

Imperialist “Pyramid Theory”: A Theory in Service of Imperialism

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The Imperialist “Pyramid Theory” Erases National Oppression and National Liberation Struggles

In “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism”, Lenin defined the imperialist system as one in which a tiny handful of great powers oppress, dominate, and financially strangle hundreds of other countries, nations, and billions of the people in colonies and semi-colonies. However, supporters of the so-called “imperialist pyramid theory,” led by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), argue that while this definition may have applied in Lenin’s time, it is now outdated because most countries have since developed monopolies. They claim that nearly all countries with monopolies are imperialist states and that these countries occupy different levels in a hierarchy that forms the imperialist pyramid.

These theorists not only deny the existence of a handful of imperialist powers but also reject the characterization of these powers as oppressors and exploiters of the rest of the world’s nations and peoples. Lenin exposed the reality of imperialism as a system in which imperialist powers violate national self-determination through annexation and coercion. Yet these pyramid theorists ignore the reality of national oppression and the violation of national self-determination. According to them, while imperialist states exist, there are no (neo)colonies subjected to their rule.

Marx explained this kind of relationship in “Wage Labour and Capital” as follows:

“A Negro is a Negro. Only under certain conditions does he become a slave. A cotton-spinning machine is a machine for spinning cotton. Only under certain conditions does it become capital. Torn away from these conditions, it is as little capital as gold is itself money, or sugar is the price of sugar.”

Just as a Black person becomes a slave only under specific social relations of oppression and exploitation, and just as a machine becomes capital only under capitalist relations of domination and exploitation of the working class, so too a king exists only because there are subjects beneath him.

However, proponents of the pyramid theory argue that imperialism can exist without the domination and oppression of (neo)colonies and without violating national self-determination. They reduce the relationship of domination between (neo)colonies and imperialist powers to mere inter-imperialist relations among monopolistic states.

Imperialism is monopoly capitalism. In the current imperialist system, all capitalist countries are integrated into this system, characterized by unequal interdependence, competition, and cooperation. However, this does not mean that all these states hold the same power or status. Within the imperialist system, there are clear distinctions between imperialist states and (neo)colonial states, between oppressor and oppressed states, and between dominant and subordinate states. Yet the KKE claims that all capitalist countries with monopolies are imperialist states occupying different levels in the pyramid, reducing the system to a web of unequal but mutual interdependence, competition, and cooperation.

The KKE even goes so far as to claim that all bourgeois classes participate in sharing the spoils of imperialist plunder:

“... all capitalist states are integrated into it and are characterized by relations of unequal interdependence, competition and cooperation. This certainly does not mean that they have the same power and capabilities; it means that all bourgeois classes participate in the sharing of the spoils, in the sharing of the surplus value produced by the working class across the world, based on the political, military and economic power of each state.”

(On the so-called World Anti-Imperialist Platform and its damaging and disorienting position, the International Relations Section of the CC of the KKE, April 10, 2023)

While it is true that all capitalist states are integrated into the imperialist system, this does not mean they all do so as imperialist powers. Contrary to the KKE’s claim, the imperialist system consists of both imperialist powers and (neo)colonial states—of oppressor and oppressed, of dominant and subordinate nations. By claiming that “all capitalist states” with monopolies are part of the imperialist pyramid, the KKE

reduces these relations to mere mutual competition and cooperation even those are “unfair” relations.

The KKE even goes so far as to claim that “all bourgeois classes participate in the sharing of the spoils.” However, if we are to accept the KKE’s absurd claim that “all capitalist states” equally take part in dividing the spoils, what we are left with is nothing more than a system where plunderers collaborate, fight, and compete with each other to divide the loot—completely excluding the very reality of monopolies and imperialist states dominating and partitioning the world. Such a view reduces imperialism to a mere alliance of looters who at times cooperate and at other times clash, rather than a structure of domination between imperialist states and (neo)colonies. Just as there can be no king without subjects, there can be no imperialism without (neo)colonies.

Lenin sought to expose the political structure of imperialism—violence and reaction—based on an economic analysis of capitalism. He identified monopoly as the basis of imperialism but never equated monopoly itself with imperialism. While all imperialist states are based on monopolies, not all states with monopolies are imperialist powers.

