

The current war in Ukraine - sketching the wider historical context

A brief introduction

In April, 2022 Kon-Flikt explained the ideological deception that was embedded in Francis Fukuyama's narrative when he [wrote about "the end of history"](#). Kon-Flikt's article provided a Proletarian Internationalist understanding of the current war as well as providing crucial background, contrasting a pro-revolutionary understanding of the last 30 years to Fukuyama's piece of ideology. This current text, background to a presentation at the Summer School in September, 2023, unashamedly aims to build on the arguments presented in Kon-Flikt's earlier post. We would also suggest that comrades could usefully examine the material referred to in [translations of material for discussion in Angry Workers](#).

At the start of the workshop, we will need to reflect on the wider context of the developments around the latest phase of the war that started with the invasion by the Russian Army in February, 2022. Failing to do this leaves us all far more vulnerable to the various confusing narratives¹ that aim to encourage the working class and its militants into practical and/or propagandist support for either the Russian or Ukrainian states and their respective political, economic and military alliances and networks.²

For the purposes of this part of the workshop, I will simply note that since 2014³ there has been continuing military conflict within the 1991 Ukraine borders. Control of areas in the South East passed to local regimes aligned to Russia. Russia also seized Crimea, reversing a decision by the Soviet Union political elite in 1954.

¹ Shortly before the invasion Angry Workers anticipated such calls in <https://www.angryworkers.org/2022/02/06/angryworkers-daily-dose-of-class-hatred-6/>. "Every trick around the concept of 'just war' has been churned out to support one or other side whenever the horrors of war start"

² This text attempts to focus on the drive to war driven both by corporations and states and to touch on its antidote, the actual and possible working class responses. It is also clear that, beyond any "political superstructure", production has reorganised and massively relocated since 1990. Dealing with this adequately would probably require a separate text of at least equal length to this one. At this point, and hopefully not causing too much distraction, I will simply list some of the most prominent developments in the last three decades of the development of the world economy -

- Switching of production from the historic metropolises to new centres
- Increasing automation/robotics
- Global supply chains
- Increasing use of ICT to manage production and workers' activity
- Demand for mineral extraction to facilitate new products and systems e.g. semiconductors
- Growth of conglomerates and transnational corporations
- Large scale growth of factory production in China

³ There is a snapshot outlining aspects of the situation in Ukraine and the other ex Soviet republics in 2014 in [2014 Guardian article](#)

A more detailed examination of the immediate situation in the war area will be delivered later in this workshop session. Two sources that comrades might find useful regarding the background in Ukraine since its emergence as a nation state in 1991 are -

- A substantial Inquiry into the subsequent “Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class” is available [here](#).
- A short summary of the processes by which “The oligarchs divide[d] Ukraine” during 1991-2014 is available in “War in Ukraine - Making sense of a senseless Conflict” (pages 25-49) by Medea Benjamin⁴ and Nicolas J.S. Davies

The Biggest Picture

The key to understanding wars and the other human-influenced disasters inflicted on the working class and dispossessed is to grasp the nature of the period that has developed since around the start of the 20th century. Industrial capitalism, with its roots in the cycle of accumulation based on creation of profit via factory-based waged labour, has penetrated every inhabited part of the world. Indeed its rapacious demand for raw material now extends to the polar regions and the ocean floor. That continuing process as the power of capital spread globally and remained dominant to the detriment of humanity and the rest of nature was characterised at its start as the epoch of “Imperialism”⁵.

The advocates of overturning the power of capital are not neutral observers, simply studying developments at each moment of the class struggle. Where groups of workers line up with the exploiters whether in the workplace or, for example, in favour of restricting migration or strengthening other elements of state control we neither pretend that such reactionary strands do not exist nor do we shrug acceptingly adopting the attitude of liberal majoritarians. The current war in Ukraine has exposed deep fault-lines even amongst those who subjectively stood in favour of the social revolution.

