

Prioritising U.S. Imperialism in Evaluating Latin America's Pink Tide

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Two conflicting leftist positions on Latin America's wave of progressive governments known as the Pink Tide have become increasingly well-defined over the last two decades. One position is favorable, while the other highly critical, to the extent that Pink Tide presidents—including Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula)—are sometimes put in the same category as conservative and right-wing leaders.

At the heart of these differences is the issue of imperialism. The key question that emerges from the debate has paramount implications: Is the struggle against U.S. imperialism the left's foremost priority worldwide, no matter what view is taken on the Ukraine war? If the answer is yes, then steadfast support for Pink Tide governments, which have been subjected to and resisted U.S. interventionism, is particularly compelling.

Or has globalisation set in motion other contradictions that need to be prioritised since the principal target must be global capital, and not Washington's political machinations? Furthermore, the environment, Indigenous rights, gender equality, and participatory democracy—all banners of what some call the "anti-globalisation movement"—have to be foremost in the formulation of leftist strategies and goals in the twenty-first century.¹ The Pink Tide's performance on these fronts has



President Lula and presidents Hugo Chavez and Néstor Kirchner during a meeting at Granja do Torto (January 19, 2006). By Ricardo Stuckert/PR - Agencia Brasil [11](#) - [row,column]=[2,2] (#123217), [CC BY 3.0.br](#), [Link](#).

¹ ↪ In fact, the number one priority in the world today is of an ecological nature. It may be argued, however, that real progress in halting climate change is contingent on respect for national sovereignty and slashing military spending, fundamental goals of anti-imperialism.

been far from exemplary, thus explaining the line of reasoning of those on the left staunchly critical of those governments.

Anti-Pink Tide writers often deny that the problems (and errors) of Pink Tide governments are related in any way to U.S.

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imperialism. The prominent anti-Pink Tide Uruguayan leftist Raúl Zibechi, for instance, wrote that the overthrow of Evo Morales in 2019 cannot be blamed on U.S. interventionism any more than the mass anti-neoliberal protests throughout the region in the same year can be blamed on Cuba, Venezuela, or Russia. Such accusations, according to Zibechi, contribute to the "perpetuation of the Cold War in which all actions are attributed to one of the

superpowers."² In fact, U.S.-promoted destabilisation in Bolivia dating back to the early days of the Morales government in 2006 has been well documented, as has been the role of the U.S.-backed Organization of American States in Morales's ouster.³

The thesis on the existence of many, equally nefarious imperialisms, adhered to by anti-Pink Tide writers, runs counter to the basic premise of pro-Pink Tide writers, namely, that U.S. imperialism represents the major contradiction in the world today. Anti-Pink Tide writers make little or no distinction between the destructive and detrimental effect of U.S. imperialism and that of the alleged imperialisms of Russia and China. Pink Tide nations, which are on the front lines of the struggle against U.S. imperialism, are thus viewed as simply changing one domination for another.

Those on the left who deny that progressive Latin American governments have any redeeming qualities are hardly confined to the so-called ultra-left. Indeed, the anti-Pink Tide writers cut across the entire left side of the political spectrum. They also include scholars of all disciplines as well as activists in the environmental, Indigenous rights, and feminist movements. Their common denominators are first their denial that there is anything significantly progressive about Pink Tide governments, and second their failure to judge Pink Tide leaders against the backdrop of imperialist aggression.

That said, the distinction between the pro-Pink Tide and anti-Pink Tide leftist positions is not always clear cut. To be sure, many—possibly most—of those in the first category are critically supportive of existing Pink Tide governments. While those in the second category recognise the devastating effect of U.S. intervention, they do not incorporate it in their analysis of those governments. Yet, the Pink Tide is hardly a cohesive group. Some anti-Pink Tide analysts on the left, for instance, consider Correa of Ecuador a sellout while lavishing praise on Morales; others make a similar contrast between the Sandinistas and the Venezuelan government; still others have harshly attacked Morales while praising Chávez.⁴

However, the distinction between the two categories is very much worth making. First, because the anti-Pink Tide position has undermined the effectiveness of the international solidarity movement in opposition to U.S. interventionism. And second, because exploring the differences between the two brings to the fore the issue that Marxists, almost by

² ↪ Raúl Zibechi, "Un siquiatra para los geopolíticos," *La Jornada*, November 8, 2019.

³ ↪ Linda Farthing and Thomas Becker, *Coup: A Story of Violence and Resistance in Bolivia* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), 54–59, 166–67.