According to the KKE’s theory, imperialism ceases to be a system in which a handful of states and nations dominate and oppress hundreds of countries and billions of people. Instead, it is redefined as a system in which, though occupying different positions within a pyramid, the majority of states are themselves regarded as imperialist powers, engaged in mutual invasions, domination, and financial strangulation. In such a framework, the existence of (neo)colonies subjected to unilateral domination and exploitation is effectively erased. This amounts to nothing less than a denial of imperialism itself. What remains is not a theory of imperialism, but a theory of horizontal, mutualist bourgeois internationalism and inter-capitalist competition

Following the Imperialist Pyramid Theory, Russia, China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Greece, South Africa, and South Korea are all considered imperialist states. Therefore, this theory does not regard the rise of China and Russia as a historical advance or progressive development in challenging the US imperialism- and Western imperialism-centered unipolar order, alongside countries like the DPRK, Cuba, Venezuela, or Iran. Instead, it views these developments merely as a reshuffling of positions within the imperialist pyramid. The decline of US hegemony is seen in the same way as when US imperialism replaced British imperialism as the dominant global power.

The same goes for the issue of capital export. Lenin identified capital export as the foundation of imperialist oppression and exploitation of the majority of the world’s nations and peoples. Imperialist capital export is about gaining enormous privileges and influence through surplus capital export, openly intervening in the internal affairs of other countries, and even attempting regime change, thereby eliminating their sovereignty.

However, the Pyramid theorists reduce capital export to any general economic investment or exchange. Followers of the Communist Party of Greece in South Korea, for example, introduce claims from self-proclaimed communists like Politsturm in the United States, arguing:

- “Russian Railways is involved in modernizing North Korea’s railway infrastructure.”
- “Support for the Maduro government should be seen as a struggle for cheap oil.”
- “Russia’s military actions in Syria and its support for the Maduro government should be seen as part of a struggle for cheap oil.”
- “The so-called ‘fight against fascism in Ukraine’ is actually a struggle for markets, cheap labor, and development opportunities in cooperation with the EU and the US.”

According to this logic, the DPRK is reduced to a neo-colony subordinated to Russian imperialism. Even Russia’s defiance of US sanctions to support the Maduro government in Venezuela is framed as imperialist greed for oil.

Under this view, even military assistance to the Syrian government, provided at Syria’s request to block US and Western imperialist aggression, is labeled imperialist behavior. Yet, when Russia withdrew its military presence, the Assad government collapsed, leading to horrific consequences. In early March, the Syrian government forces, in response to attacks from pro-Assad militias, carried out massacres and summary executions in coastal areas populated by the Alawite minority, killing 973 civilians, including women, the elderly, and children. Western media welcomed the collapse of the Assad government as the “overthrow

of a 50-year dictatorship” and the “victory of democracy,” launching a relentless smear campaign against the fallen regime. Meanwhile, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an Al-Qaeda affiliate and successor to Al-Nusra Front, was celebrated as a “hero restoring freedom and democracy to Syria.”

However, this outcome clearly represents the triumph of counter-revolution, marking the loss of one of the most important anti-imperialist strongholds in the Middle East. This defeat is expected to deal a severe blow to the Palestinian resistance and anti-imperialist struggles across West Asia and North and West Africa. It is clear that the portrayal of Russia’s actions in Syria as imperialist domination is nothing more than Western imperialist propaganda, especially in light of the catastrophic aftermath following the fall of the Assad government.

Similarly, the analysis of the Ukraine war by these theorists lazily reduces it to a battle for markets and cheap labor, ignoring historical and concrete factors such as the rise of fascism in Ukraine since before World War II, Western-backed regime change, the massacre in Donbas, NATO’s eastward expansion, the betrayal of the Minsk agreements, and Zelensky’s provocative bans on Russian language use and sanctions against Russia.

Politsturm even accuses China of being “monopoly bourgeoisie” and denounces not only Russia and China but also countries that rhetorically oppose imperialism—such as Venezuela, Cuba, and the DPRK—as pseudo-socialist states.