Since its first emergence the power of industrial capitalism has always been interlinked with the development of, and the struggle between, what earlier writers referred to as “the two great classes” of modern society - bourgeois and proletarian. For many of, if not all, the comrades attending this event, the successful revolutionary reconstitution of society by the conscious and self-organised action of the working class remains the hope for humanity and the only route to saving the eco-sphere. The outbreak of the biggest war in Europe since 1945 has reminded us of the challenges facing the whole

⁴ Medea Benjamin is a cofounder of “CODEPINK” which describes itself as “a women-led grassroots organization working to end U.S. wars and militarism, support peace and human rights initiatives, and redirect our tax dollars into healthcare, education, green jobs and other life-affirming programs”

⁵ Three classic texts from this time, are Bukharin’s “Imperialism and World Economy”, Lenin’s “Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism” and the latter part of Luxemburg’s “The Accumulation of Capital”

working class when militarism again comes to the top of the ruling-class agenda. For the advocates of the revolutionary reconstitution a new set of challenges arrive which we will return to in the final input into this discussion.

Back to basics

Fundamental to our approach are understandings that were made 175 years ago as industrial capitalism first emerged and the nature of the owning and exploited class became clear.. Returning to The Communist Manifesto, our guiding principles remain that the real essence of continuing history is the struggle between classes, workers have no country or national interests to defend and that for a new society to emerge then the unity of the working class, as a global class, needs to assert itself.

Needless to say the classic texts from the pro-revolutionary workers' movement should not be treated as "holy writ". In many cases they were written at specific places and times aimed at influencing and intervening in those particular circumstances. We do not ignore the origins of historic texts nor the changes that have taken place. However, we do not place ourselves in the tradition of those "who cannot pronounce the word 'theoretician' without a sneer" (Lenin's "What Is to be done"). Once a text has been studied and critiqued and its context taken into account then an assessment needs to be made about its ongoing usefulness.

Applying that process, pro-revolutionaries continually learn from the working class weighing up both historic legacy and theoretical insights along with conjunctural sectoral responses. In cases like the numerous wars in the last half century many on "the left" have found reasons to act as flag wavers for one or other warring faction. Let's examine the roots of that approach and reassert the ongoing applicability of responses based on "proletarian internationalism"⁶ - a refusal to side with bourgeois states and their military machines in the continuing imperialist epoch.

Anti-imperialism - reshaping the power of capital or seeking its destruction

The First World War was an early proof of the appalling reality of the barbarism of the Imperialist epoch. Harnessed by the power of militarised states the massive productive capacity was used to produce mechanised slaughter on an unprecedented scale with workers and peasants from across the globe being sucked into the meat grinder. However, just as the destructive power of capital was being shown so terribly, so the working class gave a glimpse of our potential to create a better world.

A wave of demonstrations, strikes, mutinies and ultimately revolutions ended the war and destroyed the old political order in much of Europe. For a few brief years workers,

⁶ In other texts such as [Insurgent Notes December 2022](#) and [Angry Workers April 2023](#) we refer to Revolutionary Defeatism. The term refers to a specific proletarian Internationalist approach adopted during times of war

organised in their Soviets/Councils, presented an alternative to the power of capitalism. To the immense harm of humanity, the moment was short lived. The imperialist “world order” reasserted itself and we now look back on a century of “Imperialism - the highest stage of capitalism” (the title of Lenin’s work written in 1916) - exercising its continuing domination.

During the debates following the escalation of the war in Ukraine the problems flowing from the uses of the label “anti-imperialism” have become more and more evident. The different approaches no longer exist only in leftist academic journals or discussion forums but have turned into “life and death” aspects of praxis amongst erstwhile pro-revolutionaries.

Those of us who have refused to side with either of the warring factions are accused by those siding with the Russian state of being pets of the US/Western European powers. Alternatively, we have been accused of being uncaring dogmatists by those who wish to solidarise with those supporting the military campaigns of the Ukrainian state. Laughably, both sides accuse us of being apologists for “imperialism” either of the Russian or US/NATO type. That argument leads to, often explicitly, the argument that somehow the military struggle of one or other side is essentially “anti-imperialist”.

So, not for the first time, we have to talk about “their” anti-imperialism and “ours”. Here, we again need to go back to basics. For those at the Summer School, I would suggest that the intertwined self-organisation and class consciousness of the working class lies at the heart of our hope for the future. Where arguments point to common fronts with the owners, politicians or armed forces of any state then alarm bells must ring.