⁴ ↪ Jeffery R. Webber, *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 157–272.

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definition, consider of paramount importance, namely the major contradiction—among the many that exist—and, by extension, the most important struggles in the world today.⁵

It would appear at first glance that, given the polemics about the war in Ukraine, this is not an ideal moment to write an article calling for prioritising the struggle against U.S. imperialism. I maintain just the opposite. The war in Ukraine, as horrific as it is, distracts from the larger picture, which is U.S. imperialism at the global level. Even leftists who are

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critical of both the Russian offensive and Washington for promoting the expansion of NATO are divided, however, over which of the two sides bear the brunt of the blame.⁶ Nevertheless, as I argue below, the issue of Russian intervention in the Ukrainian conflict is basically independent of the issue of the prioritisation of U.S. imperialism. That is to say, Russia might be severely condemned for its actions in Ukraine at the same time that U.S. imperialism is singled out as the greatest threat to world peace and progressive change. For this reason, the left, and progressives in general, cannot wait until the Ukrainian conflict is resolved (even

assuming that it will be) before they clearly confront the broader implications of U.S. imperialism. An examination of the Pink Tide and its relations with Russia, China, and the United States opens a window of opportunity to determine whether the hegemonic status of U.S. imperialism negates the validity of the “many imperialisms” thesis, or is compatible with it.

Atilio Borón on U.S. Imperialism

The prominent Argentine political scientist Atilio Borón prioritises the issue of imperialism while at the same time staunchly supporting Pink Tide presidents—from Venezuela's Maduro to Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega and Ecuador's Correa, all of whom are highly questioned by anti-Pink Tide leftists. A look at Borón's speeches and writings sheds light on the tight connection between the prioritisation of anti-imperialism and support for the Pink Tide, as perceived by a leading representative of the anti-imperialist Latin American left.

Borón argues that even while the United States is on the decline—as shown by the rise of the Pink Tide in its own

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backyard—the perniciousness of U.S. imperialism is more evident than ever. For years, Borón says, following the fall of the Soviet Union, “when someone spoke of imperialism they were looked at derisively and told you're living in the 60s.” He adds that “people would say globalisation has done away with all that.” Indeed, this

⁵ ↪ Marxist dialectics recognizes the ever-changing preeminence of a given contradiction in the framework of totality, in accordance with the “law of motion.” Bertell Ollman, “The Eight Steps in Marx's Dialectical Method,” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 99–105.

⁶ ↪ I have argued elsewhere (as have others) that Vladimir Putin had multiple motives for intervening in Ukraine, but the most important was national security considerations. See Steve Ellner, “The Debate on the Left over Whether to Raise the Issue of NATO Expansionism in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, March 12, 2022.

statement by Borón lends itself to the view that leftist theorising on globalisation often holds the left back from devising an anti-imperialist analysis, with devastating effects (as Zhun Xu has persuasively argued).⁷

Borón goes on to point out that, in the twenty-first century, “the reality of imperialism has set in, to the extent that Washington strategists now talk of ‘empire.’” Not only is imperialism more evident than in previous decades, but it is also, in many ways, more brutal. “What happened when Salvador Allende was president in Chile was tough, but was a child’s game compared to Venezuela,” Borón says.⁸

Like other pro-Pink Tide writers, Borón highlights the importance of geopolitics as well as the successes of Pink Tide nations in challenging U.S. imperialist dominance. For him, the importance of the Pink Tide and anti-imperialism in the region can only be understood by taking into account the overriding importance that Washington policymakers attach to Latin America from a strategic viewpoint—though they seldom publicly admit it. Borón paraphrases Zbigniew Brzezinski, who said something to the effect that “the United States established its primacy like no other empire in history because those nations were all threatenable by land, or at least short distances.” Borón then points out that Washington strategists refer to the Western hemisphere as a “big island,” with the United States “at the head”: “The security of the United States depends on the solidity of the different parts of the island.” In an obvious reference to the Pink Tide, Borón says “if countries [in the hemisphere] open any crack, if anti-Americanism flourishes or if the parts are not willing to embrace U.S. foreign policy, then U.S. security is greatly endangered.”⁹

Like many other staunch defenders of Pink Tide governments, Borón subordinates criticisms of Pink Tide governments to the need to confront imperialism. His logic is as follows:

