

Actually Existing Multipolarity

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Introduction

Since the 2011 Syrian revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan in Ukraine, many Syrians and Ukrainians have found themselves sharing a common enemy: Russian imperialism. Russia's intervention in Syria started at the end of 2015, over a year after Russia first invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea. Since then, Russian forces have bombed large parts of Syria to allow Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian and Iran-backed allies to maintain power until his overthrow in December of 2024. At the same time, since 2014 but especially since February 2022, Russia has been waging a genocidal war against Ukraine, with the clear intention, as stated multiple times by Putin and other high-ranking officials,¹ to destroy Ukrainian identity and culture.

Although the motives behind them differ, the Russian intervention in Syria and invasion of Ukraine have both led to widespread destruction. As a result, a number of Syrians and Ukrainians have found—and worked to build—solidarity with one another. Russia, meanwhile, has redeployed soldiers that were active in Syria to Ukraine and Ukrainian forces have fought Russian forces in Syria, making the link between these two causes even clearer.² Syrian aid workers have also volunteered in Ukraine, where they have drawn on their experiences dealing with Russia in their home country.³ Syrians took to the streets to declare their support for the Ukrainian resistance even before 2022,⁴ revealing an understanding that these two countries are now linked. Furthermore, the Assad regime is among the few governments to have recognized Russian-annexed Ukrainian territories as Russian,⁵ and Iranian weapons are being used in Russia's ongoing campaign against Ukraine.⁶

Despite that, most Ukrainians remain seemingly uneducated about the Syrian struggle against the axis of Assad, Russia, and Iran beyond the knowledge of this mutual enemy. Furthermore, the difference in how Europe has received Ukrainian refugees versus how it has received Syrian refugees has led many to believe, understandably so, that the Ukrainian cause is valued in Europe while the Syrian one is not. This was worsened by racist European media coverage of Syrian refugees, especially when compared to coverage of Ukrainian refugees.⁷ In this chapter, I will explore how Ukrainians' experience with Russian imperialism can serve as a bridge to other anti-imperialist struggles, and how arguments in favor of multipolarity fail to take into account similarities between authoritarian forces that nominally oppose one another—in other words, actually existing multipolarity. Instead, the experience of struggles on the peripheries suggests that, as with Ukrainians and Syrians, bond-building between victims of imperialism can help pave the way for truly anti-imperialist politics.

“Our Wounds Are Bridges”

In 2022, I moderated a four-way panel featuring two Ukrainians and two Syrians as part of the “Post-Extractive Futures” series organized by War on Want, Tipping Point UK, JunteGente, and The Fire These Times.⁸ On the Ukrainian side were Yuliya Yurchenko, a senior lecturer and researcher in political economy at the University of Greenwich and the author of *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, and Taras Bilous, a historian, activist with the Social Movement organization, and editor for *Commons: Journal of Social Criticism*, covering war and nationalism. Bilous was also fighting on the front lines at the time of the conversation. On the Syrian side were Yassin al-Haj Saleh—a writer and former political prisoner, as well as the husband of Samira al-Khalil, a famed

feminist activist who was abducted by the armed Islamist group Jaysh Al-Islam in Douma in December 2013—and Wafa Mustafa, an activist and detention survivor whose father was forcibly disappeared by the Assad regime in 2013. The conversation was recorded on YouTube⁹, and a transcription has been made available by Antidote Zine Collective.¹⁰

The title of the roundtable set the tone for the topic: “Our Wounds Are Bridges: The Threads that Bind Us from Syria to Ukraine.” The intention of the organizers, as stated in the announcement, was to provide “a space for mutual learning and solidarity-weaving amongst activists dreaming, enacting and mobilising toward postcapitalist, ecological, feminist, afro-diasporic, intergenerational, indigenous and decolonial futures.”¹¹ This solidarity-weaving was explored through the respective struggles of the speakers. Their positionality or, in other words, how they identified their relationship to their various social identities, helped form a view on the “other context,” i.e., Ukraine for the Syrians and Syria for the Ukrainians.

