many Red Shirt leaders were killed, jailed, aged, tired or retired from politics. The once-loyal rank-and-file members, who had once occupied the streets of Bangkok in protest, spent the past decade facing defeat after defeat, along with deadly repression. As such, Phue Thai was unable to seize this rare moment of instability in the deep state, and a new party, Future Forward, was formed.

Led by a young billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, Future Forward sought to capture the voices of the younger generation, articulating similar opposition to the country's aged leadership and widespread corruption. Unlike Phue Thai and Thaksin, however, Future Forward targeted a more urban demographic, one which had become alienated by the extremes of the Yellow Shirt movement and its rabid royalist beliefs. Future Forward positioned itself, not as pragmatic reformers but as Western style liberal democrats. This was reflective of the coalition they built, predominantly made up of second-tier elite capitalists, academics, and NGO leaders.

For two decades, Thaksin and Phue Thai had been the de facto pro-democratic force in Thai politics, creating an exceptionally wide tent coalition. With the rise of Future Forward, the coalition split in half,

simultaneously drawing in elite urban voters who were already rabidly anti-Phue Thai.

In other countries, parties like Phue Thai and Future Forward would make for typical parliamentary adversaries. Phue Thai recognised the rural-urban divide as Thailand's primary antagonism and sought decentralisation and material change through pragmatism above all else. Future Forward, however, took a classically idealist analysis of Thailand, identifying corrupt old politics as the key antagonism, which could be remedied by creating a more democratically Western-style state apparatus. This approach often bled into a more overtly republican stance than Phue Thai was willing to articulate, fearing state recrimination.

It was the republican sentiment that led Future Forward into their first bit of hot water, when the party was forced to dissolve and reform in 2020 by the courts, rebranding as the Move Forward Party, under Pita 'Tim' Limjaroenrat, another billionaire capitalist. Under Pita, the Move Forward Party intensified its anti-Thaksin rhetoric, shifted further to centre-right, and successfully brought in several prominent former Yellow Shirts and younger members of elite far-right Thai political families.

Meanwhile, the ultra-royalists of the former Yellow Shirt movement and former Thaksin loyalists like Bhumjaithai Party began formulating their own vision of Thailand's future, one that would protect the interests of big capitalists, the military, and the monarchy's deep state.

This set the stage for the 2023 general election, the first fully open elections since the 2014 coup. Move Forward secured the highest number of seats in parliament with 151, closely followed by Phue Thai coming with 141, and the loose grouping of pro-monarchy/military parties with 172. An additional 20 uncommitted parties also gained seats, leading to intense realpolitik negotiations for the future of the country.

During this process, the Move Forward party's candidate for Prime Minister, Pita 'Tim' Limjaroenrat, was taken to court over a clerical error in his paperwork submission to the election commission. Through the "magic" of the Thai judiciary, this was indeed proven to have been a paperwork error on Pita's behalf, with one document missing a signature. The court deemed the error sufficient grounds for disqualification, thus preventing Move Forward from taking the Prime Minister's office [10].

The move proved inconsequential, as the party was once again dissolved by the Constitutional Court a year later. The court ruled that the Move Forward party's proposal to amend Article 112, the contentious *lese-majeste* law against insulting the monarchy, violated the constitution [11]. Thus, Move Forward was reborn, this time as The People's Party.

For the liberal democrats of the Move Forward party, the outcome of the election, which they had technically won, exposed the weakness of a movement based on idealistic notions of liberal democracy. Simply put, Thailand is not Europe, and a European-style liberal party cannot survive in the global south, a state built by American Imperialism.

Whenever the Phue Thai government was attacked by the deep state actors, the masses erupted into huge protests and descended on the streets of Bangkok under the leadership of the Red Shirts. This was Phue Thai's true leverage. However, following the Move Forward's dissolution the capital city was eerily quiet, as none of its voter base was willing to put their bodies on the line for the party or its supposed movement.

Real Politik and Non-Parliamentary Organising

Move Forward clearly lacked the ruthless political pragmatism that Phue Thai welded with ease. We can only imagine the backdoor meetings, late night phone calls, and the prolonged game of poker played by the different forces that took place in Thailand after the 2023 elections. However, on the morning of the 22 August 2023, a plane landed in Bangkok, off walked Thaksin Shinawatra, back from 15 years of exile abroad. Later that day, Phue Thai took the Prime Minister's office as part of a highly fragile coalition comprising former adversaries in the military and former loyalists turned royalists. Today, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter serves as the Prime Minister of the country and as a leader of the Phue Thai Party that lost its economic and political swagger.

Despite this, today's Phue Thai has achieved some successes, such as a direct 10,000 THB cash handout to the poorest 20th percentile of the population, as well as providing land deeds to landless peasants, and recognition of citizenship to stateless people. They have also managed to turn around the shrinking GDP and, on the international front, moved away from the US by joining the BRICS in 2024, and forged tighter relations with Iran while securing the release of Thai hostages in Gaza.

Nonetheless, due to the shaky nature of the coalition, the guardrails of Thai politics and political change remain all the more firmly in place. If just one of the coalition partners withdraws, the government would collapse. This puts Thailand in the strange position of having a Phue Thai government without the immediate threat of a traditional coup.

What the deep state has been able to achieve since the coup of 2014 is to essentially de-militarise the mechanism of the military coup, shifting that capacity into the parliamentary and judicial realm.

If we look at how substantial change for the poor in Thailand has been achieved historically, this shift by the deep state, from the gun to the courtroom, is ingenious. Undoubtedly, the two forces that were able to fight for the rights of the poor in Thailand have been The Communist Party Insurgency and The Red Shirts via Phue Thai. While these movements were ideologically very different in their approach, both were dependent on people's power, mass mobilisations, non-compliance, and even violence against the state. It was through the power of people that hospitals were built, teachers were trained, roads to remote villages were paved, clean water pipes laid, and land deeds were transferred from lord to labourer. While coup d'etats have been commonplace in Thai history, it does not mean they have been taken lying down. Hundreds of thousands, of common people have given their lives to challenge the deep state.