*With all the defects Daniel Ortega may have, the United States doesn't like him.... When the empire doesn't like someone he [or she] must be doing something good. When there is ideological confusion, as Cristina [Fernández de Kirchner] recommends, look to the North. If the United States is moving in this direction, then we have to go in the opposite one. That's because the empire never improvises.*¹⁰

Certainly, the enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend, as the anti-Pink Tide writers are quick to point out. But throughout his career, Borón has been correct in pointing to the ongoing overriding importance of anti-imperialism and refuting the claims that the ebbs in those struggles signified “the end of the anti-imperialist cycle” or the “end of the Pink Tide.”¹¹ Writers on both sides of the political spectrum made such a claim following the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 and again following the Pink Tide setbacks beginning with the defeat of the Peronists at the polls in Argentina in 2015.

Imperialism versus Globalisation

As Borón notes, globalisation both in theory and practice tends to cloud the imperialist actions of the United States. Indeed, transnational capital, by transcending the nation-state, appears to be incongruent with the concept of

⁷ ↪ Zhun Xu, “[The Ideology of Late Imperialism: The Return of the Geopolitics of the Second International](#),” – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, November 2021.

⁸ ↪ Atilio Borón, “[América Latina en el contexto del imperialismo](#),” YouTube video, 1:19:17, June 22, 2017.

⁹ ↪ Atilio Borón, “[América Latina en el contexto del imperialismo](#).”

¹⁰ ↪ Atilio Borón, “[América Latina en el contexto del imperialismo](#).”

¹¹ ↪ Atilio Borón, “[América Latina en el contexto del imperialismo](#).”

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imperialism, at least by V. I. Lenin's definition, which is territorially based. Some globalisation theorists on the left have predicted that since transnational capital has become dominant vis-à-vis national capital, the emerging transnational state (comprised of organisations such as the G7, World Trade Organization, and so on) is in the process of replacing the nation-state, which is the epicentre of imperialism. J. Z. Garrod, for instance, asks whether transnational

capital "can be theorised through concepts of imperialism, given the extent to which these conceptions remain tied to a notion of space rooted in national geopolitical structures."¹²

Globalization theorists who emphasise the emergence of a "transnational state" may have jumped the gun. Not long ago, they viewed the Trans-Pacific Partnership as evidence that the transnational state was well on its way to becoming hegemonic, just as transnational capital had become.¹³ But the proposal came and went. Although transnational capital may have become hegemonic, the nation-state is not necessarily on its way out. An extended time lag could separate transnational capital's alleged rise to dominance and a dominant transnational state that responds mainly to its interests. Such a class-state lag characterised the centuries-long transition from feudalism to capitalism.

David Harvey presents another argument on globalisation that places in doubt the applicability of the concept of

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imperialism in the twenty-first century. He contends that capital mobility, which has caused production on a massive scale to be relocated to the Global South (particularly East Asia), has produced "shifting hegemonies within the world system," and that the flows associated with imperialism outlined by Lenin are now "more complicated and constantly changing direction."¹⁴ In public conferences over the last several years, Harvey declared

that the notion of imperialism is a "straightjacket" in that it impedes the theorisation of globalisation in the twenty-first century.¹⁵

Too much of the discussion of twenty-first century imperialism revolves around projections into the future rather than realities of the present. Thus the "many imperialisms" thesis anticipates that, with the alleged restoration of capitalism in China, that nation will become an aggressive imperialist power. Similarly, some globalisation theorists argue that, with the hegemony of transnational capital, the transnational state will inevitably replace the nation-state. Both these predictions are future possibilities, but the left needs to devise strategies based on the present, not hypothetical scenarios. At the moment, Washington wields extraordinary power, and all too often acts to promote its own territorially based interests, for instance, safeguarding the supremacy of the dollar.

¹² ↪ Z. Garrod, "A Critique of Panitch and Gindin's Theory of American Empire," *Science and Society* 79, no. 1 (2015): 49.

¹³ ↪ William I. Robinson, "Debate on the New Global Capitalism: Transnational Capitalist Class, Transnational State Apparatuses, and Global Crisis," *International Critical Thought* 7, no. 2 (2017): 172.

¹⁴ ↪ David Harvey, "A Commentary on *A Theory of Imperialism*," *A Theory of Imperialism*, by Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 169.

¹⁵ ↪ Salar Mohandesi, "[The Specificity of Imperialism](#)," *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 1, 2018; John Bellamy Foster, "Late Imperialism: Fifty Years After Harry Magdoff's *The Age of Imperialism*," *Monthly Review* 71, no. 3 (July–August 2019): 8–9.

