Russia and China: What is Happening Beneath the Propaganda Curtain?

As Russia announces a new gas deal with China, the voices in the US and European media are anything but delighted. The idea that Russia and China are constructing a natural gas pipeline that will transport millions of dollars worth of resources -- and from which no Wall Street or London-based corporations will make any profits -- is a sign of the changing nature of the global markets.

The reports of negotiations between US President Barack Obama and Chinese Premier Xi Jinping are causing some to be a little less nervous. The establishment of protocols for military exercises can give some relief to those who fear a possible military confrontation in the near future.

The tension, caused by the changing global economic landscape, has not faded one bit. African countries are growing closer to China. Various Latin American governments have welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin and expanded economic relations with Russia. The circles of western economic power are losing their grip.

The rise of these two new players on the global markets is being met with violence. As Ukraine grew friendlier to Russia, the elected government was overthrown and fascist violence was unleashed on the population. Conflict and suffering continues in East Ukraine.

Syria, an ally of Russia and China, has been ripped apart by a US-backed terrorist insurgency. Bombs now fall within its borders in violation of international law.

Iran, which is very close to China and growing closer to Russia, has been subjected to harsh economic sanctions and attempts to destroy its peaceful nuclear energy program.

Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Cuba are facing Washington efforts to overthrow their popular governments. High-ranking Venezuelan official Robert Serra was assassinated, and the isolated, US-backed “Venezuelan opposition” is growing more desperate and vicious.

In every corner of the world, the battle is raging between the section of the world economy controlled by Wall Street and London on the one hand, and the rising opposition to it on the other -- in which Russia and China are major players.

Current events don't fit into Cold War narratives about communism and capitalism. While the western media would have us believe that US opposition to all these various regimes is based on "human rights" concerns, this is obviously not the case.

To understand what is happening in the eastern parts of the world, and why our government is growing dangerously hostile to Russia, China, and the many countries aligning with them, one must understand a certain period of US history.

The Populist Upsurge

Following the US Civil War, there was a mass uprising of people in the United States against big business. The
coalition of “Free Soilers” and abolitionists that Lincoln had utilized to defeat the southern slave plantation owners did not dissolve after the war, but continued for several decades into a mass movement that thundered with hatred for bankers and the ultra-rich.

Unlike the “left” of current times, the majority of this movement did not have a Marxist worldview, and did not identify with the industrial working class. The majority in the movement were small farmers, who were in debt to banks and persecuted by big landowners. The movement also contained small business owners and shopkeepers who feared being crushed by the big “trusts.” Recently freed African Americans saw this movement as a potential ally. Though the early labor movement and socialists identified with these mass movements, they were not its leading force, and struggled for what little influence they had in it.

This alliance pushed for the abolition of the gold standard, and wanted an end to government protections for big business. Its leaders called for certain big economic pillars of society, such as railroads, to be taken under public ownership. This movement was also opposed to war and militarism, and formed a huge peace organization called the “Anti-Imperialist League.”

The millions who made up this massive coalition saw US intervention in Cuba and the Philippines, as well as other parts of the world, as a scheme to make money for Wall Street. Years before the powerful words of US Marine Corps General Smedley Butler, these forces had already discovered that “War is a Racket.”

The movement was very religious, and one of its principal leaders, William Jennings Bryan, was known for his opposition to Darwin’s theory of evolution. Many of the leaders of the movement were protestant Christian ministers.

This movement, which arose in the 1870s and declined in the early 1900s, was known as the “populist” movement. It seethed with hatred for the billionaires and bankers, but did not denounce “capitalism.” Instead, the target of the movement was “monopolists” and “trusts.” It wanted an “anti-monopoly government” that served “people, not money.”

Much of the rhetoric of the populist movement was hijacked by racists and fascists in the following decades, but the origins of the populist movement were anti-racist. The movement had its roots in the struggle to abolish slavery, and was the sworn enemy of the Ku Klux Klan and other neo-confederate groupings. In many instances, populists went out to fight Klansmen and racists. Many populist newspapers proclaimed racism to be tool of the big monopolies in their robbery of the people.