At the peak of the Red Shirt movement, Professor and activist Ajarn Kengkij described the collective struggle within the protest movement as having grown out of its initial confines of a Thaksin support network and developing its own class character and consciousness, building class solidarity in doing so. To quote his **2010 article** in Prachatai:

Inequality, oppression, exploitation and injustice is the lived experience that the majority of the country has faced. The issue of whether Thaksin is a Lord or a Serf is not important. What's interesting is that the more the Red Shirt masses define or associate themselves as "Serfs" the clearer it becomes that the struggle of the Red Shirt masses has moved beyond the individual. As now promoting a proletarian identity is not a weakness, but a point of strength, which leads to the development of class consciousness.

Again, in short, it has been in the moment of the coup d'etat that the true face of the deep state has revealed itself. As such, it is within the organising of the counter-coup that the Thai people have been able to forge

their close bonds of solidarity and class consciousness. Today, the current state of affairs allows the deep state to potentially orchestrate *a coup without a coup* as the non-military organs of the Thai state -judiciary and the bureaucracy – have been captured.



This then begs the question of where progressive forces in Thailand focus their struggle in this new era. Certainly, there has been a noticeable rise in peasant and labour activity in the past few years, much of this activity has looked into Thailand's radical history for inspiration. Late last year a **memorial event was held** in the Northern city of Chiang Mai. Hosted by the Northern Peasants Federation. It was in honour of the peasant activists of the 1970s who were assassinated by state-backed paramilitaries, largely in the Northern region. While the Northern Peasants Federation played host, they were joined by other recently re-energised peasant and labour groups from across the country, such as the Four Slums Region Network, P-Move, The Southern Peasants Federation and The East Thailand Labourer's Group among others. At the end of the ceremony, the gathering released a statement that captured the essence of the progressive movements of Thailand:

"We are the product of a long history of struggles. The memories of fighting for justice and a better life still shine brightly, guiding us toward a more beautiful future … It is also an opportunity to learn about the political consciousness of farmers, their organizational struggles, and to continue the movements that may have been suppressed in history. It is a time to understand the contemporary political landscape and seek new ways to fight under current conditions."

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Sri Lanka's New Government, the Indo-Pacific Debt Trap, and the Struggle for the 21st Century

> *Positioned at the geographic and political heart of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is the epicenter of the 21st century struggle for regional influence.*
>
> —U.S. Department of State, Integrated Country Strategy – Sri Lanka, 2022

On 23 September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake (referred to locally as AKD) was sworn in as the 9th executive President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. AKD is the first President of Sri Lanka to not belong to the political duopoly of the nationalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and comprador United National Party (UNP), and their offshoots which have ruled the country in turns since the 1950s.

In the first elections held since the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy in 2023 and its default on external debt, AKD secured 42.31% of the popular vote, while his right-wing rivals Sajith Premadasa and Ranil Wickremesinghe secured 32.76% and 17.27% respectively.[1] A month later,[2] on 15 October 2024, AKD's party the Jathika Jana Balawegaya (National People's Power – NPP) won a thumping 61.56% of the popular vote in the general elections.[3]

In contrast to his fiery pre-election speeches, which lashed out at the corruption of establishment politicians, AKD struck a measured tone in his first speech as President. Acknowledging the significant challenges that his government inherits, AKD said that the 'profound crisis' facing the country could not be resolved by a single government, political party, or individual. 'I am not a magician. I am simply an ordinary citizen of this country, with both strengths and limitations, knowledge and gaps,' AKD said.[4] Now in power, AKD must temper messianic expectations and govern under conditions given to him. All this while commanding a party with little experience in holding the reins of government, let alone withstanding the daily harangues that can be expected from the local and foreign agents of imperialism.

Following these elections, mainstream media outlets moved rather recklessly to label AKD and the NPP

government as, 'Marxist', 'Marxist-leaning' or 'Neo-Marxist'. It is true that the core constituent party of the NPP is the Marxist-Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front – JVP), of which AKD is also the leader. However, the main representatives of this force have been far more cautious in how they label themselves. In 2023, AKD compared the NPP to a national liberation movement.[5] On the eve of elections this was moderated to the more neutral sounding 'national renaissance'.[6] Some intellectuals close to the party have described the NPP as 'Left-populist'.[7] More recently, JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva has said that, 'Ours is not a leftist government, but one of leftists, democratic, and progressive forces'.[8]

The NPP's caution to label itself gives an indication of the delicate balance of political forces, both within the party and in the country at large. The fledgling government has already shown its inclinations and limitations. On foreign policy, the government has formally applied for membership in BRICS, although neither the President, Prime Minister nor Foreign Minister attended the summit in Kazan.[9] In his first speech to the diplomatic community, the NPP foreign minister Vijitha Herath reiterated Sri Lanka's call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, alongside support for the establishment of an independent State of Palestine.[10] On the domestic front, one of AKD's first acts was to instruct the Treasury to provide subsidies for farmers and fisherfolk.[11] The government has also scrapped plans to privatise national carrier Sri Lankan Airlines and public electricity provider Ceylon Electricity Board.[12]

However, the risk of lapsing into neoliberal immobility remains ever present. While there may be a new President and a slew of new faces in Parliament, the officials in charge of the Treasury and Central Bank of Sri Lanka remain the same. The government has chosen to continue with an ongoing IMF program and its path of fiscal consolidation. It has also continued with a disastrous debt restructuring agreement negotiated by the preceding government. According to IMF Director Kristalina Georgieva, "The Sri Lankan authorities have reaffirmed their determination to persevere with their reform agenda and put the economy on a path of sustained and high growth."[13]

To understand Sri Lanka's present conjuncture, and the dilemma's facing the new government, a concrete analysis of the preceding years is required. The main factors for analysis are the interplay between Sri Lanka's geopolitical significance in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, as well the country's legacy of colonial underdevelopment and indebtedness.



Anura Kumara Dissanayake, President of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka as epicentre of Indo-Pacific Strategy

Shortly after the conclusion of Sri Lanka's Civil War in 2009, the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, then led by senator John Kerry, published a report titled Sri Lanka: Recharting U.S. Strategy After the War. The report argued that policymakers in Washington tended to 'underestimate Sri Lanka's geostrategic importance', insisting that, 'the United States cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka'.[14] These statements were partly in reference to the Western criticism of Colombo's handling of the war against the separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Amid Western pressure to pursue peace talks, including a US arms embargo, Colombo forged closer ties with China, Russia, Iran, and Libya, who provided the arms and financing needed to clinch victory against the LTTE.[15] During the final years of the war, the JVP played a pivotal role in mobilising public support, insisting that peaceful negotiations were impossible with the LTTE. Given a history of repeated failed peace talks and ceasefires, this was a persuasive argument to many war-fatigued Sri Lankans. Thus, Washington's fear of 'losing Sri Lanka' needs to be understood in the context of Sri Lanka's domestic nationalist upsurge against separatism, as well as the country's foreign policy swing towards forces in the Global South.