These ultra-sectarianists go so far as to claim, “Cuba’s fake anti-imperialist rhetoric is no different from that of Russia or China. Behind the same tired phrases lies Cuba’s subordination to Russian and Chinese imperialism, pursuing policies in their interests.” They even viciously accuse the DPRK of “using anti-imperialist rhetoric to justify military expansion.”

The Two-Sided Argument of “Multipolar Imperialism”

These sectarians relentlessly criticize socialist countries building socialism under imperialist siege, as well as progressive, sovereign governments fighting against imperialism, without the slightest regard for the specific conditions those countries face. This sectarian stance mirrors that of Trotskyists, who have historically denounced humanity’s progressive advances as nothing more than “state capitalism” or “degenerated workers’ states,” arguing that both Moscow and Washington represent equally imperialist forces. This kind of anti-socialist, two-sided logic ultimately serves the interests of imperialism.

The Communist Party of Greece, following this same Trotskyist line, denounces China as monopoly capitalist imperialism, North Korea as a dynastic regime, and Cuba as market socialism. It characterizes the war in Ukraine as an inter-imperialist conflict over markets and raw materials between the United States and Russia, while dismissing Venezuela’s progressive government as reactionary. Completely denying the progressive historical achievements of humanity is characteristic of Trotskyism and anarchism, and the KKE fully reproduces this line.

Such historically detached two-sided arguments ultimately serve imperialist interests. For example, in August 2022, when US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, the KKE commented:

“The visit of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives to Taiwan, the mobilization of US military forces, and the heightened tensions in the Indo-Pacific region are all links in the dangerous chain of competition between the US and China to secure dominance in the global capitalist system.”

By defining Russia as imperialist and framing the war in Ukraine as an inter-imperialist conflict, the KKE similarly treats the Taiwan issue as a confrontation between imperialist camps. This lacks any historical perspective and effectively conceals the schemes of US imperialism and Taiwanese separatists through two-sided rhetoric.

Today, China is clearly the principal target of US imperialism. The entirety of US strategic pressure is directed at China. The US pursues a strategy of isolating and encircling the anti-imperialist camp—North Korea, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran—using the conflict with China as its central axis. In particular, the US exploits issues like Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan under the pretext of “human rights and democracy” to push for the division and independence of Taiwan, thereby attempting to dismember the unified Chinese

state.

The Taiwan conflict is a direct consequence of this separatist agenda, yet the KKE's two-sided stance ends up serving US interests by denying the necessity of anti-imperialist partisanship.

The global system centered on US imperialism is undergoing rapid change. The decline of US hegemony has become increasingly evident, particularly after the defeat in Afghanistan and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Trumpism arose as a response to this decline, seeking to restore American dominance. In this context, the formation of a multipolar world order raises the question: Is this development progressive for humanity, or does it merely intensify inter-imperialist rivalries? The KKE and its supporters in South Korea view it as the latter. They argue that, just as British imperialism gave way to US imperialist dominance, the shift toward multipolarity represents nothing more than a redistribution of hegemonic power among new imperialist contenders like China and Russia.

While excessive illusions about multipolarity or avoidance of domestic class contradictions should certainly be cautioned against, it is also wrong to dismiss multipolarity as inherently reactionary. A scientifically grounded understanding of multipolarity, if translated into practical strategies, could indeed be beneficial for advancing global revolutionary change.

In Northeast Asia, the China-DPRK-Russia alliance and the US-Japan-South Korea alliance are not equivalent imperialist blocs. According to the KKE's two-sided logic, we should remain neutral between these two alliances. This would mean, for instance, denouncing North Korea's deployment of troops to defend Russia's Kursk region as participation in an imperialist war of aggression. If progressive forces were to adopt such a stance, they would end up aligning with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who, citing "North Korean intervention," sought to justify military support for Ukraine and even contemplated sending troops, using this as a pretext for declaring martial law.