Furthermore, globalisation has hardly clouded the North-South divide along the lines that Harvey suggests. Just because Mexico's Carlos Slim has become one of the richest people in the world does not mean that Mexico has reduced its gaps with the United States from an economic, social, or military viewpoint. This is also the case with other nations of the Global South, with the exception of China. Massive immigration to the United States and Europe, for instance, is a clear indication that enormous income gaps continue to exist between the working class of the North and that of the South.

“Many Imperialisms” and the Pink Tide

The recognition of U.S. imperialism as the world's major contradiction has fundamental implications for leftist strategy—two, in particular. First, in the realm of foreign policy, those political parties and governments (Russia, for example) that confront Washington but do not represent a force in favor of socialism, and furthermore carry out certain ethically and politically questionable actions, do not necessarily get thrown in the same category with the United States and its allies. The left needs to highlight the distinctions between the foreign policy of these nations and that of the United States. Second, the criticism of progressive governments (the Pink Tide governments, for example) has to be contextualised in the face of imperialist hostility, and their positive role in the anti-imperialist struggle needs to be emphasised.

The anti-Pink Tide leftists, who see Moscow and Beijing as no better than Washington, do not subscribe to this line of thinking. The British Marxist scholar Mike Gonzalez, for instance, writes that “not just the United States but also China, Russia,” and other capitalist nations “are waiting to seize [Venezuela's] enormous oil, gas, and mineral wealth under the complacent eye of an openly neoliberal government,” that is, the Maduro government.¹⁶ Gonzalez also accuses Nicaragua's Ortega of delivering “the country into the hands of Chinese multinationals.”¹⁷

Though Gonzalez and other anti-Pink Tide writers on the left do not let Washington off the hook for its imperialist actions, neither do they credit Maduro, Morales, Correa, Ortega, and other Pink Tide leaders for confronting U.S. imperialism since, after all, they are merely exchanging one imperialism for another. Gonzalez accuses some leftists, myself included, of ignoring the investments coming into Pink Tide countries from China—“now the region's second largest investor”—and the alleged corruption associated with Chinese capital in Venezuela.¹⁸

Maristella Svampa is a leading non-Marxist, left-leaning scholar who also views ties with China as no better than dependency on the United States. The arguments put forward by Svampa, who is far from being a Washington apologist, make evident that the anti-Pink Tide viewpoint is not confined to any particular political stripe on the left. According to Svampa, the original hope for a “multi-polar world” was shattered by “the accentuation of unequal exchange” between China and Latin America.¹⁹ She denounces the increased dependence of all Latin American countries, left and right alike, on non-processed commodity exports, which is partly a result of China's insatiable need for raw materials. For Svampa, Pink Tide governments are in some ways worse than the neoliberal ones that preceded them, and virtually without redeeming qualities. Like many other anti-Pink Tide writers on the left, Svampa says little of the hostile

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¹⁶ ↩ Mike Gonzalez, “[Being Honest About Venezuela](#),” *Jacobin*, July 8, 2017.

¹⁷ ↩ Mike Gonzalez, *The Ebb of the Pink Tide: The Decline of the Left in Latin America* (London: Pluto, 2019), 2.

¹⁸ ↩ Gonzalez, *The Ebb of the Pink Tide*, 111–12.

¹⁹ ↩ Maristella Svampa, *Neo-Extractivism in Latin America: Socio-environmental Conflicts, the Territorial Turn, and New Political Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 18.

treatment afforded Pink Tide governments by Washington and its allies. In her latest book, which is highly critical of Pink Tide governments, she says nothing of it at all.²⁰

Is the New Cold War a Re-Run of the First World War?

The main point of reference for anti-Pink Tide, anti-China Marxists is Lenin's economic analysis of the pre-1914 European imperialist powers, though empirical studies such as that of Minqi Li in *Monthly Review* point to fundamental differences between the economy of those nations and that of China today. Basic discussion revolves around economics, such as the unrestrained drive for super-profits (which Li claims is the defining characteristic of imperialism according to Lenin, and is a driving force that does not apply to China)²¹ The political and military dimensions of imperialism, however, are largely left out of the debate by those on both the right and the left. These dimensions—the political and military ones—as applied to Latin America's Pink Tide demonstrate the fallacy of the “many imperialisms” thesis.