Sri Lanka's economic and foreign policy shifted to the right after the 2015 elections, as the nationalist SLFP split and one faction formed a coalition with the UNP, whose leader Ranil Wickremesinghe became Prime Minister. Despite criticising Sri Lanka's human rights record in diplomatic forums, the US began a concerted effort to improve military engagement with Sri Lanka's armed forces, specifically with the Navy.[16] This

entailed training and joint military exercises, and the donation of navy vessels.[17] The US also sought to pressure the government in Colombo into signing a trifecta of agreements, which Sri Lankan diplomat Tamara Kunanayakam warned were 'part and parcel' of the US Indo-Pacific strategy,[18] and, if signed, would violate Sri Lanka's sovereignty and drag the country into 'a war not of its own making'.[19] These agreements were:

1. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC).[20] Political economist W.D. Lakshman (who served as governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka from 2019 to 2021) warned that the MCC's provisions for the privatisation of publicly owned land would pave the way for a land grab by multinational companies.[21] A government committee appointed to review the MCC agreement recommended rejecting it unconditionally, noting that certain stipulations would be in violation of the constitution.
2. The Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA).[22] ACSA, which provides the US military with logistical support and refuelling services in Sri Lanka was first signed in 2007. The agreement was never tabled in Parliament despite pressure from the Left. ACSA was renewed under hasty and similarly opaque circumstances in 2017. The new agreement was said to be open-ended and over ten times as long as the previous one.
3. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).[23] SOFA was first signed by the Sri Lankan government in 1995, and a new draft was sent to the government in 2018. A leaked version of the draft revealed that US security forces and contractors, as well as personnel of Department of Defence, would enjoy legal immunities equivalent to diplomatic staff.

The JVP constituted part of the popular opposition to these agreements. For example, in an interview in 2020, AKD said that his position on the MCC was 'a big no', citing concerns over land privatisation.[24] However, the political formation that most effectively drove and capitalised upon popular opposition to these neocolonial proposals was the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (Sri Lanka People's Front –SLPP), a big-tent party founded by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, which included Sinhala nationalists and elements of the Old Left (namely the Lanka Sama Samaja Party founded in 1935 and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka founded in 1943). In the 2019 presidential elections, the SLPP candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Mahinda Rajapaksa's brother) scored a comfortable victory in a campaign that was inflected with a combination of economic grievances and concerns over the erosion of the country's sovereignty.

Following the 2019 elections, US pressure on Sri Lanka intensified. A government-appointed commission recommended that the country refrain from signing the proposed MCC agreement with the US.[25] In 2022, the US sanctioned Sri Lanka's Chief of Army Staff Lt. Gen Shavendra Silva.[26] The same year, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Sri Lanka for a 12-hour trip, during which he told the media that the 'Chinese Community Party is a predator'.[27] This blunt and aggressive posturing by Pompeo made perfectly clear that the US viewed Sri Lanka as key part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy and New Cold War against China. Indeed, the US State Department[28] notes 'more than 60,000 ships – including two- thirds of the world's seaborne crude oil, half of its container ships, and all U.S. Navy vessels passing between the 5th and 7th Fleets – annually transit Sri Lankan waters.' [29]

In March 2022, on the eve of the protests that would go on to oust President Rajapaksa, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland **visited** the country to meet with civil society.[30] Rajapaksa's ouster bore some similarities to the protests that overthrew Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, constituting a combination of internal factors and genuine grievances over governance failures and economic conditions, as well as hybrid war tactics by the US and its network of soft power agencies to gain advantage through the crisis.[31] As is the case in many of these situations, external interests capitalised on internal contradictions. Following Rajapaksa's ouster, right-wing leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed interim President. Under his leadership, the US had donated more navy cutters to the Sri Lankan military.[32] Months later, Sri Lanka appeared further subordinated to US imperialism after it sent one of its own navy vessels to the Red Sea in order to help the US fight the Ansarullah government in Yemen.[33]

Sri Lanka in the International Sovereign Bond debt-trap

Sri Lanka was the original poster child for the myth of the Chinese debt-trap, which has now been thoroughly debunked by both local and foreign experts.[34] The truth is that the cause for Sri Lanka's indebtedness can be traced back to the colonial structure of its plantation economy, which has only been augmented through additional dependencies on tourism, remittances, and low-value added manufacturing.[35] Despite attempts by nationalist and left-leaning governments, Sri Lanka has failed to achieve food and energy self-sufficiency, or to set in motion a self-expanding process of industrialisation.[36]

The end of Sri Lanka's Civil war in 2009 coincided with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the Great Recession. Sri Lanka was relatively insulated from economic downturn as the end of the war brought about a honeymoon period as tourism and property speculation boomed. The Obama administration's bailing out of the banks through Quantitative Easing unleashed a wave of speculative investments to the Global South, including countries like Sri Lanka.[37] Meanwhile, China's going out in the wake of the GFC allowed the Sri Lankan government to engage in further fiscal expansion through an ambitious program of infrastructure development, focusing on roads, ports, energy, and not just a few white elephants. However, these shortcomings in the mobilisation of Chinese development finance are more attributable to Colombo's lack of vision and coherent industrial policy, than any malice on the part of China. As Chinese envoys have often emphasised, all projects were undertaken at the request of the Sri Lankan government, and shortcomings have usually been due to the lack of domestic capacity to manage projects efficiently.[38]

As a lower-middle income country, Sri Lanka found itself increasingly locked out of concessionary finance from multilateral organisations, and so began turning towards private lenders. The country launched its first International Sovereign Bond (ISB) in 2007.[39] However, it is the rightward shift in policy following the change of government in 2015 that completely transformed Sri Lanka's debt profile, as the government binged on over USD 10 billion worth of ISBs.[40] Therefore, on the eve of Sri Lanka's default in 2022, only 13.67% of external debt was owed to China.[41] By contrast, 42.43% of external debt was to private bondholders, like Blackrock and Ashmore.[42] To make matters worse, this private debt was of much higher

interest rates than bilateral debt from China, accounting for over 70% of interest payments in 2021.[43]