A key part of that proletarian revolutionary approach to anti-imperialism was summed up in the Founding Conference of the Third International in 1919, an event that took place amidst the revolutionary wave - In the words of Boris Reinstein, of the U.S. Socialist Labor Party: “The first point is that in regard to militarism and war, the Third International rejects the concept of defense of the fatherland. ... in our century there can be no wars that are not rooted in capitalist competition. In light of the purely commercial causes of modern wars, the proletariat not only does not have the duty, it does not even have the right to support its government, even in so-called defensive wars. There is only one war that the proletariat is duty-bound to support, and that is social war, the social revolution.”

For consistent advocates of working class independence, that approach has been further validated by a century of historic experience. Numerous wars and “robbers’ peaces” have been fought to create, defend or change the boundaries of mother/fatherland nation states. The majority of the member states in the United Nations have come into being since the end of the First World War. This has happened in waves with firstly the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian empires, followed by the de-colonisation process as the system of Imperial rule by European powers ceased to be viable in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Finally, in the period since 1990

(Fukuyama's End of History!) a set of new national bourgeoisies have established their place in the exploitative pecking order. The big majority of these emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Imperialism and Anti-imperialism - Two interpretations

So, within the geopolitics of the epoch, national boundaries are drawn and redrawn but worldwide antagonism between capital and working class is the continuing fundamental reality⁷. There are two basic choices about how to relate to the creation of new states or redrawing boundaries in the current epoch. During recent years it has been necessary to return to arguments that place the distinct interests of the working class at the centre of the approach rather than strategies that encourage workers to find common ground with "their" national ruling class.

I would argue that "imperialism" describes a stage in the development of the domination of capital. It is dangerously misleading to attempt to separate out an "anti-imperialist approach" from an "anti-capitalist" approach. The commonly held view that some states are "anti-imperialist" does just that, building in a contradiction at its core.

There is a large layer of liberal thought who want to identify with "the underdog" blithely ignoring the fact that the post-liberation local national ruling class will find their place in the World Economy by enforcing exploitation in "their" territories. The liberal cheerleaders, of course, ignore the reality of class society. They also ignore the most obvious histories where the forces they support e.g. ANC (South Africa), SWAPO (Namibia), ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe) not only get their snouts in the capitalist trough but also indulge in corruption and repression as they see fit.

Parallel, and often overlapping with the liberals, are much of the left, including many who consider themselves socialists, communists or even anarchists. Excluding the liars and charlatans who will provide left cover for oppressive regimes from North Korea to Zimbabwe no honest leftist can point to any situation where the new national states have provided openings for working class power.

The historic reality is that the projects of the "national liberationists", when successful, have only ever created new states where local ruling class elements can connive to grab a few crumbs of profit from working class efforts.

There may be a few deluded leftists who believe that repeating the same process many times will produce a different output. Generally, their arguments are more subtle, pivoting

⁷ Those who are shouting "Slava Ukraini" with left wing accents really do need to explain the class benefits of restoring the Ukrainian state boundaries to the historic accident that existed in 1991. That area of control had been established after Stalin's land grabs from Poland and Czechoslovakia following the Second World War and the later transfer of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine.

on interpretations of "anti-imperialism" and the often-interlinked issue of "national self-determination". The outcome of that is to support forces and dynamics that serve to reorganise the power of capital rather than build the self-organisation and independence of the working class.

The reality of these existing or new states is that they universally act as arenas where the class of capitalists adopt the national structures, in order to grab their share of the profits within the globalised economy. In not a single instance has the power of capital been challenged, irrespective of the supposedly anti-imperialist credentials of the national liberation movements⁸.

Humans make their own history - But not in a way that can't be critiqued

During debates we have also been accused of not recognising "agency". Whilst not wanting to wander into sociological discourse I'll willingly concede that human beings "make their own history ... under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon). When some workers break strikes, attend demonstrations against immigration or argue for discriminatory practices then pro-revolutionaries do not pretend such events do not happen. Rather than merely observe and understand we can offer a criticism of the actions while presenting arguments for alternative approaches.