This format challenges the premise of a decontextualized and ahistorical “objectivity” that has meant that non-Syrians and non-Ukrainians are often prioritized in Syria/Ukraine conversations in Western media and policy circles as actors able to be “objective.” Although Ukrainians are platformed more often than Syrians are, they, too, are often spoken about rather than spoken to, and their cause is often deprioritized depending on internal European or American political matters. For example, Ukraine’s right to exist in the face of Russian plans to annex it can take second place in discourse to the conspiracy theories-oriented Hungarian government complaining about “transatlantic liberal elites”¹² or the German government blocking crucial supplies from reaching Ukraine.¹³ As the far right continues to gain influence in Europe, difficult days are likely ahead for Ukraine given the far right’s broad support for the Putin regime.¹⁴

Furthermore, what we often see in media coverage is that the views of non-Ukrainian policy-makers and members of influential think tanks are prioritized. To use the metaphors raised by the roundtable’s title, one’s wounds devalue oneself as a “legitimate” narrator when the intention of media coverage and politics is to create a distance between what is happening “over there” and the “here,” the center. This is what the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said referred to as the lack of a “permission to narrate,”¹⁵ with groups of people on the periphery of power often deprived of the ability to tell their own story. By focusing on these wounds, the panel participants challenged what Bilous later described¹⁶ as many Ukrainians’ unwillingness to shake a belief in the inherent superiority of European civilization over the rest of the world, which in turn reflects a white supremacist worldview. This worldview, he explained, is partly maintained by “othering” the rest of the world, a dynamic that can be interrupted through reclaiming the permission to narrate, and weaving Syrian and Ukrainian anti-imperialist narratives together.

The Ukrainian establishment’s prioritization of an agenda of joining the EU and NATO has hindered, in Bilous’ analysis, the ability of many Ukrainians from recognizing Europe’s relationship with the rest of the world as the continent that enslaved and colonized large swaths of it. This was only worsened by the Ukrainian establishment’s response to the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza despite Israeli tactics in Gaza resembling Russian tactics in Ukraine. This dynamic, he continued, contributes to a lack of sympathy toward the Ukrainian cause in the Global South. This is regardless of the fact that the Ukrainian resistance to Russian imperialism depends on Western support, no matter how inadequate the support has been. Indeed, it could be argued that the lack of urgency expressed by Western governments vis-à-vis the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine betrayed a Western chauvinism that has long viewed Eastern Europe with contempt. It is no surprise then that the most vocal backers of Ukraine have been in Eastern Europe and the

Baltic states, as those regions have a more intimate knowledge of Russian imperialism from their own respective experiences with the Russian empire, the USSR, and/or post-USSR Russia.

The contempt with which Western governments view Eastern Europe has been expressed on both sides of the political spectrum, from the more overt pro-Russia stances of the German far-right party AfD¹⁷ or US far-right influencers Tucker Carlson¹⁸ and Alex Jones¹⁹ to comments by prominent left-wing figures whose prioritization of anti-NATO politics erases any and all considerations of Ukrainian agency (see, for example, the UK “Stop the War” movement,²⁰ the Irish Member of the European Parliament Clare Daly,²¹ or the Democratic Socialists of America [DSA]).²² Some prominent leftists have even expressed sympathy with Ukraine while expressing reservations about its right to defend itself against Russian imperialism, while others have made explicitly pro-Russia statements that are indistinguishable from those made by the far right.

That being said, the “Our Wounds Are Bridges” roundtable was part of an attempt by two Ukrainian leftists who are part of wider collectives in Ukraine and its diaspora to reorient Ukraine’s horizon; they are not necessarily explicitly orienting away from Europe,²³ but rather trying to integrate non-Western European histories of struggle to facilitate bond-building. After all, they have argued, Ukrainians today have more in common with Bosnians, Palestinians, Armenians, Uighurs, Rohingya, Tigrayans, and Syrians than they do with Western Europeans. To use the metaphor again, there are multiple bridges that can be built out of these people’s respective wounds as victims of a larger neighbor’s ethno-supremacist, settler colonial, and ultranationalist worldview and/or of an authoritarian government.