There is no need to convince Monthly Review readers of the destructiveness of the political and military aspects of U.S. imperialism, consisting of actions and policies that are hardly matched by those of Russia and China. Indeed, the Russian and Chinese military deployments that are classified by Washington politicians and pundits as examples of imperialist aggression are largely confined to their borders, as in the case of Ukraine and Taiwan. This stands in sharp contrast with U.S. military interventionism, which goes far beyond its “backyard.”

Just a few facts regarding the political and military dimensions of U.S. imperialism are needed to show that the United States is in a class by itself, and why the left needs to prioritise anti-imperialism: its maintenance of 750 military bases in 80 countries and colonies throughout the world outside of its borders; substantive support for numerous right-wing military coups against governments considered hostile to U.S. interests (many of which are progressive); direct military interventions as well as covert interventions; sanctions against countries considered adversaries that amount to veritable blockades; an astronomical military budget with a ripple effect throughout the world; and extensive political, economic, and military support for Israel (which contributes in a major way to the destabilisation of the Middle East, not to mention the atrocities committed against Palestinians), to name only a few.

A central argument of the anti-China writers across the political spectrum is that Chinese imperialism may not be as

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aggressive as that of the United States, but only because it is at an incipient stage. One position on the left, for instance, views China as a case of “imperialism under construction.” Leftist analyst Esteban Mercatante states that “even though China lacks the global police power of the United States...it can be characterised as an imperialism under construction

which means the development of many dimensions that permit it to project an interventionist capacity equivalent to that of other imperialist nations such as Great Britain and Japan.”²²

²⁰ ↪ Svampa, *Neo-Extractivism in Latin America*.

²¹ ↪ Minqi Li, “China: Imperialism or Semi-Periphery?,” *Monthly Review* 73, no. 3 (July–August 2021): 50–58.

²² ↪ Esteban Mercatante, “El lugar de China en el orden mundial,” YouTube video, 1:11:33, November 12, 2020.

A more damning characterisation of China comes from the “just wait and see” argument put forward by Guardian editor

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Simon Tisdall, in his 2021 article, “In China's New Age of Imperialism.” Tisdall claims that China is “shifting to empire phase two,” which, once dominant, will have a powerful military component and is “potentially more dangerous” than previous

empires.²³ This argument ignores the law of uneven development, which has historically meant that countries like Germany and Japan, in their drive to “catch up,” were more aggressive than their imperialist rivals. If China (along with Russia) were simply attempting to catch up to and surpass the United States within a system of inter-imperialist rivalry, then one would expect it to be more bellicose at the global level, not less.

The defence of Pink Tide countries' national sovereignty by Russia and China and their explicit support for a multipolar world have no equivalent in the pre-First World War period of inter-imperialist rivalry. While Washington accuses China of coming to the aid of authoritarian and corrupt regimes in Africa (as if the United States does not have a long, sordid history of doing the same), in Latin America there are ideological implications to the Russian and Chinese presence that are favorable to the left. This dimension is a far cry from Russia's and China's alleged “bid to make the world safe for dictatorship” by promoting an “alliance of autocracies,” as the New York Times and Washington Post claim.²⁴

Other scholars have pointed out that China “has friendlier and more cooperative relations with the countries that have leftist and centre-left regimes...such as Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and somewhat less friendly but still respectful cooperative relations with countries...led by more conservative, pro-US regimes.”²⁵ However, these conservative regimes did not always reciprocate with an equal degree of “respectfulness.” This was the case of Jair Bolsonaro and those in his inner circle who accused China of desiring world domination and insinuated that the country was responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

One example of support for progressive principles in the area of foreign policy is the forums held between China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, the latter being an organisation championed by Pink Tide presidents and based on a progressive approach to Latin American integration. An example of Russian and Chinese

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commitment to the defence of national sovereignty came in the form of financial support for the heavily indebted Maduro government at a time when its survival was placed in doubt by the Trump administration's destabilisation campaign, and when Venezuelan opposition leaders, at least initially, vowed to tear up the nation's contracts with both Russia and China.²⁶ Initiatives like these place into doubt the validity of the “many imperialisms” thesis.

Certainly, no equivalent to international relations conducted along these lines can be found in the foreign policy of the pre-1914 imperialist powers of Europe.

²³ ↪ Simon Tisdall, “In China's New Age of Imperialism, Xi Jinping Gives Thumbs Down to Democracy,” *Guardian*, December 12, 2021.