It is clearly the case that proletarians have been active, attempting to defend their own interests, in many of the mass uprisings in recent decades. In some cases such as the Arab Spring or the more recent overthrow of the Omar Al-Bashir regime in Sudan their presence has been a major contribution to a "critical mass" capable of enforcing a change in the political superstructure. However, the outcome of those upsurges is a change in the controlling faction. The power of capital remains undiminished.

Returning to the current war in Europe, in Russia it appears that a large part of the working class remains at least prepared to passively accept the state's war-mongering. In Ukraine, it certainly seems that a far larger proportion of the class continues to see military victory as being the best option. The power of those ideas is part of the process whereby workers slaughter or are slaughtered by fellow workers, urging others to join them. In opposing them we are not claiming any privileges over and above our fellow workers but accept that advocating for positions in support of the proletarian revolution is currently a role for a minority.

⁸ The two most recent African states to be carved out by "national liberationists" are tragic examples of the outcomes from such reorganisations. From Eritrea, there has been wave after wave of emigration attempting to flee state repression. The current departures include many trying to avoid being conscripted for the appalling military atrocities in Tigray - [recent Guardian report](#). South Sudan (formed in 2011) has been ripped apart by warring factions seeking control of its natural resources including oil. Tragically, tens of thousands of refugees who fled to Sudan are now being forced to return as their temporary refuge is now also ravaged by competing military factions - [recent PBS report](#)

Fortunately, counter-tendencies also exist in the conflict areas. In [Angry Workers report from proletarian anti-war rally in Milan](#) we highlighted the work of <https://libcom.org/tags/assemblyorgua> that maintains a blog with posts from Internationalist class struggle anarchists operating in Russia and Ukraine.

For pro-revolutionaries (and if we're not then why are we at the Summer Camp?) it is not a question of majoritarianism within our class at a given time and place. In every time and place different layers within the class have a different view of the world. For me, that is a reflection of differing levels of class consciousness. That variety of views should be no surprise if, even with a passing nod to more modern commentators, we recognise the essential validity of the argument in "The German Ideology" that it is the ideological framework of and for the ruling class that generally dominates in differing ways.

This then raises the question of how we - those of us who see the need for and possibility of a revolutionary rupture - can or should respond. Comrades living outside actual conflict zones currently enjoy at least two advantages, in varying degrees, that allow us to argue against war, militarisation and the increasing drift toward barbarism. Firstly, we do not face the level of legal restrictions and pressures faced by class siblings in the war zone. Secondly, the ideological pressure to support the war aims of "our" national ruling class, while ever present, is not as strident as in the warring states.

Some comrades have chosen to concentrate on humanitarian support to the immediate victims close to the atrocities. Ensuring that such efforts are not recouped and subverted by the local state/military regime is easier said than done.

Working with the millions of displaced people and those migrating to avoid conscription or other moves leading to co-option into the war machine are arenas where comrades can find opportunities to intervene. Seeking intersections aimed at building on and extending class resistance to the war in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus should be dealt with in other contributions in this session. Suffice it to say that resistance to speed ups and restrictions on workers activities, street demonstrations against the effects of war, desertion, sabotage, conscription avoidance, "fraternisation" across the frontlines are all activities that we could seek to at least publicise, for example, by supporting <https://libcom.org/tags/assemblyorgua>. Practically, seeking to work in our own territories for working-class action against the war such as the blocking of arms shipments or the strikes that have taken place and are planned in Italy point the way forward.

The challenges to developing an effective proletarian internationalist response will also be covered later in this session. Applying a self-denying ordinance, and refusing to explain, advocate and agitate for our perspective, would transform our Inquiries, investigations and understandings into valueless pieces of academia.

Periodisation - useful if not precise

It is impossible to neatly conceptualise the last 125 years in a sharply defined series of blocks of time. Nevertheless it feels meaningless to try and locate current circumstances such as the war in Ukraine without at least sketching out the historic developments from which it arose.

The leftist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, wrote a series of three histories detailing the development and expansion of industrial capitalism from 1789 to 1914. He later added a fourth volume, which was sub-titled “The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991”⁹. For me, the description in that last title is a worthwhile piece of periodisation.