Multipolarity, the False Alternative

This brings us to the concept of multipolarity, a concept that has gained popularity in recent years in segments of the left. As Promise Li, a Hong Konger socialist organizer, puts it in a podcast interview with me, multipolarity is the idea of “a world defined by multiple imperial cores instead of just one.”²⁴ At the center of this idea lies an acceptance of imperialism as long as it comes from a non-Western source, notably Russia and/or China. Li continues:

When you break up that hegemonic control into several different parts it just makes it that much harder to organize around and tackle, because these different poles can co-opt resistance. This is what we see very often especially in leftwing defenses of multipolarity: that these separate imperial cores co-opt resistance to American imperialism and promote imperialism of a non-US variety.

Although an inherently reactionary position that merely replicates imperialist logic instead of dismantling it everywhere, multipolarity has had some appeal on the left especially since the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and more recently since the start of the Israeli genocide in Gaza. What we have seen is a tendency to use the struggles of groups of people, most notably the Palestinians, to condemn, downplay, or erase the struggles of others, such as the aforementioned groups of oppressed people from Uighurs to Tigrayans.

In that same podcast, Kavita Krishnan, an Indian Marxist organizer who used to be a politburo member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) before resigning over the party’s refusal to support the Ukrainian resistance, notes that a core component of multipolarity as practiced by the Chinese and Russian states is the argument “that universal or widely accepted stan-

dards of democracy and human rights are a Western imposition, a unipolar imperialist imposition. So the fight for sovereignty and for anti-imperialism means a rejection of these universal standards.”²⁵ As she points out, this worldview rejects internal dynamics in Russia and China such as labor and feminist struggles in favor of a grander narrative that puts states over people, and replaces left-wing politics with an antithetical conservative worldview. Krishnan continues:

This should have always been an alien discourse. It springs from realism—from the Kissinger school. So I cannot understand when and how this became a part of left language. The fact that the left uses this language, completely shutting its ears to the fact that it has acquired a very dangerous meaning, is something really alarming to me.²⁶

Also in the same podcast, the Ukrainian Marxist writer Romeo Kokriatski argues that states like Russia and China “want to be able to do whatever they want and they don’t want anyone to criticize them.”²⁷ This has melded “into rejecting Western influence or pushing back against US liberal capitalist values”—not by providing progressive and emancipatory alternatives, but by promoting other supremacies instead, such as pan-Russianism or Han supremacy. Thus, multipolarity rejects the universality of human rights. Instead of critiquing shortcomings of liberalism in favor of more progressive positions, leftists who subscribe to multipolarity align their politics with a decisively right-wing position. Li again:

The discourse of multipolarity actually prevents us from adequately understanding our political conditions in order to fight back against capitalist authoritarian forces, because a lot of leftists have chosen one side of this binary instead of understanding that authoritarianism is manifesting itself in different forms.²⁸

Given how prominent the Palestinian cause is on the left, it should also be noted that there is no evidence that multipolarity has benefited the struggle against settler colonialism and apartheid in Israel/Palestine. In fact, Russian oil flows to Israel alongside Azerbaijani, Kazakhstani, Brazilian, Gabonese, and US oil to fuel the genocide in Gaza, with the facilitation of multinational companies such as BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, and TotalEnergies.²⁹ In fact, it can be argued that the Israeli genocide in Gaza, like the Russian genocide in Ukraine and the Assadist extermination campaigns in Syria, evidences a “multipolarization” of international law, with powerful actors—in this case the United States and Russia—using their influence as permanent security council members to veto any actions proposed against their allies. The US vetoes resolutions pertaining to Israel just as Russia vetoes resolutions pertaining to Syria or itself.

