

Public Opinion and Imperialism*

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A New York Times News Service report reproduced in The Telegraph of Kolkata (May 7), discusses the findings of a global public opinion survey carried out by the Bennett Institute of Public Policy of Cambridge University. These show that the Ukraine conflict had shifted public sentiment “in developed democracies in East Asia and Europe as well as the United States of America, uniting their citizens against both Russia and China and shifting mass opinion in a more pro-American direction”; by contrast “outside this democratic bloc, the trends were very different”. For a decade before the Ukraine war, public opinion across a vast span of countries stretching from continental Eurasia to the north and west of Africa, had become more favourable to Russia even as western public opinion became more hostile; the Ukraine war apparently has made little difference to this fact. And the same is also true of public opinion vis-à-vis China.

While this divergence between people’s sympathies in the two parts of the world is striking, the explanation offered for it in the report is quite banal: it points to what it calls a “divergence in fundamental values”. It is not only the “oppressive” and “authoritarian regimes” of the developing world whose perceptions differ from those of the “democratic and liberal” advanced countries; even the peoples of the former appear to be unsympathetic to western powers, and this is because they have very different fundamental values. The people of the third world in other words are not with the west because they have values that do not appreciate the importance of democracy, civil liberties, secularism, and so on, which is why they support Russia and China.

The corollary drawn for US foreign policy is that it should woo, rather than shun, third world “illiberal” regimes like those in Turkey or India. The suggestion is that such regimes, while differing from western values, are generally in sync with the mood of third world peoples.

What this analysis ignores is that the US has never shunned such regimes anyway; besides, it is a calumny to suggest that the values of the people of the third world are in sync with such regimes. In fact, on the contrary, whenever they have elected regimes that work on their behalf, to further their interests, the US has worked directly or indirectly to topple such popularly-elected democratic regimes through promoting revolts or coup de etats. The examples of Guatemala (Arbenz), Iran (Mossadegh), Indonesia (Soekarno), Chile (Allende), Brazil (Goulart), Congo (Lumumba), Burkina Fasso (Sankara) are just a few that immediately come to mind; in addition it has directly or indirectly supported the assassination of popular leaders who were leading their peoples to national liberation, leaders such as Eduardo Mondlane, Amilcar Cabral, and others.

Such an analysis recommending even stronger US support for third world authoritarianisms, arises if one closes one’s eyes to the real reason behind third world people’s hostility to western powers, including on the Ukraine War; and this lies in their opposition, whether informed or instinctive, to western imperialism based on their lived experience. And third world governments, including even authoritarian

ones allied to the US, are often forced to take cognisance of this fact, which is why they express sympathy for Russia in the Ukraine War.

On the other side, thanks inter alia to the barrage of propaganda to which they are subjected through the corporate-controlled media, of which the NYT piece under discussion is itself an example, public opinion in the west is manipulated into supporting imperialism.

This fact however is changing, as is clear from the spate of strikes that workers in the European Union, are currently engaged in, to protest against the erosion in their living standards through inflation, for which they blame the Ukraine War with good reason. The prolongation of this war, they realise, is entirely because of the actions of their own governments.

What is significant however is the large-scale betrayal of the people in the west by their political parties, barring a few exceptions, which have lined up behind the US. Their support for the US has gone to a point where even the revelation by Seymour Hersh that the US was responsible for blowing up the Nord Stream gas pipeline, in order to scuttle any possibility of Germany obtaining its gas from Russia even in the future, has caused not a flutter; it has been more or less blocked out by the media not only in the US but also in the European Union.

This complete ignoring of the interests of the people by political parties, including by parties that claim to speak on behalf of the working class and have traditionally enjoyed the support of the working class, is reminiscent of the eve of the First World War, when the leadership of the Second International in each belligerent country supported the war effort of “its own bourgeoisie”. When war credits were being voted in the German parliament in 1914, the mighty Social Democratic Party of Germany which had as many as 86 daily newspapers, voted in favour. The sole vote against was by Karl Liebknecht who had then gone on to found the German Communist Party before being martyred along with Rosa Luxemburg.

Today it is not just the Social Democrats, but even large swathes of the radical European Left, that stand behind the German government’s support for Ukraine against Russia. They put forward two arguments, one general and one specific. The general argument states that, far from the war being an outcome of western imperialism, the west is backing Ukraine in a war against Russian imperialism, that Russia is an aggressive imperialist power.

But even if we ignore the entire background to the current war, namely, the “maidan” coup against Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, engineered by the American “neo-cons”, and the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine because of its suppression of the Russian-speaking majority, there is one simple fact that shows who is responsible for the war. The Minsk agreement which could have prevented the war and which Russia had agreed to and adhered to, was torpedoed by the English and the Americans. In fact, it now turns out from Angela Merkel’s admission (which she has subsequently withdrawn because it was embarrassing to the west), that the Minsk agreement was motivated entirely to buy time for Ukraine so that it could properly arm itself. Accepting the Minsk agreement as Russia did can hardly be considered a symptom of Russian imperialism.

The specific argument states that since Russia invaded Ukraine, it must be held squarely responsible for the ongoing war. This too however lacks substance; while invasion is not to be endorsed, it cannot be seen in isolation from the entire set of events that constitute its background. The importance of the overall context was underscored by Lenin in 1915 when he had written in a resolution on the First World war: “The question of which group dealt the first military blow or first declared war is immaterial in any determination of the tactics of socialists” (quoted in The Delphi Initiative, May 6). And the present context is one of expansion eastwards by western imperialism.

A question may be raised: why should Russia be afraid of any such eastward expansion of imperialism? Why should it read anything sinister into such expansion? The answer lies in the tendency of imperialism to break up large countries into smaller fragments so as to dominate them more comprehensively. This tendency which had first manifested itself in the case of Yugoslavia, would be even more pronounced in the case of Russia which is also very rich in natural resources, especially natural gas and to a lesser extent oil. Besides, if Russia gets fragmented, or otherwise dominated, then the way becomes clear for imperialist domination of the many Central Asian republics which are also rich in mineral resources. Imperialist aggressiveness vis-à-vis China too has a very similar motivation, of fragmenting it into insignificance. A country like India incidentally has much to worry about from this tendency of imperialism.

At present of course, among other factors, because of this very aggressiveness vis-à-vis Russia, imperialist hegemony itself is under threat. The “neo-con”-inspired imperialist strategy of seeking world dominance is coming a cropper precisely because of its very aggressiveness. But that is an inevitable consequence of its ambitious project; from the fact that it is coming a cropper, one should not infer its absence. One should not in other words conclude from its failure that this ambitious project was never there to start with. And the people of the third world have rightly seen this project for what it is, which is why there is so much support for Russia.

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