²⁴ ↪ Steven Lee Myers, “An Alliance of Autocracies? China Wants to Lead a New World Order,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2021; Editorial Board, “Russia and China Announce a Bid to Make the World Safe for Dictatorship,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 2022.

²⁵ ↪ Richard L. Harris and Armando A. Arias, “China's South-South Cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Journal of Developing Societies* 32, no. 4 (2016): 522.

²⁶ ↪ Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, “Extra-regional Actors in Latin America: The United States is not the Only Game in Town,” *Prism* 8, no. 1 (2019): 106.

Washington pundits claim that Russian and Chinese policymakers support the Pink Tide not out of a belief in any lofty principle, but as a result of geopolitical calculations. These nations' backing of progressive governments is seen as self-serving, particularly as Russia strives to become, in the words of a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace director, "the go-to country for all those unhappy with U.S. global dominance."²⁷ This claim regarding Russian motives belies what is really taking place. So does the appearance of rapport between Moscow and the right-wing ilk of Donald Trump, Fox News, and Marine Le Pen.

In Latin America's highly polarised political setting, the lines are clearly drawn. The Chinese and Russians—since Xi Jinping became president in 2013—have been aligned with progressive governments in Latin America. In contrast, conservative and right-wing governments in the region have been close allies of the United States (dutifully following Washington's orders, for instance, to promote regime change in Venezuela) and, in some cases, have expressed hostility toward U.S. adversaries, particularly Russia and China. Thus, despite Moscow's inconsistencies and China's apparently apolitical approach to foreign policy, there is a principle at stake that clearly distinguishes Russia and China from the United States: espousal of multi-polarism as illustrated, for example, by their joint support for the "democratisation of international relations."²⁸

With the continued decline of the United States on all fronts (other than the military one), Russia's and China's positions in the world may change. Li, for example, does not discard the possibility—albeit remote—that China goes from being a "semi-peripheral" nation to an imperialist one.²⁹ The left in the United States and elsewhere, however, cannot analyse world events on the basis of hypotheses regarding what friends and allies in the present may look like in the distant, or even medium-term, future.

The banners of national sovereignty and a multipolar world raised by Beijing and Moscow create opportunities for leftist governments such as those of the Pink Tide and facilitate their navigation in a hostile world that lacks powerful governments committed to revolutionary transformation. That said, Pink Tide governments have no pretence of emulating the domestic policies or economic model associated with either China or Russia (unlike the case of the pro-Moscow world communist movement in the post-1917 period).

The Anti-Pink Tide Position on the Left: What It Means in Practice

The issue of the prioritisation of anti-imperialism is not confined to academic debate or the media; it has played out in conflicts throughout the region. In several countries, the anti-Pink Tide position—the one that leaves U.S. imperialism out of the analysis—was used to great effect during the right-wing pushback that began in 2015. Leftists who adhered to this line of thinking went beyond criticising Pink Tide governments for any specific shortcoming and staunchly condemned them without recognising their progressive qualities (such as their anti-neoliberal policies), strengthening the hand of the radical right in the process.

One example was the refusal of a major faction of the anti-neoliberal Indigenous movement headed by self-proclaimed "ecological leftist" Yaku Pérez in Ecuador to support Correa's party in the second round of presidential elections in 2021,

²⁷ ↪ Dmitri Trenin, as quoted in Angela Stent, "Putin's World," *The Crisis with Russia*, ed. Nicholas Burns and Jonathon Price (Washington: Aspen Institute, 2014), 56.

²⁸ ↪ Kremlin, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," February 4, 2022.

²⁹ ↪ Li, "China: Imperialism or Semi-Periphery?," 73–74.

which sealed the victory of neoliberal banker Guillermo Lasso. At one point, Pérez declared, in an off-the-mark reference to Correa's movement, "a banker is preferable to a dictatorship." Pérez's reason for not taking sides in the election was that, as president, Correa had opened the heavily Indigenous Yasuní National Park to oil drilling and had suppressed protests against the project. But in doing so, Pérez ignored Correa's anti-imperialist credentials. While Pérez's supporters attempted to discredit Correa's populist domestic policies, it would have been more difficult for them to have found fault with his anti-imperialist initiatives. In 2009, he ordered the United States to leave the Manta military base around the same time that Ecuador joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), which represents a radical brand of Latin American integration. As a candidate in the 2021 elections, Pérez, who some pundits claimed was to the left of Correa, called for trade deals with the United States while denouncing China's "aggressive policies around extractivism and human rights."³⁰

