

The brewing New Cold War with China has been decades in the making



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By Charles McKelvey

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The disorganized and incoherent response of the Trump administration to the COVID-19 pandemic, with tragic as well as politically disastrous consequences, has given rise to a strategy by Trump to blame China for the pandemic, deflecting blame away from himself. The Republican Party is joining the strategy of blaming China, although not necessarily defending Trump.

The scapegoating of China for the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly accelerates global tendencies of the last four decades. The United States is a declining hegemonic power, adopting extreme and aggressive measures in a desperate attempt to maintain its hegemony in a neocolonial world-system that itself is unsustainable. China is a rising great power, seeking to ascend with a non-confrontational strategy in accordance with the established rules of the world-system; which at the same time is developing mutually

beneficially relations with the majority of states that represent, in varying degrees, the neocolonized peoples of the earth, cooperating with them in the development of an alternative world system that would be emancipated from a colonial foundation. China seeks to become not the dominant world power, but rather, the leading world power in a world-system based in alternatives structures, principles, and values, an alternative world-system that would have political stability because of its foundation in mutually beneficial economic relations among the nations.

The source of our current difficulties is the colonial foundation of the world-system. Although not commonly framed in this way North of the Third World, it is a fundamental historical fact, well known by the colonized peoples through their experience, that the modern world was developed on the base of the European conquest and colonial domination of the empires, nations, and peoples of the planet from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. What emerged from this foundation was a world-system in which the wealth of the powerful nations was based on superexploitation and forced labor of the peoples of the world, made possible by diverse and continually evolving processes of political control. The sustainability of the system was ensured by the continuous conquest of new lands and peoples, incorporating them into the colonized and superexploited peoples, and exploiting their natural resources. However, this continually evolving and expanding system came up against its limits around the middle of the twentieth century, as it ran out of new lands and peoples to conquer, and as the colonized peoples became increasingly politically conscious and increasingly united in their demand for a New International Economic Order.

As that critical historical moment was reached, human civilization possessed the capacity to envision the necessary structural transformation, which involved the use of the wealth, science, knowledge, technology and productive capacity developed through colonialism and conquest as the foundation for a new stage in human history, characterized by a more just and sustainable world that recognized the inherent right of all persons to a decent standard of living and the right of all nation-states to sovereignty. Indeed, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had declared a vision in which every person of the world would live in a condition that he called “freedom from want.”

But the future of humanity was hijacked by those in positions of power in the wealthy nations, who were armed with a self-serving agenda. They have used their positions of wealth and influence to confuse and divide the peoples of the nations of the North, a tendency especially prominent in the United States. The hijackers, whose amorality is increasingly exposed, have led the hegemonic nation for four decades in a project of economic and military aggression against the peoples of the earth, taking the world far away from the necessary structural changes that were envisioned by some decades ago.

Meanwhile, China has grown in wisdom. China was never conquered and peripheralized like the Third World. However, British military incursions in Chinese coastal zones compelled China in the nineteenth century to accept trade agreements that undermined its economy. Modern China, therefore, was forged on an anti-colonial impulse, disengaging itself from the world-economy and the “unequal treaties” imposed by Western powers, which had facilitated its economic decline from its ancient wealth and glory. And then, four decades later, reengaging the Western powers, but now in a form guided by its national aspirations for economic and social development, forged on a foundation of autonomous economic development. In this dynamic, China has for the most part been an ally of the Third World, and Zhou En-lai was among those present at the historic 1955 conference in Bandung, Indonesia, where the Third World was declared as a project.

The New Cold War against China is pure distraction, blinding us to these world historical dynamics and realities. It seeks to manipulate the people into hostility toward China, so that the people do not see with clarity the betrayal of the Western global elite of their peoples, their nations, and humanity, as it launched new forms of aggression against the nations and peoples of the world in defense of its self-serving agenda.

We have been witnesses to the moral and political descent of the hegemonic neocolonial power: from the assassination of the hope for world peace, to the unspeakable violence in Vietnam against the humble and courageous people of that land, to the incapacity to develop a politically mature response to the Islamic Revolution, to the simplistic and self-righteous geopolitics of Reagan, to the military aggression of Bush I, to the compromises of Clinton, to the neoconservatism and aggressions of Bush II, to the disappointment and soft-imperialism of Obama, and to the neofascism and ethnocentric nationalism of Trump.

The incompetence of Trump in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is stunning. He could have blamed the pandemic, with justice, on the long-standing neoliberal inattention of the political establishment to the health system. To be sure, his cuts and politically driven appointments, motivated by his weak-state ideology, had contributed to the unpreparedness. But he could have quickly shifted gears, taking into account the emergency of the situation. He could have presented himself as a great defender of the people, not only with respect to their manufacturing jobs, but now also with respect to their health. For whatever reason, he did not see this political possibility.

The incompetence of Trump with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic places the Republican Party in a politically difficult position. The political survival of Republican Senators and Congresspersons may depend on their capacity to scapegoat China, to deflect blame for the pandemic away from the Republican president.

As Peter Beinart, professor of journalism at the City University of New York, has pointed out recently, scapegoating China is a sensible ideological move for the Republican Party at this historic moment. The GOP is the party of military spending and white anxiety, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been looking for a new evil empire. China is a credible candidate, inasmuch as it is a nonwhite, non-Christian, Communist power that is effectively challenging U.S. domination in the world.

The identification of China as a new evil empire is surging. As we saw in our last editorial commentary of May 15, the strategy of Trump and the Republicans is to claim that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was created in a laboratory in China, and that China covered up the disease, and was slow in reporting it; accusations not supported by scientific investigation or relevant known facts.

But false claims are useful in ideological manipulations, especially when combined with false premises with respect to world historical tendencies. Josh Hawley, Republican Senator from Missouri, makes the most politically effective case. He declares that “Chinese imperialism is the greatest threat to American security in the 21st century.”

Can the claim that China is imperialist stand up against the test of historical and scientific investigation? We will address this question in our next commentary.

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