

Is China an imperialist power?



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In the brewing New Cold War with China, among the voices emerging to cast China as an evil empire is Josh Hawley, Republican Senator from Missouri. He declares that “Chinese imperialism is the greatest threat to American security in the 21st century.” He maintains that the United States has to return to making reciprocal trade agreements with allied nations that are beneficial to U.S. national interests and the nation’s workers, resisting Chinese economic imperialism.

But it is reasonable to assert that China is an imperialist power? And what exactly is imperialism?

Imperialism is the policy of taking control of the natural resources and labor of lands beyond national territory. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, it involved seizing direct control through conquest, establishing colonial administration over the conquered territories and peoples. During the period, Western European powers established colonial empires that extended throughout the planet. Japan and Russia also emerged as imperialist powers, seeking control of territories in their geographical areas. As the United States emerged as a world power during the nineteenth century, American imperialism competed with other imperialisms, particularly with respect to territory that the young American republic wanted to control. On the North American continent, the United States was especially

in competition with England, France, Spain, and Russia for control of territory.

In this nineteenth century process of competing imperialisms, China was not among the competing imperialist powers. For millennia, Chinese empires had been among the most advanced human civilizations. But by the nineteenth century, China had experienced economic decline. Moreover, during the century, British military penetration of its territory compelled the Chinese empire to accept trade agreements that undermined its economy.

In the late 1890s, there emerged in China a nationalist anti-imperialist tendency among intellectuals, in reaction to Western commercial and military penetration as well as the imperialism of Japan. Chinese Marxism was born in this nationalist anti-imperialist intellectual environment. The Chinese Communist Party was established in 1921 by two Beijing University professors and their student followers. Among them was a young library assistant, Mao Zedong, who formulated an adaptation of Marxist theory to the conditions of China.

Following a decades-long military and political struggle with, on the one hand, a Chinese nationalism that accommodated to Western interests, and on the other hand, the military occupation of China by Japan; Mao Zedong arrived in Beijing on October 1, 1949 to proclaim the People's Republic of China.

The intention of the triumphant Chinese Revolution was to set aside the previous policy of accommodation to bourgeois and foreign interests, and on this basis, to propel the economic modernization of the country. The Agrarian Reform Law of 1950 distributed land to individual peasant proprietors, liquidating the landed estate bourgeoisie as a class, with the intention of organizing the peasants into cooperatives. There emerged disagreements within the leadership of the Communist Party concerning the pace of the collectivization of the peasants, with Mao pushing for acceleration of the process. And there also emerged disagreements concerning the form and the pace of industrialization. The period of 1950 to 1976 was characterized by intense political conflicts within the Communist Party leadership, with Maoists pushing for rapid transformations, against the pragmatists that were in the majority in the Party leadership; and with both sides mobilizing masses in defense of their cause.

Events would favor the pragmatists. Mao's Great Leap Forward of 1957 to 1958 was an economic failure with tragic consequences; and Mao's divisive comportment in 1965 and 1966 stimulated the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, growth in China's Gross Domestic Product and national income was much greater during times in which pragmatic policies prevailed, in contrast to the periods of ultra-Leftist policies or political conflict.

Following Mao's death in 1976, the Communist Party embarked on the pragmatic road. In the period of 1978 to 2012, China pursued a program of "Reform and Opening," followed by "The New Reform," from 2012 to present. Both stages of reform are based on the concept of a socialist market economy, which departs from the classic view that a market economy is inherent to capitalism, and a planned economy is inherent to socialism. In a socialist market economy, economic planning is primary, and the market plays an auxiliary role, defined by the state-formulated plan; and state-owned property is the pillar of the economy.

The reform was initially formulated by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping as a series of measures, which later became the practical basis for the formulation of theory by the Communist Party. The reform sought to increase long-stagnant agricultural production through contracts with peasant families on state-owned land, with expansion of the free market for agricultural products. The measures also expanded space for private capital in industry.

Inasmuch as the modernization of the economy required levels of investment beyond the reach of national capacity, China also turned to attracting foreign investment, a central component of the so-called "opening" of the economy. From 1979 to 1995, various structures were established that enabled a significant increase in foreign investment, in which 185 nations of the world have participated.

Meanwhile, during course of the twentieth century, the United States had forged a new form of imperialism, which involved economic penetration of other territories, without seizing direct political control. This imperialism with a democratic face was initially developed by the United States in the first half of the twentieth century with respect to Cuba and Latin America; and in the period 1945 to 1990, the new form of imperialism defined U.S. relations with much of the world. As the European colonial empires disintegrated before the force of the anti-colonial movements, the European imperial powers also turned to imperialism with a democratic face. However, beginning in 1990, as a result of its economic decline, the United States began to abandon the democratic pretense and to initiate wars of aggression, in violation of the rules of the neocolonial world-system that it had forged when it was at the height of its power. In practice, without declaring the intention, the United States is seeking to move the world-system to a new stage, from a neocolonial world-system to a global military dictatorship.

Chinese foreign policy rejects the new form of imperialism, integral to the neocolonial world-system, forged by the United States during the twentieth century. Chinese foreign policy is based on the anti-imperialist principle of cooperation and sovereignty among nations. It affirms, in theory and in practice, that all nations of the world are free to control their economies, their political systems, and their foreign policies, and they are free to trade among themselves, without interferences and interventions by global powers that seek control of natural resources and markets. In developing in practice commercial relations on the basis of these concepts, departing from the standard practices of the established neocolonial world-system, China is cooperating with other nations in the de facto development of alternative norms for international relations.

China's challenge to the United States is not merely economic and financial; China is seeking to ascend in a form that changes the rules of the world-system, moving toward a system defined by cooperation and mutually beneficial trade among nations. China is promoting an approach to international affairs that the Non-Aligned Movement and the more independent governments of the Third World have proposed since the 1960s.

The accusation, therefore, that China is an imperialist power is without foundation. China did not participate in the colonial domination of the planet initiated by the Western European powers in the sixteenth century, nor was it one of the competing imperialisms during the nineteenth century. For most of the twentieth century, it was absorbed in internal conflicts, seeking to define its response to Western and Japanese imperialisms. Since 1976, it has been cooperating with Western capitalism, including U.S. corporations, in accordance with its national plan for economic and social development. At the same time, it has been developing mutually beneficial trade relations with many nations of the South, in accordance with the Third World principle of South-South cooperation. It thus is positioning itself to become a leading nation in a world with alternative norms, an alternative world-system that is more just and sustainable, and therefore in the interests all nations.

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