The anti-Pink Tide analysis coming from the left also had a devastating effect in the case of the 2019 overthrow of Morales. While most leftist and social movement adversaries of the Morales government joined the resistance to the semi-fascist regime that succeeded it, others refused to recognise that what took place was a coup. This was the case with Pablo Solón, Morales's former ambassador to the United Nations who broke with him over his developmentalist plans for the Indigenous Tipnis rainforest. Solón's ecological critique—which included opposition to GMOs, biofuels, and mega-dams—eclipsed the issue of U.S. imperialism as well as neofascism, both of which played a key role in the coup. Solón hailed the street protests that broke out against Morales's re-election in October 2019 that led to the coup, claiming that Morales was "addicted to power."³¹ Following the coup, Solón, who identified himself as a leftist, opposed allowing Morales to return to Bolivia and naively and erroneously predicted that the right-wing de facto president Jeanine Áñez would accept Indigenous cultural symbols, claiming "the government and the entire society wants peace."³²

The pro- versus anti-Pink Tide positions have also impacted the international solidarity movement. Even while many harsh critics of the Pink Tide denounce U.S. imperialism in no uncertain terms, such critics do not populate the anti-sanctions solidarity movement in significant numbers.³³ It might be argued that the Cuban and Venezuelan governments prefer working with anti-sanctions movement leaders who are politically aligned with them, and that this support for Pink Tide governments does not extend to the rank-and-file of those movements. Yet, William Camacaro, a long-time Venezuelan solidarity activist, told me: "Relentlessly attacking progressive governments dampens the spirit of anyone inclined to work to oppose the sanctions." Nevertheless, he added, "If you look at the highly divided U.S. left, it's the groups that are sympathetic to the Maduro government whose members are most active in the anti-sanction movement here in the U.S."³⁴

This is not to say that criticism of Pink Tide governments should be off the table or that the Pink Tide has always adhered to progressive policies. For instance, Correa's anti-imperialist credentials do not let him off the hook for overreacting to the protests of Indigenous groups against ecologically damaging mega-projects. Indeed, the Pink Tide's pros and cons cannot be placed on a balancing scale when the cons include issues of principle regarding violations of basic rights. In

³⁰ ↪ Brendan O'Boyle, "[Yaku Pérez: The New Face of Ecuador's Left?](#)" *Americas Quarterly*, February 1, 2021.

³¹ ↪ Juan Karita, "Evo Morales Returns Triumphant to Bolivia After Exile," *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2020.

³² ↪ Pablo Solon and Kevin Young, "[After Evo: As Right-Wing Senator Declares Herself President, What's Next for Bolivia?](#)," interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, November 13, 2019.

³³ ↪ I make this statement partly on the basis of my experience in the Venezuelan solidarity movement, and specifically my interaction with over a score of solidarity groups throughout the United States and Canada in the latter half of 2018.

³⁴ ↪ William Camacaro, interview by author, February 19, 2022.

Latin America stands out as the only region in the world where numerous progressive governments committed to anti-neoliberalism challenge U.S. hegemony.

addition, as Fidel Castro warned shortly prior to his death, imperialism cannot be blamed for all of a nation's problems or used to cover up its errors. Finally, the condemnation of a government pitted against Washington does not always preclude effective solidarity work in opposition to U.S. interventionism, such as in the

case of the Ukrainian conflict.

Latin America's Precarious Uniqueness

The string of progressive electoral triumphs over the last year or so in Honduras, Chile, Colombia, and Brazil confirms a central point of this article. Latin America stands out as the only region in the world where numerous progressive governments committed to anti-neoliberalism challenge U.S. hegemony. Some sectors on the left harshly and repeatedly attack these governments, sometimes with valid arguments regarding their shortcomings and limitations. Their criticisms, however, are more plausible in the area of domestic policies—especially the failure to promote structural changes—than in the area of foreign policy.

Nowhere is the erroneousness of their line of thinking more evident than in the case of recently elected Brazilian president Lula da Silva, whose role in international affairs is of particular concern in Washington. When first elected president in 2002, Lula immediately calmed market fears by renewing all agreements with the IMF, but his recognition of Palestine in 2010 on the basis of 1967 borders, and support for a new international currency to rival the dollar, alarmed President Barack Obama and angered many in Washington. With its clout now in decline, Washington has even more reason to fear Lula's firm position on these issues and his call for a multipolar world.³⁵ Brazil, along with other recent Pink Tide governments, bucked Washington by re-establishing relations with Caracas, thus reversing policies successfully pushed by the United States throughout the region in favor of regime change in Venezuela. Colombian president Gustavo Petro, after snubbing Secretary of State Antony Blinken on his official visit to Bogotá in October 2022 by censuring Washington's Cuba policy, traveled to Venezuela twice to meet with Maduro.