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the vulnerabilities of Sri Lanka's economic structure became painfully apparent. The lack of foreign exchange inflows due to the collapse of tourism and remittances, combined with inflation caused by global supply chain crunches and commodity price booms, brought the economy to its knees. Following the ouster of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2022, the governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka announced a 'pre-emptive default' on external debt.[44] In the months that followed, the interim President Ranil Wickremesinghe used the chaos to enforce a dizzying array of shock therapy style reforms, unthinkable under conditions of normality. These included:

1. Austerity. Withdrawals of fuel subsidies and cost reflective pricing of energy. This contributed to plunging thousands into poverty and off the electricity grid.
2. Domestic debt restructuring. A restructuring of domestic debt that singled out the pension funds of the working class while allowing domestic capitalists, bankers, and bondholders to walk away scot-free.[45]
3. Central Bank independence. Legislating Central Bank independence, which would prevent the Central Bank of Sri Lanka from purchasing government debt. Concretely, this means that the government is significantly restrained from countercyclical spending in the event of an external shock. Additionally, it could weaken the government's ability to control interest rates. The act severs monetary sovereignty as it forces the country to rely exclusively on private lenders for financing.
4. External debt restructuring. An external debt restructuring agreement negotiated with the mediation of the IMF has been described by local critics as a sell-out.[46] The agreement includes swapping existing bonds for newer bonds, some of them being novel financial instruments.
    a. Macro-linked bonds – These are bonds, whose interest rates will be linked to Sri Lanka's economic performance. As GDP growth rates increase, so too do the interest payments. In effect, Sri Lanka must pay its creditors more for growing faster.
    b. Governance-linked bonds – These bonds tie the interest rate to the government's implementation of anti-corruption legislation.[47] There is a reasonable concern that this amounts to a kind of blackmail on a sovereign government to adjust its administrative structure according to the whims of international finance capital.

The Rise of the NPP

The NPP coalition includes 21 civil society organisations including trade unions.[48] However, the prime mover within the party is undoubtedly the JVP. The JVP was established by Rohana Wijeweera in 1965, largely through the youth wing of the Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist), which in turn was the result of a 1964 split in the undivided Communist Party of Ceylon that mirrored the tragic Sino-Soviet split.

Till date, the JVP was targeted, and their ranks were decimated twice. First, following an attempted youth insurrection in 1971, and again during another insurrection from 1987-1989. The latter resulted in the assassination of Wijeweera along with the entirety of the party's politburo, except for Somawansa Amarasinghe. Building the party from scratch, Amarasinghe went on to lead the party on the path of reform and was instrumental in taking JVP into electoral politics. During Amarasinghe's leadership, the JVP dabbled in electoral coalitions, first supporting the SLFP's Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in 1994, then SLFP's Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2005, and finally joining the UNP in supporting Army Commander Sarath

Fonseka's bid for Presidency in 2010.

It was in 2014 that the next big shift came, as AKD was made the new leader of the JVP. He has attempted to chart a more independent and centrist path for the party, rejecting coalitions with established political parties and personalities. Following the JVP's 7th National Congress in 2014, the party released a document which proposed a national policy framework for a "modernised and industrialised Sri Lanka."[49] Two years later, in 2019, the National People's Power was launched, with the JVP at its core. The broader coalition of NPP helped open JVP's doors to the middle-class that traditionally was wary of the Party's radical history. This included professionals, academics, artists, public intellectuals, and even traders and business owners.



NPP's Public Meeting

The NPP's success lays in this ability to overcome the JVP's previous sectarianism and incorporate a broader coalitions of class forces, while at the same time remaining independent of established political parties. For the most part, NPP's recent electoral campaign avoided a frontal assault that identified the enemy as capitalism, imperialism, or even neoliberalism. Rather, the NPP chose to focus on the vaguer category of corruption, which struck a chord among large portions of the middle-class who felt that the immediate cause of their plight was bad governance.[50] The NPP was able to locate elements of the petty bourgeois that did not have direct access to state power through the established patronage networks of the main parties. This combined with a generational shift in politics helped the JVP construct the NPP as its own 'civil society' front. The hunger of this young petty bourgeois to reproduce itself as a class constitutes the strength and

weakness of the NPP.

On the election campaign trail, the NPP faced much scrutiny from both the rightist and leftist elements which honed on its lack of an articulate economic plan or strategy. While the NPP platform is explicit about its intention to retain and strengthen public ownership of energy, finance, healthcare and education, questions regarding policy specifics were often dodged with the promise that life would improve with the eradication of corruption. That said, the NPP's main economic promise was to establish a 'production-based economy' that prioritises farmers, fishers and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).[51] Furthermore, the NPP pledged to renegotiate the debt restructuring agreement with the IMF and bondholders in order to ease the tax burden on the people, to establish a development bank, and initiate an expansive science and technology policy to modernise the economy. Concretising these disparate promises into a viable developmental program continues to be the main challenged for the NPP.

One of the most remarkable features of the NPP's political campaign was its mobilisation of women. This was conducted not in any paternalistic manner but by women party cadres themselves. Rural party meetings often featured women speaking to women, about the specific ways in which economic hardships affected women. This, combined with the party's sympathies towards people's economic plights and their sharp vitriol against the perceived corruption of establishment politicians, helped drive an emotive bottom-up campaign. Women in these meetings took the message home, influencing their children, who would go on to popularise the party's platform on social media platforms, including Tik Tok. In Sri Lanka, where labour force participation for women (FLFPR)[52] is extremely low, 29.6%, they are particularly sensitive to price swings in essential commodities.[53] Meanwhile, the women who work do so predominantly in the public sector, or in export-oriented sectors such as plantations and export processing. This makes political conscious women extremely sensitive to economic shocks, and a powerful political resource once organised.

Struggle for the 21st Century

Sri Lanka's dilemma is a striking example of the close link between neoliberal debt bondage and subordination to the interests of US-led militarism. In other words, the struggle for sovereignty and development requires a political, economic and even military strategy. In the past, various administrations in Sri Lanka have attempted compromise, thinking that concessions in one area would enable advances in others. The reality is that there is little possibility for negotiation with an increasingly irrational imperialism bent on maintaining US preponderance of power.[54]

The fact is that the NPP governs under conditions favourable to the right. This is to say that the NPP inherits a state that is deeply in debt to Western finance capital, with a military that has been gradually encroached by the US through use of carrot and stick. Moreover, the networks of knowledge production and distribution in Sri Lanka remain downstream of monopoly capital. The JVP itself has only been able to climb into power by moderating rather than dialling up its past socialist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, meaning it does not necessarily have a popular mandate to carry out a revolutionary break from the status quo. Yet even the moderate mandate of the NPP, to improve social welfare and establish a production-based economy, cannot but bring them into confrontation with an imperialism which seeks to stymie the development of the productive forces.