Furthermore, as Jean-Pierre Filiu noted, both Putin and Netanyahu manipulate the “history of WWII in order to equate their enemies in both Ukraine and Palestine with the Nazis.”³⁰ Indeed, Putin routinely references the Soviet role in defeating the Nazis as one of his justifications for invading Ukraine,³¹ comparing the Ukrainian resistance to the Third Reich even as his allies as well as state-controlled Russian media companies spread antisemitic conspiracy theories about Ukraine’s President Zelensky, who is Jewish. As for Netanyahu, he references the Holocaust to push for a perverted interpretation of the post-Second World War slogan “never again” in which any call for restraints on Israel’s all-out war against Palestinian civilians is labeled antisemitic. Netanyahu has compared the Oslo Accords to the 1938 Munich Agreement, during which the

Nazis annexed part of what was then Czechoslovakia.³² He has even gone so far as to argue that Hitler only agreed to kill Jewish people en masse after meeting with a Palestinian mufti,³³ a lie so egregious that Holocaust historians such as Moshe Zimmermann labeled it a form of Holocaust denial.³⁴ Netanyahu has also compared himself with Charles De Gaulle and Winston Churchill as a way of implying that he is battling foes similar to the Nazis.³⁵

Any pro-multipolarity argument that fails to take into account the similarities between authoritarian forces is likely to reproduce an authoritarian logic. To put it simply, to condemn Israel while downplaying, whitewashing, or even supporting Russia is to place human lives on a scale of more worthy to less worthy, a scale that can be used by any state, including those deemed imperialist by pro-multipolarity leftists.

The same goes for China, a state with a long history of partnering with Israel to develop surveillance technology first tested against Palestinians before being deployed against Uighurs and dissidents in China.³⁶ Pan Yue, China's current Ethnic Affairs Commissioner, described both "Xinjiang" (which means "new frontier" in Mandarin Chinese) and Tibet as backward and Uighurs and Tibetans as in need of colonization by Han Chinese emulating the settler colonialism of the United States, Russia, and Israel. In fact, as Darryn Byler noted, Yue called

on China to learn from a trifecta of contemporary colonizers: the United States, Israel, and Russia, taking elements of each as a model of how contemporary China should colonize Tibetan and Uyghur lands. He suggested that the Western expansion of settler colonialism in the United States and Russia's imperial settlement of Siberia should be combined with the more contemporary example of Israel's controlled deployment of the West Bank's settlers and infrastructure in the Occupied Territories of Palestine.³⁷

In January 2014, the National Police University of China (NPUC) published a paper praising Israeli repression of Palestinians, which the paper described as "Israel's anti-terror strategies in its planning, execution, information gathering, and propaganda," as a "success story."³⁸ Revealingly, the paper described Israeli antiterror strategies as the "'culmination' of the international community." This backs Promise Li's insight into the nature of modern multipolarity whereby "national ruling elites in a lot of these countries, especially in the Global South, are working in hand with the Western capitalist ruling class to exploit the working class and other marginalized populations of the Global South."³⁹ The NPUC paper then set out to explore ways in which the Chinese state could learn from the Israeli experience. The year of publication is also indicative as 2014 is when the repression of Uighurs in China would intensify, culminating in the ongoing cultural genocide.⁴⁰ In July of that year, Israel launched "Operation Protective Edge" in Gaza, killing some 2,310 civilians. This would be the deadliest conflict in Gaza until October 2023, when the genocide, ongoing at the time of writing, began.