The “People’s Front” that the US Communist Party created during the 1930s was very inspired by this movement, and drew its rhetoric from it. William Z. Foster, the leader of the US Communist Party during the 1930s, first campaigned for William Jennings Bryan, before being won to Marxism-Leninism decades later after the Russian Revolution.

The Rise of Anti-Monopoly Governments

What do the governments of Iran, Syria, Zimbabwe, the People’s Republic of China, Venezuela, Belarus, and Russia all have in common?

On the surface, these governments are very different. Iran is an Islamic Republic based on very clear religious principles. Venezuela is a “Bolivarian Socialist Republic” that seeks to construct “21st Century Socialism.” Zimbabwe is led by African nationalist Robert Mugabe. China is led by the Communist Party, but has a vast capitalist market, and upholds “Deng Xiaoping Theory” as an alternative to planned economies that were once synonymous with communist-led states. Syria is led by the Arab Nationalist Baath Party. Belarus is led by Alexander Lukashenko, who preaches a kind of patriotic anti-capitalism. Russia is led by Vladimir Putin, who is largely considered to be a Russian nationalist.

None of these governments are ideologically identical. They all have a unique heritage, and different historical, religious, and ideological backgrounds.

But there are certain things they have in common.

All of these governments voice loud opposition to the financial monopolies of Wall Street and London, and the military aggression waged to keep their profits rolling in. All of these governments preside over a huge network of state-owned enterprises that make up a large bulk of their national economies. All of these governments face opposition from the wealthiest sectors of their respective countries, who have aligned with the United States and
want “regime change.” All of these governments also enjoy massive popularity among low-income sectors of society, and have taken big measures to improve the living standards of the people.

In Venezuela, Bolivia, and Iran, state ownership of oil resources funds the social programs that benefit the population. In most of these societies, certain services like healthcare and education are provided free of charge by the state.

These governments all came into power as a result of explosions of mass outrage, revolutions, and the political involvement of millions of people.

The Iranian revolution overthrew a western-backed dictator who was a puppet of western oil corporations. The Bolivarian revolution of Venezuela can trace its roots to the “Caracazo” uprising against Neo-Liberal privatizations. Putin’s strength is loved for combating the oligarchs who looted the country in the aftermath of the USSR’s demise. The Syrian Baath has its roots in the uprisings against French colonialism. Zimbabwe arose from an anticolonial struggle against the white settlers of “Rhodesia.”

If the late-1800s populist movement that railed against war, corruption, criminal bankers and railroad tycoons had taken power in the United States, the result would have been an economic setup much like Iran, Venezuela, Russia, or Syria. Key industries would have been nationalized. A capitalist market would have remained, but under constant fear and regulation by the state. A populist government would depend on support from a politically involved populace, as Wall Street would fight each day to overturn it.

A populist anti-monopoly government would have taken its actions in the name of morality and humanity. Populist leaders often expressed in religious terms why the power of capitalists and bankers had to be restricted and “the people” had to take priority.

The New Anti-Imperialists

Once the primary opposition to the US internationally was made up of forces that called themselves “Marxist-Leninist.” In the current period, it is a different kind of politics that is on the rise.

It’s worth noting that even the rhetoric through which the Communist Parties took power often sounded very populist, and was not the Marxist language of “surplus value” and “alienation.”

The Chinese Communist Party did not come to power on a program calling for “worker’s power” or “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The political line of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 was for a “New Democratic Revolution,” led by a “bloc of four classes” including business owners, peasants, and intellectuals, as well as industrial workers.

The 1959 Cuban revolution was not fought in response to a call for worker’s power. Fidel Castro did not proclaim the goal of socialism until 1962, and the official Soviet-aligned Communist Party in Cuba had not originally been part of the July 26th Movement.