To borrow from the US State Department's own choice of words, Sri Lanka today stands at the 'epicenter' of the struggle for the 21st century. It is a struggle between peaceful development and militarised underdevelopment. Between productive investment for the benefit of the working majority, or debt bondage for the benefit of a ruling minority. While the country appears hemmed in on all sides, entangled in US imperialism both militarily and financially, it would be too simplistic and nihilistic to suggest that there are no alternatives. This struggle for sovereignty and development is today being waged across the darker nations, from the Bolivarian countries in Latin America, to the Sahel region in Africa, and by the Palestinians in West Asia. The struggle of the Sri Lankan people too, will play its role in defining the trajectory of this century.

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Memory and Resistance in Palestinian Art

"The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves."

-Ngugi Wa Thiong'o [1]

This essay delves into a set of Palestinian artworks through a conceptual framework that questions the general use of media imagery of Palestinians as faces without names and people without a voice. It attempts to highlight Palestinian cultural production's relationships with hegemonic ideologies, national and ethnic identities, self-determination under colonial occupation and ultimately the conflict-ridden landscape of not only Palestine but largely West Asia. To produce art from such contested sites is to constantly negotiate what is meant by resistance in art; and how as artists and viewers we can stand witness, position ourselves with the victims, while simultaneously imagining and creating ever newer structures of opposition to the status quo.

As the images of the ongoing genocide inundate our screens, many debates arise around the question of images and ways of looking. This genocide is unique in the fact of it's consistent documentation by the people living right in the middle of it all. Images are important because they are evidentiary documents; they are supposed to point towards a materiality of truth that no discourse from any side of the ideological spectrum can embody. There are debates, however, about the ways in which we consume these images; the excess of this imagery also runs the risk of desensitizing us towards the gravity of the mass destruction happening right in front of our eyes. It is in this regard that art can save us; as in its reinterpretation of the visual world it inherits, it shows us how to really look.

There are physical bombs and there are cultural bombs; the former is no more material than the latter. While the physical bombs hold the capacity to destroy whatever land exists for the Palestinians; the cultural bomb holds the capacity to destroy the ability of the Palestinians to imagine their own land. The power to imagine an alternate reality is the driving force of any struggle against injustice.

To appreciate the persistence of so many Palestinians to envision an alternate visuality for themselves, we must first understand the cultural politics of war and the concept of war as culture itself [2]. Why do we need to look at artworks by Palestinian artists? How does the experience of looking at their interpretations of the genocide differ from simply consuming the images of the war-torn city? What are the implications of viewing this genocide in today's media society?

The act of recording through media "converts every challenge to thinking universally and diagnosing violations of universal principles into 'scenarios' of rules and violations, rights and infringements" as observed by Soumyabrata Choudhary in his book '*Thoughts on Gaza far from Gaza*'. The cutting-edge technological advancement of media society means that the loss of civilian life and property resulting from each military action can be recorded to its very last detail. But this objectivity that media evidence enables also reveals, for this very reason, the extent to which truth is manipulable due to the sophistication of today's technical apparatuses. This relativisation of truth claims in today's media society immobilizes us; so that the images we encounter daily with our limited attention spans carry traces of truth but do not allow any real cognitive space to understand the gravity of the events they claim to depict [3]. Choudhary also notes the automatism of media apparatuses that record this devastating misery in real time- for which "the human being is only a trigger, or even more ironically, a medium."

Artistic practices from the region in such a time must be understood in these contexts as interventions in the protocols of receiving and reading images that we inherit from this media society, and reveals above all the creative force of a people refusing to accept their loss at the hands of the genocidal state of Israel as the ultimate destiny.

The 'sovereign right to kill' that Israel has accorded to itself traces its genealogy back to slavery and colonial imperialism, where colonizers could act with impunity and without rules [4]. The self-justificatory force of any imperial governance is first and foremost aesthetic, meaning a priori. We see something immediate as real and accord to it the status of 'reality'. Visuality's politics lies in making the separation between the autocrat and the ruled so permanent that it is beyond questioning. It heavily relies on the lack of authority of the civilian population to imagine an alternate reality [5].

News media from sites of imperial governance such as the U.S also lament the long-drawn 'war', but their weaponisation of the 'network form of war' and intensification of military-industrial visuality only perpetuates it indefinitely. The 'pinnacle' of these wars instigated by the American military-industrial complex is understood to be forever impending, a 'nuclear' disaster that is always in an incomprehensible futurity but a possibility nonetheless, and which must, through all means necessary, be averted. This 'fabulously textual' status of nuclear war generated the very status of the old world's culture, civilisation, and 'reality'.

The imperial colonizers thus engage in a pre-emptive warfare, calling it and visualising it as a 'global war on terror'. 'Image wars' are central to this doctrine, which imagine decisively defeating its enemies in battle and ideology. Thus if one sifts through the varieties of imageries that the American invasion into Iraq produced, from 'surveillance maps' and 'selfies with inhabitants' to 'population surveys', to understand the violence of visuality is to make note of how amongst the image of an American soldier giving thumbs up gesture while standing next to an Iraqi girl, and the same soldier repeating her gesture next to an Iraqi corpse, both scenes represent violence.

Non-existent images of 'headless Israeli babies' went viral on our screens; a digital image in its very being wants to be circulated by all means necessary. What virality of such images generates is not the excess that embodies a sincere attempt at documenting a 'truth', but an excess that ensures that no single instance could be decisive. Which explains the innumerable procedural attempts by neo-liberal organisations such as the ICJ, United Nations, to bring Israeli war crimes to justice but always falling short of the decisive act of stopping the genocide.

The very justification of the invasion of Palestine, centered on such alleged violent acts by Palestinians on October 7, survived the clear demonstrations that there were none. That is the power of visuality and virality. In the hands of authority, it claims an evidentiary status that can long survive proof that it is false.