1914 marked the completion of the early period of industrial capitalism’s geographical expansion. That period before the First World War saw the wiping away of micro-state political relics of feudalism with the unification of Italy and Germany. It also saw the state-enforced end to the official use of slavery in the USA. On the other hand, the period was deeply marked by the nature of a social system that was “red in tooth and claw” from its very emergence. Throughout Africa, local inhabitants were at least dispossessed and often, as in South West Africa or Congo, subjected to the most brutal slavery and genocide. In the USA, the victorious state machine with its quickly growing industrial capitalist base, systematically destroyed all vestiges of the native American societies, murdering in planned and ruthlessly executed campaigns extending over decades. Meanwhile, fine tuning the carve-up of imperialist gains resulted in the British creating “concentration camps” in South Africa - a model particularly copied and developed by the later German fascist regime.

In line with Hobsbawm’s schema, 1914 marked a new phase in the blood-soaked global exploitative order. The nature of inter-capitalist competition had escalated from one between individual firms via trusts and cartels to one where the interest of states and their national capitalist interests had become inseparable. Rather than crises resulting in individual enterprises collapsing, a new period opened up where World Wars would destroy capital and human beings on a massive scale.

⁹ Age of Extremes - The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991

The start of the First World War was seen by contemporary revolutionary socialists as the opening of a period of “crises, war and revolutions”. As I've mentioned above, for a few years (arguably 1917-21, although there are many interpretations) it appeared that the working class could set humanity on the path to the free association of producers. Instead, the power of capital reasserted itself. The working class was punished with systematic state repression of both the fascist and Stalinist varieties. 1929 saw the commencement of a global economic crash. There was massive hardship and deprivation for working people - the state-supervised famine in Ukraine 1932-33 (and the then Kazakh ASSR starting in 1930) is a particularly appalling and relevant episode¹⁰. The short lived prospect of a social revolution in Spain was overwhelmed in a Civil War. Elsewhere, wars in China and Ethiopia were the opening episodes for a second episode of world wide slaughter. For Left Communists, there was an understanding that the counter-revolution had arrived¹¹.

The Second World War, unlike the First, was not ended by working class struggle. Despite hopes and expectations of the minority no proletarian revolutionary wave appeared. Large parts of Europe had been devastated. The exploitative norms were restored in the Western areas under the direction of US political and economic power via the Marshall Plan. In the East, the Soviet Union regained the territories that the Russian Empire had lost and took over Königsberg in East Prussia. The remaining territories where the Red Army had taken control were transformed into so-called “People’s Democracies”. These were mirror images of the Soviet Union where the tendency towards the intertwining of state and capital reached its limit with a party/class exercising domination of production and society.

In 1945 the use of atomic weapons had shown that the imperialist dynamics had moved to a new level, presenting humanity with an increasingly existential threat. When war broke out in Korea many feared the outbreak of a super-destructive Third World War¹². In fact, the war between the USSR and their ally, the recently formed “People’s Republic of China” (PRC), and the USA and their allies under a United Nations “flag of convenience” ended in a bloody stalemate in 1953.

That set the scene for the next four decades when the competition between the blocs would be played out in a whole series of “proxy” wars away from the industrial capitalist metropolitan heartlands. These “proxy wars” were often fought on territories, in Africa or Asia, which had been part of one or other European empire or “sphere of influence”.

¹⁰ The episode in Ukraine became known as “Holodomor” meaning “death or murder by hunger”. The recent commercial movie “Mr Jones” provides a view of the catastrophe.

¹¹ We remain indebted to many fractions and comrades who strove to understand the nature of the crisis confronting humanity. In [Angry Workers on Revolutionary Defeatism](#) we acknowledged “the generations who stood firm and evaluated the decades that followed the defeat of the revolutionary wave in the early 1920s (Appel, Mattick Snr., Socialisme ou Barbarie, Cardan/Castoriades, Munis, Johnson/Forest Tendency, Situationists etc.)”

¹² During that period, such fears reappeared, with a degree of justification, around the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

The “Balance of Terror” continued to dominate the relationship between the two blocs until the Soviet Union’s inner contradictions came to the surface as it was driven out of Afghanistan, lost its grip on its military, economic and political client states and then dissolved into 15 independent states, including Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The latter was in geopolitical and economic terms far more massive than any of the other new independent states. As such, it, for example, inherited the Soviet Union’s place as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.¹³

Post 1990

So what has been the reality of the world since the end of the “balance of terror” that prevailed from the end of the Second World War (or possibly the war in Korea) until 1990? Needless to say, the ending of contradictions and antagonisms associated with the victory of liberal democratic capitalism has not taken place. Fukuyama was smart enough to recognise that and quickly recanted.