While Marxism-Leninism tends to be highly secular, and in some cases blatantly hostile to religion, the rising bloc of global resistance to the US contains many deeply religious tendencies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded by Imam Khomeini, a man who lived a devout and humble life, and rallied his people against the evils of usury and moral decay. The Bolivarian movement of Latin America is led primarily by leaders who consider themselves to be Christians, and invoke the name of Jesus Christ and his “driving the money changers out of the temple.” The Syrian government is secular, but has become increasingly religious and pro-Islamic in the last decade. Though President Bashar Assad is Alawite, he has attended prayer in mosques, and worked to build ties with the country’s Sunni population.

However, as much as the new anti-imperialist current sweeping the globe is not Marxist-Leninist, communism has without question left its mark.

The Soviet Union no longer exists, having collapsed in the catastrophic events of 1991, but Russia would not be what it is today without it. It was the USSR’s Five-Year Plans of the 1930s that created the steel mills, oil refineries, mines, and other economic infrastructure that now strengthens the Russian economy. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia was an impoverished agrarian society. Much of the “means of production” constructed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and to be held in common by the workers are largely still state-owned.

The strength of the Chinese economy is also the huge state sector, forged in the aftermath of the 1949 revolution.
The 2008-2009 financial crisis did not have the devastating impact on the Chinese economy that it had on capitalist economies, because a huge state apparatus was mobilized to keep people in China employed. Chinese capitalists have no “economic rights.” The multi-million-member Communist Party has the final say in all matters of politics and economy. Xi’s anti-corruption campaign serves as the most recent reminder of this fact.

The Resistance Forces in the West

The communists, social democrats and anarchists who make up the western “left” have always declared the Wall Street and London monopolists their enemies. However, in modern times, all but a small minority of leftists has refused to build links with the new anti-imperialist forces emerging around the globe.

Most leftists do not cheer for the Chinese Communist Party, as it pushes around corporations like McDonald’s on behalf of the public and builds hospitals and trains in Africa. Instead, too many leftists echo the New York Times and cheer for the minority of wealthy university students in Hong Kong who “Occupy Central” with Wall Street NGOs funding them.

Likewise, leftists do not support the Syrian Arab Republic, born out of an anticolonial struggle, as its government battles Wall Street-backed takfiris. Many leftists have been cheering for the terrorists, and repeat the Pentagon line that “Assad must go.”

With the exception of Latin America, the bulk of the western left has declared almost absolute, unapologetic opposition to the emerging anti-imperialist bloc.

Just like the western left failed to build alliances internationally, it has also failed to capture the energy of rising political movements within western countries. Occupy Wall Street and the explosions of resistance to austerity throughout the world from 2008-2012 caught the leftists who traditionally lead “activism” in western countries by complete surprise. Much of the left had no idea how to relate to it, and arguably grew weaker in its aftermath.

Many leftists seem not to realize that history is not made by ideas, but by existing social forces.

In the 1860s, Karl Marx was not neutral in the US Civil War. Lincoln was no anti-capitalist, but that was not the struggle at hand. Marx and his followers like August Willich, who led union soldiers into battle, understood that the abolitionist movement and the Union Army stood for social progress. By smashing the slavocracy, history was moving forward.

The forces of resistance to Wall Street and monopoly power cannot function as they did in 1980, 1968, 1935, or 1914. In a new world, new tactics and alliances must be made.

A global explosion against Wall Street is continuing. It takes place in the Middle East, in Africa, in Asia, and is gradually finding its way into Europe and the United States. The Ferguson uprising is seen by many as a sign of things to come, and events are still unfolding in Missouri. Not since the age of the populists have states like Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska been battlegrounds of social conflict. De-industrialization, the rising police state, and the economic crisis seem to have forced them back into the center stage of US history.

The many changes in the East are forcing changes in the West, and many more are to be expected. History is marching forward at a rapid pace, and new battlefields are opening up. What ultimately results is unlikely to fulfill anyone’s preconceived notions or predictions.

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