On the other hand, one is confronted with images of advertisements of Israeli real-estate agencies that have swiftly moved to declare the debris of Gaza as 'inhabitable land'. It is in this context that we study the artworks of Ala Albaba, John Halaka, Malak Mattar, Abdel Rahman al-Muzayen, Sliman Mansour and learn how these artists are expressing about the life and resistance in their 'homeland'.



Image: Ala Albaba: The Camp #21, 2021

Starting with the painting 'The Camp #21' by Ala Albaba we see, a detailed rendering of a refugee camp in Palestine. The buildings are all coloured in bright hues, with flat strokes and simple brushwork; the complexity of the painting instead lies in the details that the artist has managed to capture of what life must be like in the refugee camp. One must note that while the images from popular news sources that are inundated on our screens of war-torn Palestine show people in refugee camps scrambling for food, make-shift houses built on debris, wailing women and children; this painting and the general representation of Palestine by Palestinian artists is one of a life of dignity and hope. It reminds us of videos of children, young inhabitants

in refugee camps who strive for collective resilience and joy by performing acrobatics, dance sequences, distributing food and toys, and jumping from one building to another.

While photos of the camps from mainstream media show the cramped spaces as health hazards and signifying lack of resources, this painting shows in those same cramped spaces dignity and abundance and solidarity. The colours of the windows stand in stark contrast with the building's outer appearance, as the black void-like windows might signify abandoned homes and other buildings that might have fallen out of use. They do, however, look functional; there are satellite dishes, solar panels, clothes drying and other household equipment that animate everyday life. The artist seems to have made this painting looking out from a similar building. The fact that Ala Albaba chose to paint a wide expanse of settlements to denote a population without showing the figures of people who might be living inside them, reveals the constant anxiety and horror that underlies life in Palestine. The absence of people marks the constant displacement of the population, and the everyday household items of utility might speak of the individual, mundane lives that the inhabitants lead.

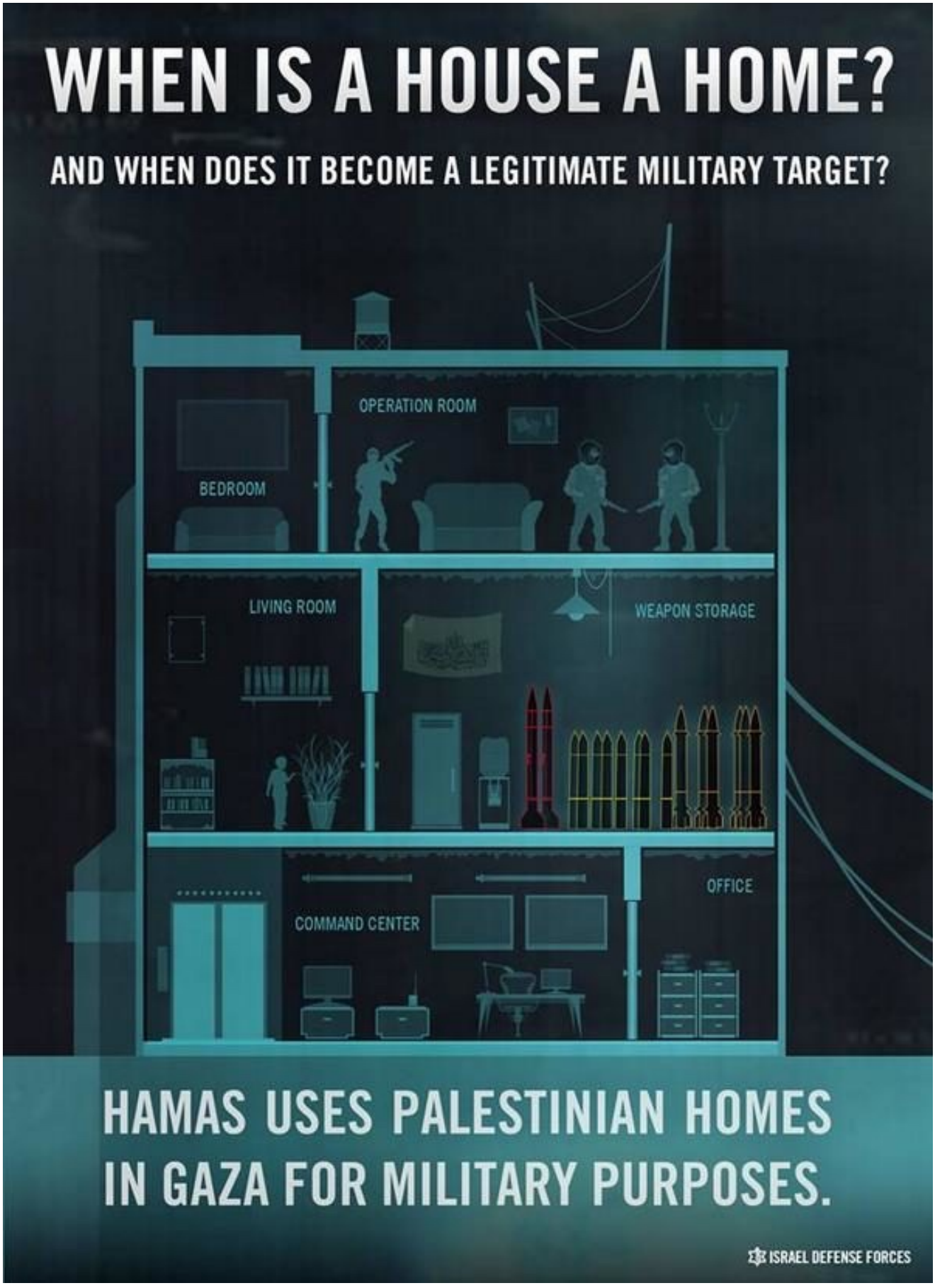

WHEN IS A HOUSE A HOME?
AND WHEN DOES IT BECOME A LEGITIMATE MILITARY TARGET?
OPERATION ROOM
BEDROOM
LIVING ROOM
WEAPON STORAGE
COMMAND CENTER
OFFICE
HAMAS USES PALESTINIAN HOMES IN GAZA FOR MILITARY PURPOSES.
ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES

Image Source: "When Is a House a Home?" The re-signification of civilian spaces into military targets. / Israel Defense Forces blog (2014) Cited in ***https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/17-weaponized-infrastructure/37293-2***

It is important to remember that Israel's settler colonial apparatus is constructed on the idea of the Palestinian population as essentially 'nomadic', thereby claiming the sovereign right to destroy their homes. It comes as no surprise then, to see infographics released by the IDF asking questions like 'when is a house a home?'