In place of any smooth progress to the endless bliss of world-wide capitalism the reality has seen the nation-states and their transnational structures perform a terrifying “dance of death” of shifting economic, political and military realignments.

Since 1945 the Soviet Union had been one of the two contending powers in the exploitative world order. Its collapse caused massive dislocations both internally and in global inter-state relations. All across the former Soviet Bloc the living standards of the working class were severely hit as both the state-owned production and welfare arrangements disintegrated. In almost every case, as the new states emerged, elements of the former party-state ruling class found their place in the privatised profit making economy and/or new state apparatus. Simultaneously, the new nation states found their places as new participants in the chaotic competition involving national and

¹³ Although until the 1990s the rivalry between the contending blocs continued to dominate global diplomacy and war (“the continuation of politics by other means” - von Clausewitz) the class struggle was not dormant.

During the 1950s and 1960s the expansion of global capitalism experienced few disruptions. The end of the 1960s saw a return to more than a decade of economic instability and open class and social struggles.

The overarching power of the US dollar had underpinned the lengthy post-war expansion. Following the USA’s long and unsuccessful entanglement in the war in Vietnam the appearance of mass movements against the war and against deep seated discrimination was the domestic backdrop to the US pulling the rug from the financial arrangements that were the basis for the post-war economic and financial settlement. That had been based on a series of structures established by the Second World War Allies in 1944 at a conference in Bretton Woods. At its centre was the power of the US Dollar and its link to the price of gold. The US withdrew from the agreement in 1971 - a thumbnail giving the background to this is at <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/operation-and-demise-bretton-woods-system-1958-1971>. Meanwhile, in Europe, the working class had already reasserted itself with mass struggles breaking out in France in 1968 and Italy’s “Hot Autumn” reaching a peak the following year.

The loss of global economic stability and the appearance of a new generation of workers resulted in the 1970s and early 1980s seeing a rebirth in large-scale struggles by the working class.

supra-national entities. The ongoing existence of that state-based system is one of the fundamental contradictions within the global economic realities.

Unsurprisingly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia into new, or restored, nation states was far from smooth. In a whole number of cases redivisions took place, often accompanied by the horrors and butchery of war, as the contending ruling classes wrestled for powers. Armenia and Azerbaijan fought wars around control of Nagorno Karabakh now known as the Artsakh Republic, Russia brought back the Chechen Republic under its control flattening the capital Grozny in the process, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were removed from Georgia after a war with Russia in 2008 and Transnistria was effectively stripped from Moldova with Russian connivance. A series of brutal conflicts and external interventions redrew the map of Yugoslavia with US sponsored settlements enforcing a messy and unstable supposed federation between the “entities” in Bosnia/Herzegovina and Kosovan independence being enforced by NATO bombing and subsequently recognised by just over half the members of the United Nations.

After more than 30 years the “aftershocks” from the collapse of the Soviet Union continue both in the form of ongoing deprivation and the results from the jockeying for position between the competing “elites”. For example, many workers are forced to migrate to support the families they leave behind - [2020 World Bank report](#), Georgia suffers from manoeuvres by both Russia and the European Union and their local supporters to draw them into their “sphere of influence” - [2023 Crisis Group Podcast](#), in both 2021 and 2022 military and civilians were killed in fighting between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - [War crimes during 2022 flare up](#).

Overall the “tectonic plates” between the rival powers, alliances and blocs shifted position as both NATO and the European Union drew in significant numbers of new member states in Central and Eastern Europe. That political and military realignment also, of course, accompanied by economic penetration by transnational corporations.