US and Western imperialist rulers, fully aware of the undeniable brutality of their own domination, seek to obscure their crimes by promoting two-sided narratives that portray Russia and China as new imperialist exploiters of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Bourgeois and imperialist ideology inevitably seeps into progressive circles, leading some to openly or subtly defend imperialism. For example, Germany's Green Party, a "left-wing" force within imperialism, has consistently adopted a two-sided position on the war in Ukraine. Some so-called "progressive" intellectuals, such as Étienne Balibar, have gone so far as to call for sending arms to Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. In South Korea, groups like the "People's Solidarity for Social Progress" translated and circulated these arguments, siding with US imperialism and Ukraine. Notably, popular commentator Pak No-ja praised these views as insightful analyses from an international scholar.

Western "progressive" political forces and intellectuals, while preaching neutral peace rhetoric regarding the war in Ukraine, ultimately sided with the United States and Western imperialism by supporting the proxy war instigated by the U.S. using Ukraine as a pawn. In South Korea, groups such as Workers' Solidarity and Left Communists, which represent the domestic Trotskyist current, as well as the so-called Marxist-Leninist Institute for Social Science of Labor, which follows the line of the Communist Party of Greece, have likewise either consistently maintained a two-sided stance or openly sided with Ukraine and the United States, thereby serving the interests of Western imperialism.

It goes without saying that far-right media outlets in South Korea, such as Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, and Dong-A Ilbo, have done the same. Even pseudo-progressive, petty-bourgeois media outlets like Hankyoreh and Kyunghyang have aligned with U.S. and Western imperialist interests by uncritically reproducing the propaganda disseminated by the United States and the West.

The War in Ukraine: A Crucial Test for the Forces of Progress

The war in Ukraine has served not only as the graveyard of the United States and Western imperialism but also as a critical test to measure whether progressive forces have upheld their commitment to genuine progress or have ended up serving the interests of imperialism.

In South Korea, so-called "neutral" positions—rooted in American-style double standards and

one-sided propaganda—have only functioned to advance the interests of the ruling regime and capital, which have actively spread Russophobia (anti-Russian sentiment) to serve their own agendas.

Just as the Imperialist Pyramid Theory turns a blind eye to the reality of national oppression and erases the question of national liberation struggles, the theory of “emerging imperialist powers” like Russia and China has practically obstructed the focus on anti-American struggles in the South. The year 2025 marks 80 years since the U.S. military entered the Korean Peninsula as an “occupying force” after liberation from Japanese colonial rule. To this day, the United States continues to maintain military, political, economic, cultural, and psychological dominance over South Korean society. However, while the United States faces a global wave of decline and anti-American struggles are breaking out worldwide, in South Korea, the U.S. maintains not only political but also deep-seated psychological dominance, reinforcing a widespread pro-American mentality.

Nevertheless, Ukraine’s defeat in the war represents a defeat for U.S. imperialism, and this defeat will only accelerate the ongoing decline of U.S. hegemony. The retreat of U.S. imperialism on the global stage will open up new possibilities for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula and the realization of a peace treaty. As the war in Ukraine draws to a close, the forces that have held historically correct positions will be clearly revealed, and the divided international communist movement is expected to be restructured in the wake of this historical upheaval.

Leaving aside the theoretical question of whether China and Russia are imperialist, what practical basis exists in South Korea to define these countries as targets of anti-imperialist struggle? The U.S.-Japan-South Korea “trilateral alliance” is forming a so-called “alliance of values” aimed at surrounding, isolating, and crushing the China-Russia-DPRK (North Korea) alliance in Northeast Asia. The Yoon Suk-yeol regime is actively participating in this alliance, recklessly pushing for war. Under these circumstances, how can labeling China and Russia as imperialist powers possibly help to expose the reactionary and aggressive nature of this “alliance of values,” or to formulate meaningful progressive strategies?

This is not an issue limited to the Korean Peninsula. Should the focus in Latin America shift away from supporting the struggles of nations like Cuba, Venezuela, and others fighting for sovereignty against U.S. interference and domination, in order to instead oppose their friendly ties with China and Russia? What about the struggles unfolding in the Middle East and Africa?

At a time when exposing the shameless double standards and propaganda of imperialist powers and resisting their invasions, war provocations, and sanctions is more urgent than ever, some forces—obsessed with labeling Russia, and even China, as imperialist—are doing nothing but serving the interests of U.S. and Western imperialism. Are they not, like the Trotskyists before them, the latest allies of imperialism?