The violence of its visuality lies in its rendering of the different rooms (sites of intimacies and subjective formation for the Palestinian families) as 'operation rooms', 'weapon storage rooms', 'commander centers', etc. Their denial of the right to life is by turning the infrastructures that generally hold familial life into sites of insurgency and 'conspiracy' against the State, thereby denying the Palestinians any narrative of subjectivity. The frameworks that the army deploys come from their architectural and territorial visions in which they can declare any moving body as a 'non-civilian'. Ala Albaba's and John Halaka's respective engagements with the images of homes and other intergenerational architectural places and their memories try visualize the tensions between the emotional presence and physical absence of populations whose cultures have been devastated by the violent intrusions of settler colonialism.



Image: John Halaka: Memories of Memories, 2023

However empty the homes depicted in the works of these two artists might seem, they are a refusal to partake in the destruction of the idea of a Palestinian home. This repeated invocation of the homeland and the right to return is a recurrent motif in Palestinian art for example, the use of the symbol of the key,

A symbol that signifies another kind of 'return' is the Dove, which when used in Malak Mattar's paintings offers a clear departure from its appropriation by neoliberal institutions proclaiming themselves as 'harbingers of peace', and its reclamation in the hands of a young girl.



Image: Two Gazan Girls Dreaming of Peace, Malak Mattar

In 'Two Gazan Girls Dreaming of Peace', Malak Mattar shows two girls looking onwards at the viewer, with a glint in their eyes, as if welcoming the viewer to join in their embrace. They are seen holding a white dove, symbolizing peace in general. If one follows the genealogy of the figuration of the dove one can trace the roots of its symbolization in religious texts of the region. According to biblical lore and its counterparts in other religious texts, a dove was released by Noah after 'the flood' to find land, and when it came back carrying a freshly plucked olive leaf. It's return denoted a sign of life after 'the flood'. The dove as a symbol was subsequently appropriated by different organizations. Most notably, the United Nations which itself failed in its duty towards the Palestinian people in its inability to uphold the very principles it claims to have been founded upon. The dove in the painting seems to have 'returned' and perched on the hands of the two women, seemingly content in its rightful place; it is not in motion but rested and at peace. The painting marks perhaps a 'return' of the dove, denoting signs of life not in the war-mongering societies of the West where it was caged in meaningless logos and appropriations, but instead finding traces of life in the resilient social relations and bonds that have ensured the Palestinian people's survival against all odds.

The halos around the women's heads, usually mark presence of divinity, but here they note the people's everyday resilience as god-like. The warm red hues of the background evoke a feeling of the calm and warmth that prevails after a long-standing struggle, facing their despair with a calm confidence in justice in the future. Malak Mattar also talk about love in her paintings. The painting 'You and I' is based on the poem by with the same title by "the Palestinian Poet … Mourid Barghouti, Dedicated to His Late Wife Writer Radwa Ashour, my painting is a tribute to Mourid Barghouti and Radwa Ashour who made us live the beauty of love in Palestine and the pain of exile.[6]"



Image: You and I, Malak Matar

It presents two people embracing each other. The decoration on the clothes and the pose in which they are holding each other is reminiscent of the painting 'The Kiss' by Gustav Klimt. The artist's repetitive attempts at re-interpreting western traditions and canonical styles into her own paintings must be noted because they connote a Palestinian artist's attempt to find her own voice in an art milieu that is dominated by artists from the West. The embrace between both the people seems so intense that the separation between the two bodies, or 'You and I', is rendered invisible. This work, along with Malak Mattar's 'Two Gazan Girls Dreaming of Peace', is in stark contrast with the artist's rendering of the war in Gaza. There are stylistic affinities between the two sets of paintings, as they both make use of flat brushstrokes, curved figures, solid application of colours; but the artist's diversity of subject-matter speaks of the multiple voices in which the Palestinians speak to the world – anger as well as celebration, despair as well as hope, in movement but also rooted.

Abdel Rahman al-Muzayen's figuration of Palestinian women raising their arms and flags in resistance is another image that speaks of Palestinian agency, subjectivity, resilience, communal strength. The stark, linear edges of their clothes and bodies are almost masculine and reveal a stoicism and will to persevere in their struggle. The women's clothes show olive leaves and trees as well as palm trees, symbolizing the Palestinian landscape that finds refuge in them rather than them finding refuge in the landscape. Their bodies are in movement, but also static and rooted to the ground on which they stand. The figures have a solidity and iconic statue-like disposition which is reminiscent of ancient Egyptian art's figuration; perhaps the artist is using that tradition of figuration to assert the Arabic identity and its historical legacy over the cultural and claimed civilisational hegemony of the west. The flags that they wave are churning and revolving like waves of a sea invoking in this case, the Palestinian idea of *sumud*, a word that connotes the condition of searching for a stoic posture in the face of disaster.

This work shows a Palestinian woman hurling a sling shot, the sling of which seems to merge into the embroidered cloth that she is wearing. The stone in the sling she is about to hurl, however, shows a small image of a gun, perhaps denoting the methods of Palestinian resistance. The power of intifada was, as it asserts, in its ordinariness. The woman's dress also shows more women soldiers in a similar stance, aiming their sling shots into the distance, with a resolute gaze. The heavy assertion of traditional Arabic identity is also stressed through the embroidered clothes and their patterns. The drawing is done in such a way that the women, their hair, garments, the larger landscape, etc are not separate pictorial elements but a well-oiled machinery in which they all constitute each other and envision the same future.

The action of hurling a sling shot must be seen in the context of the image representing a long history of revolt by colonized populations against settler-colonial projects across the world. Slingshots and stone-throwing reject constant victimization, asserting instead the authority of resistance instead. They represent powerful autonomy in the responsibility to resist and to remain actively antagonistic.



Image: Abdel Rahman Al Muzayen, Palestine Series, ***2000***

If one sees the paintings 'Revolution Was the Beginning' by Mansour and Malak Mattar's 'Gaza', the long expanses of landscape and multiple timelines on one single surface of the painting show the Palestinian struggle and Nakba as a long history of defeats but also the refusal to accept it as a final predicament. It is history painting in the truest sense of the word.



Image: Sliman Mansour (Palestine), Revolution Was the Beginning, 2016.