Meanwhile, China (PRC)¹⁴ has reasserted its role as a major power. By any measure it now vies with the USA as the hegemonic world power. The growth in factory production, exports and the ongoing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹⁵ have provided a framework for China to deepen its penetration into the global economy. Around its Pacific rim, the creation of artificial islands and growth of military capacity is seen as a threat to many neighbouring states. At the apex of the perceived expansionist ambitions are the recurring threats to reabsorb Taiwan into the Chinese state, a task far more significant

¹⁴ The “People’s Republic”, originally established by the military victory of the “Red Army” in 1949 and dominated by the Chinese Communist Party since then.

¹⁵ The PRC’s public consumption presentation of BRI is at <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/>.

A view of the threat as seen by the US military is at [August 2022 assessment](#)

An early view of the unfolding process is at [2018 Guardian article](#)

China’s loans to other weaker states and its role as a creditor competing with others is described [April 2023 politico article](#)

and problematic than the reabsorption of the Hong Kong and Macao territories in the late 1990s.

China is the predominant force in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) alliance, an alternative economic and political bloc to the North American and Western European dominated G7. Although clearly a junior partner to Xi's China, Putin's Russia also enjoys additional influence and opportunities via BRICS. In August, 2023 the organisation announced firm plans to add six new members - Argentina, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Ethiopia and Egypt.

The incorporation of these new states at China's instigation is not accidental given its dependence on fossil fuels and its role as a major global creditor under BRI. For example -

SCMP.com (South China Morning Post) reports that "Ethiopia has an estimated US\$13.7 billion in debt to China, much of it advanced by China Exim Bank between 2000 and 2021".

A flavour of Egypt's parallel relationship as a debtor is at - [2022 Mada Masr article](#) China's links with Iran are outlined in [August 2023 United States Institute of Peace](#). In South America the membership of both Brazil and Argentina, brings together in the BRICS framework, the two biggest economies on the continent.

Crisis and catastrophe

Throughout the period, corporations and their national backers have sought to maintain and extend their own profits. Invariably that is done at the expense of their competitors, always at the expense of the working class whose living labour is the source of the profit which is vampire capital's life blood. Entirely predictably, the tendency towards crisis never disappeared. The global crisis of 2008-09 was only mitigated by enormous state interventions and further inflating the massive and ever increasing global debt bubble¹⁶. Today, after some 15 years, the global economy awaits its next crash. Even before it hits, dire shortages push even more in the "global south" to total impoverishment and rampant inflation hits workers in "advanced economies" from Argentina to Lebanon.

Of course, the slide towards the abyss of barbarism has not been an even development during the last 100 years. From today's vantage point it appears that we have seen a dramatic acceleration since 1990. Wars without end, ecological destruction apparently bordering on the irreversible, fires, floods, famines, starvation, recurring pandemics, mass forced migrations and "strong state" reactions to them have gradually become the norm rather than the exception.

¹⁶ Recently the bubble broke through the US\$300 trillion barrier. [S&P Global Report](#) expresses concern for the effects this may have on the workings of the power of capital.

The last occurrence of global warfare had its geographical focus in Europe and around the Pacific. Already, in both arenas, the “Masters of War” are showing their willingness to drag humanity to an even more dreadful conflagration - one with the very real potential to destroy any vestige of advanced human society or even humanity itself. In the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and the ongoing meat grinder in Syria, the big powers have largely avoided direct conflicts, even when coming very close. That “red line” has been definitely crossed in Ukraine as EU/NATO provides financial, logistical and military support to Ukraine. The need for the working class to actively prove that a “better world is possible”¹⁷ has become increasingly urgent.

Here, we have arrived back at Fukuyama’s triumphalism but do acknowledge that 1990 was indeed a significant turning point. FF’s ideological illusions have been shredded by history. It is now clear that the material reality of the continuation of the global system based on profit not need has produced calamity after calamity.

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels left us with the “broad brush” formulation that unresolved class antagonisms end in “the common ruin of the contending classes”. It is perfectly imaginable that the concrete expression of such common ruin can be an accelerating slide towards both irreversible ecological destruction and a Third World War.

Striving for working class independence and unity and refusing to side with the states, alliances and blocs in Ukraine and elsewhere is an essential element of working towards an alternative to that cataclysm.

KIT
August 2023

¹⁷ A slogan that has become prominent in the “progressive” discourse in recent years. Exploring the case for possibilities, necessities and routes towards that “better world” all remain essential.