

Imperialism's Striving for Expansion*

Prabhat Patnaik

The “inevitable striving of finance capital”, Lenin had written in *Imperialism*, (is) “to enlarge its spheres of influence and even its actual territory”. He was writing of course in a world marked by inter-imperialist rivalry, where this striving took the form of a competitive struggle between rival finance capitals that speedily completed the partitioning of the world, leaving no “empty spaces”; only a repartitioning of the world was thenceforth possible, through wars among rival financial oligarchies. The wars that were actually unleashed however led to a weakening of imperialism and the splitting off of parts of the world from its hegemony, through socialist revolutions and the process of decolonisation that socialism helped to usher in.

The further development of the centralisation of capital, leading to its consolidation, has on the one hand muted inter-imperialist rivalry, since capital now wants the entire world, not broken up into spheres of influence of rival powers, as the domain for its unrestricted movement; on the other hand it has also led to an attempt on the part of now-united imperialism to reassert its hegemony over the territories that had broken off from it earlier. The two weapons that imperialism uses for this latter objective are: the imposition of a neo-liberal order on the world that essentially negates the effects of decolonisation, and the unleashing of wars where the first weapon alone does not suffice for its purpose.

The neo-liberal regime has meant a weakening of the working class everywhere. In the advanced countries it has placed before the workers the threat of relocation to lower-wage third world countries saddled with vast labour reserves, because of which their wages have stagnated. In the third world countries, such relocation has not reduced the relative size of the labour reserves, because of which the real wages have stagnated there too. Thus, while the vector of real wages across the world has stagnated, labour productivities have increased everywhere (which after all is the reason for the relative size of third world labour reserves not decreasing), causing a rise in the share of economic surplus both for the world economy as a whole as well as in individual countries. This has not only brought about a sharp rise in economic inequality (and over much of the third world even an increase in the proportion of the population suffering from absolute nutritional deprivation), but precisely for that reason a tendency towards over-production (since the working people consume a larger proportion of their incomes than those living off the surplus).

The standard Keynesian remedy for over-production, namely larger government spending, does not work under the neo-liberal regime, since the two possible ways in which such spending has to be financed if it is to boost aggregate demand, viz. a larger fiscal deficit or larger taxation of the rich, are both ruled out under this regime. Both are anathema for finance capital and the nation-state confronted with globalised finance capital that can leave its shores at the drop of a hat, must kow-tow to the caprices of such finance capital.

With this tendency towards over-production, immanent in neo-liberal capitalism, pushing the world economy towards stagnation, there has been an upsurge of neo-fascism, with corporate capital tending to ally itself with neo-fascist elements who

provide a diversionary discourse. This discourse is concerned not with the material conditions of life, but with generating hatred against some hapless religious or ethnic minority that is portrayed as the “other”. Neo-fascist elements have captured power in some countries, and waiting in the wings in others, though the journey from their capturing power within a liberal democracy to building a fascist state remains a more or less prolonged one. But even neo-fascist elements being in power within a country does not overcome this tendency towards over-production: as the State remains a nation-state facing globally-mobile finance, its incapacity, even under a neo-fascist government, to increase aggregate demand through government spending that is financed either by a larger fiscal deficit or by taxes on the rich, remains as before.

It may be asked: why should the blame for this inability on the part of the nation-state to counter the tendency towards stagnation, and hence the ascendancy of neo-fascism, be laid at the door of imperialism? The simple answer is that any attempt on the part of any nation to delink itself from the vortex of global finance and use the State to boost demand would be met with the imposition of economic sanctions by the phalanx of imperial states, led by the United States. The first weapon used by imperialism to reassert its hegemony, in short, leads to acute misery for the people everywhere and a neo-fascist denouement.

The second way of reasserting its hegemony over parts of the world that had split off, which is through wars, is now pushing the world towards a catastrophe. Both the two wars that are going on at present are promoted and sustained by imperialism and have the potential to escalate to nuclear confrontations. Take the Ukraine War first. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Mikhail Gorbachev was given the assurance that there would be no expansion of NATO eastward. But NATO did expand eastwards right up to Ukraine. Ukraine itself did not want to join NATO; its duly-elected president Viktor Yanukovich who was opposed to any such idea was ousted in a coup, engineered under the supervision of US official Victoria Nuland, that brought in to government supporters of Stepan Bandera who had collaborated with Hitler’s troops during the Second World War. The new government not only expressed a desire to join NATO but also started a conflict with the Russian-speaking Donbas region that claimed thousands of lives before Russia intervened.

Let us ask the question that is a litmus test in these matters: who stands for a peace agreement in the Ukraine conflict and who opposes it? The Minsk agreement which had been reached between Russia and Ukraine with the help of France and Germany was torpedoed by the US and Britain, with Boris Johnson the British prime minister even flying down to Kiev to dissuade Ukraine from accepting it. And lest it be thought that different imperialist powers were speaking in different voices, Angela Merkel the German chancellor of that time has now admitted that the Minsk Agreement was a ruse merely to buy time for Ukraine until it became war-ready. What indubitably stands out is that the war in Ukraine is basically a means of bringing Russia under the hegemony of imperialism, which had been the imperialist project after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and which almost got accomplished under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin.

Now take the other war, unleashed with staggering brutality and ruthlessness by Israel against the Palestinian people and now against Lebanon. Total backing for Israel by US imperialism appears at first sight to be a reflection of the strength of the Zionist lobby in American politics, rather than of any imperialist plans per se. This

impression however is erroneous. Imperialism is not just complicit in Israeli “settler colonialism”, for promoting which Israel is carrying out a genocide today and preparing for mass ethnic cleansing tomorrow; its project is to control the entire region via Israel.

Here again the litmus test is: who stands in the way of peace today? The US formally accepts a “two-State” solution, but every time the proposal to accept Palestine as the 194th member-state of the United Nations has come up in the General Assembly, which would be the first step towards implementing the “two-State” solution, the US has voted against it; clearly it would veto such a move in the Security Council. Its support for an authentic “two-State” solution therefore is a sham. What is more, whenever some critical point is reached in truce negotiations between Israel and its opponents, whether Ismael Hanieh or Hassan Nasrallah, these leaders are assassinated by Israel. The negotiations for truce in short are again just a sham as far as Israel is concerned; and US imperialism is clearly complicit in this charade. Israel’s own settler colonialism jells with the role earmarked for it by US imperialism, of being the local gendarme of imperialism. And with the war escalating, the danger of a nuclear confrontation looms larger everyday.

I mentioned that the imposition of a neo-liberal economic order and engaging in wars were the two weapons used by the now-united imperialism to reassert its hegemony. But if one is leading to neo-fascism, the other is pushing mankind towards a catastrophe.

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