Sliman Mansour's 'Revolution Was the Beginning' is a painted landscape showing different scenes from the Palestinian life. On the extreme right, one can see refugee camps over which a dark cloudy sky looms. Two Palestinian women look on as younger groups of people and families march onwards in the hope for a better future; and the gloomy dark sky with a vulture symbolizing death transforms into a bright sun in which a dove flies in arms with a young girl. The three figures in the segment are holding three different symbols of Palestinian resistance; the boy holding a gun with an olive leaf, a woman holding a key symbolizing an imminent return of the Palestinian people to their homeland after the mass exodus, and the woman in front holding a brush and a pen symbolizing the intellectual, artistic lineages of the Palestinian struggle.

The two figures in the centre are beautifully painted, with their clothes showing different snippets of the Palestinian landscape. The man's robe shows the rows of olive trees and a view of the al-Aqsa mosque in the old city of Jerusalem located near the man's chest; representing the cultural, and geographic symbols at the heart of the Palestinian identity. The man and woman look on as two figures seem imprisoned behind bars, a young resistance fighter leaps over a burning tire and a woman aids a fallen man. Towards the far left, a man and a woman collectively carry forward the Palestinian flag, with their keffiyeh and the flag waving in the wind. The composition of the work heavily relies on narration, consistently showing the movement of the Palestinian people from distress and violence towards peace and an egalitarian society. This is done by a repetitive assertion of the Palestinian cultural symbols and identity at the heart of their resistance. By invoking words like 'beginning' in the title and the old Jerusalem site, the artist is stressing on the struggle as a historical one in which resistance has been a constant road towards emancipation rather than singular events or dates in time.



The Painting 'Gaza' by Malak Mattar is a chaotic rendering of the different forms of violence that have been inflicted on the Palestinian people. On the far right on top, one can see lines of men stripped naked with their hands tied on their back, a never-ending line that is juxtaposed with debris of buildings destroyed during the genocide. As we look below, an IDF soldier seems to target a graffiti artist who seems to be speaking to the soldier through the medium of graffiti, saying that the atrocities committed by the likes of him will haunt them forever. Further below are carcasses, bodies of lives taken by the military forces, and a hand that seems to be pulling up a woman trying to escape from the scene. On the other side, one can see the bombing of the city as the skies are lit up by bombs instead of stars, buildings like churches, houses, and other community centres that await their destruction. As we go further below, a wrecked car, a bloodied press jacket, a child's severed body, and a man wailing while holding what might be remnants of a loved one. In the middle, however, is a horse-drawn cart on which a person is carrying their belongings like a rolled-up mattress, chairs, tables, and all the other items that might've once animated their home. The artist's own experiences of displacement and having to leave behind her community must have contributed to her rendering of the figure of the refugee rushing away from her hometown ravaged by the military forces. The mountain of belongings on the cart seem to fall all over the space so that they become one with the debris and the violent cacophony in the background; speaking of the impossibility of reconstructing a peaceful life after having witnessed the horrors in her own city committed on her own people.

One must note, from an interview in which she spoke to **Tings Chak** [8], that the artist insists that art is not supposed to be comforting, it is supposed to disturb because the conditions in which it was made were such. The artist has not shied away from, or aestheticized, the cruel violence imposed on her people; which is why the painting does not look for any 'beauty' or 'redemption' but lays bare the inhumanity and moral depravity that is at the heart of the world order. One can say that the destruction of the city and the people within it is a part of her art; and images of the war will always inform and follow how she organizes her life 'elsewhere'. The composition and disembodied representation of people and the city evokes a similar organization of space as seen in Picasso's Guernica, another anti-war painting, which is telling of how the artist has re-interpreted canonical artworks to represent her people's lived realities.

Palestinian artists are constantly reinterpreting and thus re-energising what is considered to be canonical from a marginal lens. The position from which they speak is "one of knowledge and authoritative learning, but also

from the position of people whose message of Resistance and contestation is the historical result of subjugation", as described by Edward Said [9]. Therefore, a painting, in its very act, is a process of deconstruction of inherited frameworks of looking. He speaks in this regard of cultural activities from subjugated peoples as:

> [C]hoosing to focus on rhetoric, ideas, and language rather than upon history tout court, preferring to analyze the verbal symptoms of power rather than its brute exercise, its processes and tactics rather than its sources, its intellectual methods and enunciative techniques rather than its morality — to deconstruct rather than to destroy [10].

The question, ultimately, for us viewers who encounter such devastating images of genocide in this media society from this inarticulable distance, is how we can rejoin experience and culture. The question is a matter of knowing that what we see invariably informs how we see. It is to constantly remind oneself that the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.

Artworks and cultural activities in the larger sense are not finished objects, unlike the photographs and antiquities stored in imperialist archives. Israel's 'onto-epistemological' attack on the Palestinian world was orchestrated through a combined use of military technologies and technologies of museums and archives, which organized the world according to European taxonomies. Every artwork coming from Palestinian experience is thus a refutation of the limits and categories that these archives impose by refusing to imagine the end of poetry.

What I Can't Imagine

When the Earth, after a pileup of planets,

is swallowed by a black hole

and neither man nor bird remains

and all the ghazelles and trees are gone

and all the countries, and their invaders, too…

When the sun is nothing

but the cinders of a once-great blaze

and even history is over,

there will be no one left to tell the tale

or be shocked by the frightful finale

of our planet and our kind

I can imagine that ending

I can even surrender to it

but what I can't imagine

is that it will also be

the end of poetry

-Najwan Darwish

Notes

[1] Wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. "Decolonising the mind." *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (1998): 101-104.

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[3] Ibid

[4] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 2011. *The Right to Look :A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press.

[5] "Imagining Palestinian Futures beyond Colonial Monumentality – the FUNAMBULIST MAGAZINE." 2021. Thefunambulist.net. August 31, 2021. https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/against-genocide/imagining-palestinian-futures-beyond-colonial-monumentality.

[6] Malak Mattar on the inspiration behind the painting, 'You and I' https://www.facebook.com/MalakMattarArtist/posts/you-and-i-a-poem-by-palestinian-poet-who-passed-away-today-mourid-barghouti-dedi/1784539988367956/

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[8] Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books,

[9] Ibid

[10] Abu-Zeid, Kareem James , and Omar Sakr. 2016. *6 Poems by Najwan Darwish*. Translations *Cordite Poetry Review*, May. http://cordite.org.au/translations/abu-zeid-darwish-sakr/.

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