This sea change in Latin America's position in international politics is ignored by the anti-Pink Tide writers on the left, as well as in the upbeat public statements issued by Washington. But it is a major development that needs to be incorporated and emphasised in any critical analysis of progressive governments in the region. The recent right-wing pushback, consisting of the soft coup against left-leaning Peruvian president Pedro Castillo in December 2022 and subsequent disruptions in Brasilia, Brazil, in January 2023, which outmatched those of January 6, 2021, in Washington, clearly demonstrates the need for the left to identify and distinguish between friends and enemies.

Conclusion

Most political scientists now reject the notion (dating back to Immanuel Kant) that democratic nations are more peaceful in their international relations than undemocratic ones. But a related postulate serves as the bedrock of neoconservative thinking and guides U.S. foreign policy in general: that democracies are peaceful in their relations with other democratic nations, but are forced to emulate the aggressive behaviour of non-democratic ones (allegedly, Russia

³⁵ ↩ Steve Ellner, "[What Worries the U.S. Most About Lula](#)," *Consortium News*, November 3, 2022.

Anti-Pink Tide writers fail to distinguish between U.S. actions and those of Russia and China, and at the same time minimise the differences between progressive and conservative Latin American governments.

and China).³⁶ None other than Jimmy Carter disapprovingly called this strategy “fighting fire with fire.”³⁷ The case of the Pink Tide is particularly telling in that it so obviously puts the lie to this line of reasoning. In fact, the contrast could not be starker. The United States destabilises progressive governments in Latin America in the name of the “responsibility to protect” and

“humanitarian intervention.” Russia and China come to the defence of these same governments in the name of the principle of national sovereignty. This is hardly a case of Washington emulating the wicked.

Similarly, anti-Pink Tide writers fail to distinguish between U.S. actions and those of Russia and China, and at the same time minimise the differences between progressive and conservative Latin American governments. These writers question

The left needs to highlight the importance of Maduro's success in crafting a strategy to survive the brutal campaign engineered from Washington to starve and intimidate the country into submission. Such recognition does not exempt Maduro from criticism, but it does represent a critique of those anti-Pink Tide writers and political leaders on the left who minimise or completely ignore the Pink Tide's positive features.

the progressiveness of the Pink Tide by focusing on its social and economic policies, but the nationalistic nature of its foreign policy is hard to debate.

Moreover, from a leftist viewpoint, the “many imperialisms” thesis as applied to foreign policy falls flat for two reasons. First, the defence of national sovereignty and self-determination in the face of interventionism from the North was a cause proclaimed by Lenin (and Marx), which, in the era of

globalisation, is especially relevant. Second, in Latin America, Russia and China (though perhaps to a lesser extent) have aligned themselves with progressive governments while Washington is closely allied with rightist ones in the context of the extreme political polarisation that has characterised the region in the twenty-first century.

The prioritisation of anti-imperialism as discussed in this article has another implication for leftist strategy that especially applies to Venezuela under Maduro (as well as Cuba). The left needs to highlight the importance of Maduro's success in crafting a strategy to survive the brutal campaign engineered from Washington to starve and intimidate the country into submission. Such recognition does not exempt Maduro from criticism, but it does represent a critique of those anti-Pink Tide writers and political leaders on the left who minimise or completely ignore the Pink Tide's positive features.³⁸ Indeed, this success in resisting imperialist aggression and interventionism characterises the Pink Tide in general, which has displayed a staying power that, for a bloc of nations, is without precedent on the continent.

³⁶ ↩ These formulations are known as “democratic peace theory.”

³⁷ ↩ Joshua Muravchik, “Scoop’ Jackson at One Hundred: The Conscience of a Neoconservative Giant,” *Commentary* 134, no. 1 (2021): 27.

³⁸ ↩ In 2020, the Venezuelan Communist Party broke with the Maduro government and largely placed it in the same category as the neoliberal opposition. In doing so, the party downplayed the issue of anti-imperialism, as I discuss in a forthcoming article for *Science and Society*, “Objective Conditions in Venezuela, Maduro's Defensive Strategy and Contradictions among the People.”

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❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review in March 2023.

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