Despite the clear parallels between the United States and Israel on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, the concept of multipolarity effectively flattens these complexities in favor of a grand narrative of good versus evil, with the United States and its allies in the latter camp and Russia, China, and others in the former. With regard to Ukraine, this is facilitated by the fact that most non-Western governments have not joined the West in seeking to isolate Russia for invading Ukraine. For example, the "Russia-Africa in a Multipolar World" conference was held in Moscow in March 2023 and featured around forty "official parliamentary delegations" from

Africa. In his speech at the conference, Putin spoke of how “Russia and African countries stood against neocolonial ideology imposed by foreign states,”⁴¹ omitting mention of the neocolonial actions of the Russian military and Russian militias, notably the Wagner group, in countries like the Central African Republic, Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mali, and Sudan.⁴² In Syria, as mentioned, Russia deployed troops on the ground, including through Wagner, around the same time as the annexation of Crimea.

Multipolarity from the Peripheries

Anti-Assad Syrians have often made symbolic shows of solidarity to Ukrainians, including celebrating announcements of Russian military deaths in Ukraine, particularly when the soldiers in question had previously fought in Syria. In March 2014, protesters in Kafranbel, Syria, known for their creative signage at weekly protests, addressed Ukrainians with a banner that read: “Ukrainian brothers! Don’t surrender to the savage Russians. Keep going on, depend on yourselves, and never rely on the international community.”⁴³

This view of the international community communicated by the Kafranbel protesters is one that is regularly expressed by protesters around the world, from Sudan to Bangladesh. This international community is something that is experienced as a negative, as exemplified by the question, “Where is the international community?” This question emerges from grievances regarding lack of decisive actions to stop government-perpetrated atrocities. This lack of action in turn is arguably best summarized by the phrase-turned-meme “thoughts and prayers.” Initially associated with American politicians using that platitude as replacement for action on gun violence, the phrase has since been used to describe broader feelings of being abandoned by an international community. For example, we see this regularly expressed online whenever Western politicians express “concern” over Israel’s actions in Gaza while refraining from taking concrete actions within their power, for example, sanctions, cutting off of diplomatic relations, or support for the judicial processes of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Where does this leave us today? As we have explored, multipolarity is used today by states like Russia and China to avoid accountability. It is also a reality, one that US military establishment figures have recognized. For example, in December 2020, US Army General Mark A. Milley told the Brookings Institution that “we’re in a multipolar world,” which, according to Milley, means the world has “automatically” become “more complex almost by definition.”⁴⁴ Russia’s foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, in a 2023 meeting with his Syrian regime counterpart, declared that both regimes “agree that the West’s attempt to impose a unipolar dictatorship on the international community is doomed to fail.”⁴⁵ The question, therefore, isn’t whether we are moving toward a multipolar world—that is already a reality—but rather whether multipolarity can ever be considered progressive. The argument made by its proponents, that it provides an alternative to a unipolar US-led world, does not stand up to scrutiny given the ways in which these states are interconnected with the Western-led world order to such an extent that it is conceivable to imagine the same world order without it being “Western-led” at all, with its impacts remaining unchanged, if not made worse.

Indeed, it would be odd to argue that states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are in any way alternatives to the West given how interdependent their elites are with

Western ones, but this is what we have to believe to accept that BRICS, the intergovernmental organization comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the UAE, holds any liberatory potential (Saudi Arabia is not yet an official member but participates as an invited member). These states between them house the majority of the world's population and yet have been unable or unwilling to provide an alternative to the Western-led order. Additionally, most of these are governed by authoritarian regimes and have some of the worst human rights records on the planet: China, Russia, and Ethiopia have committed genocides in "Xinjiang," Ukraine, and Tigray, respectively and, alongside India, are ruled by ethno-supremacist ideologies; Iran is a theocracy that represses minorities from Kurdistan to Khuzestan, imposes strict gender apartheid, and is an imperialist force in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon; Egypt is a military dictatorship that has crushed its nonviolent opposition movement; the UAE and Saudi Arabia are both absolute monarchies ruled by families that rely on the mass exploitation of migrant labor to maintain their profits, and both the UAE and Russia are directly involved in the ongoing genocide in Sudan. As for Brazil, as we have seen, it being currently ruled by a left-wing party has not prevented it from being an accomplice in the genocide in Gaza through lucrative oil deals with Israel.

The remaining BRICS member, South Africa, provides an interesting case study as it was the first nation to bring forward accusations of genocide against Israel at the ICJ, doing so on December 29, 2023. By its own declaration, South Africa's case was motivated by its "rights and obligations" to prevent genocide and "protect the Palestinians of Gaza from destruction" within the framework of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.⁴⁶ Given its past status as an apartheid state, South Africa's accusation against Israel was widely viewed as symbolically powerful. Here was a Black-majority African country of the Global South taking on a state, Israel, being supported by the world's leading military superpower, the United States. Palestinians took to social media to express gratitude to South Africa, many of them sharing videos of Nelson Mandela supporting the Palestinian cause, including during his 1999 visit to Gaza, and sharing his famous declaration that "our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."

That being said, the principles that South Africa acted on in its ICJ case against Israeli genocide did not appear to extend to victims of Russia or China, since South Africa has abstained from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine⁴⁷ and has praised China's "great progress" in "Xinjiang."⁴⁸ Just as we see NATO members sometimes refrain from criticizing one another, BRICS members sometimes follow a similar pattern. Instead of discussing the theoretical benefits of a different kind of multipolarity, therefore, it is more useful to speak of an "actually existing multipolarity," which evidently reproduces many of the same oppressive patterns that it was supposedly intended to solve. What we are witnessing is not the peripheries fighting back against centers of empire, but rather a reconfiguration of the existing world order to accommodate the relative decline in American supremacy.

The examples explored here from Ukraine, Syria, "Xinjiang," and Palestine should demonstrate the extent to which actually existing multipolarity fails to provide an emancipatory alternative to the so-called Western-led world order, instead facilitating the co-optation of some causes at the expense of others. An analysis from the periphery—as demonstrated by the cited activists, scholars, and writers—encourages an alternative, one which takes seriously power dynamics not just between states but within them as well. Such an analysis more effectively promotes solidarity-weaving, as the Ukrainian-Syrian panel put it, between groups of people across and beyond borders despite actually existing multipolarity.

Conclusion

Actually existing multipolarity contradicts the main argument made by those who support multipolarity, namely that it can serve as a progressive alternative to the US-led world order. In actuality we see multipolarity reproduce imperialist logic and the supremacy of states over human rights universalism. Instead of pursuing multipolarity, the left must integrate a rigorous anti-authoritarian critique to prevent anti-imperialist discourse from being used by competing imperialist powers against one another and, most importantly, against the most vulnerable populations within their states or abroad. Failing to do so would reproduce the same grievances expressed by victims of imperialism toward the so-called international community vis-à-vis crises like the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The potential of Ukraine-Syrian bond-building and solidarity-weaving is merely one of many examples suggesting a potential alternative to the binary world-view of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Only by moving beyond state-centric frameworks can we better leverage the tools at our disposal to push more effectively for causes we hold dear. Rather than throw other vulnerable populations under the bus in the name of anti-imperialism, a thoroughly left-wing alternative to the status quo would center these peripheries, not just out of principle but as an effective way of challenging centers of power.

Finally, this text presents an overview of some of the issues that an anti-authoritarian left ought to understand in order to propose progressive alternatives. It raises a number of questions that deserve further research. These include: What are ways to create spaces of bond-building and solidarity-weaving between struggles that are not usually in conversation with one another? Examples could include Syrian-Tibetan or Tigrayan-Palestinian connections. Could platforming peripheral struggles and connecting them with one another more effectively create challenges to political and other centers of power? Given that authoritarian state and non- or multi-state actors (such as multi- and trans-national corporations and institutions) often learn from one another (for example, in the areas of surveillance tech, tools and methods of oppression, and so on), could peripheral struggles also learn from one another? These are just some of the questions that arise from this analysis, and they have become all the more urgent given the increased sophistication of tools and methods of oppression around the world.

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