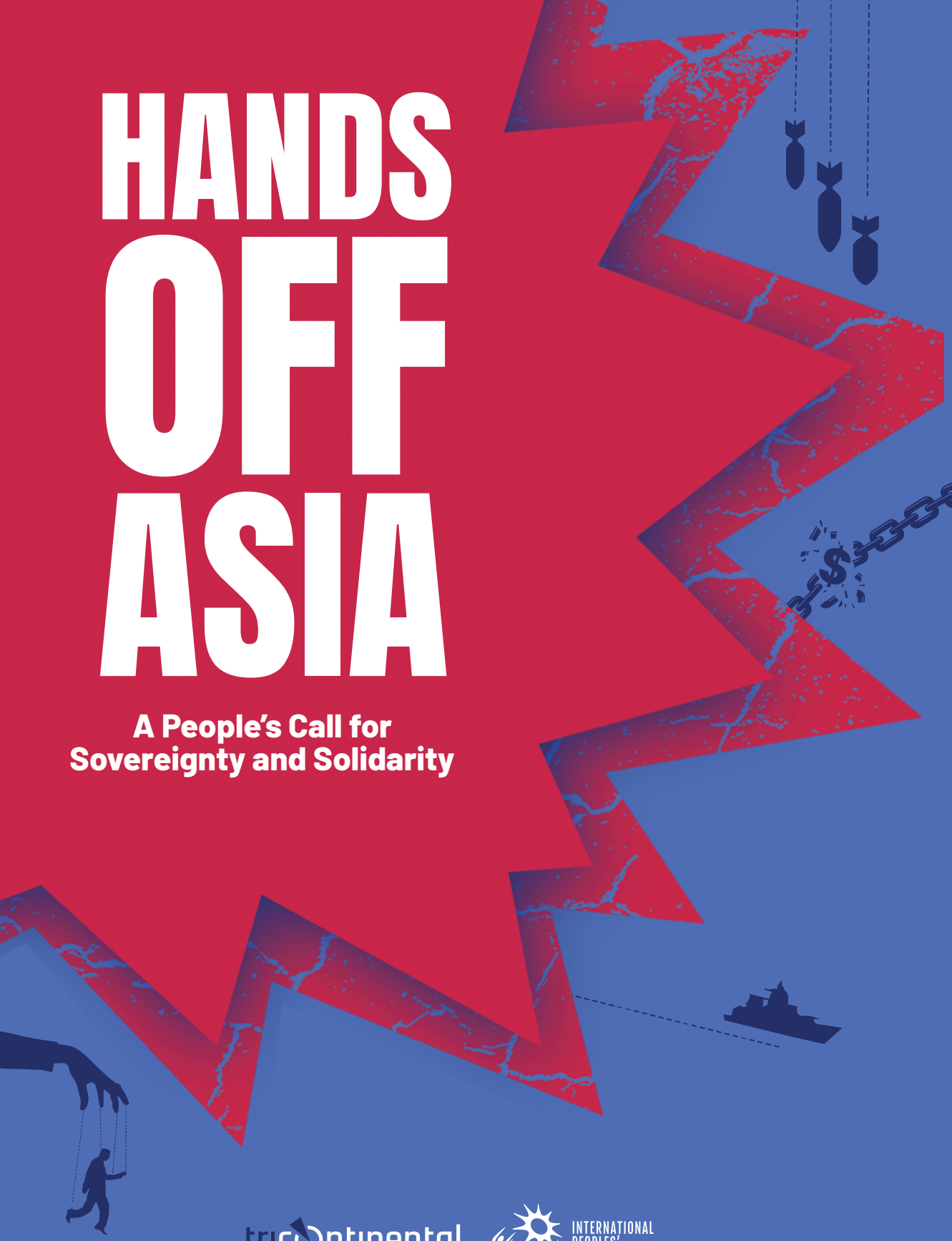
HANDS OFF ASIA

A People's Call for Sovereignty and Solidarity



Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

INTERNATIONAL PEOPLES' ASSEMBLY

Hands Off Asia

A People's Call for Sovereignty and Solidarity

Proceedings of the Hands Off Asia conference
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Hands Off Asia

Song by Taimur Rahman based on a poem by Vijay Prashad, written and performed during the Hands Off Asia conference, Colombo, 16–18 July 2026.

You bombed and
stole from this land.
You looted cities with
bloodstained hands.
We won't take your murder
any longer.

Give us back our ancient land.
We're coming together;
we are taking a stand.
We won't take your
killing any longer.

Come on,
speak the words:
Hands Off Asia!
Hands Off Asia!

Your Opium Wars, Atlantic
slave trade,
Your wars of terror,
and your free trade,
Your freedom of speech,
free press, with your genocide.
Your mask has fallen,
the truth exposed.
Your lies, your falsehoods -
it's all disclosed.
Don't talk to us about
freedom; we see through you.

Hands Off Asia!

No empire can purchase
the wind or sea.
The wheat guards its
promise in root and tree.
The people remember
what power must be.

Hands Off Asia!

The bombs wrote treaties
only dust can read.
The fields keep faith with
every burned seed.
Empires depart;
the people hold the key.

Hands Off Asia!
Let Asia be free.
Hands Off Asia!

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stole from this land.
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Hands Off Asia!
Let Asia be free.

Introduction

In July 2026, delegates from seventeen countries and forty-six organisations gathered in Colombo for three days of political debate. They came from political parties and trade unions, peasant and women's movements, student organisations, publishers, and research institutes across Asia, joined by guests from Cuba and Brazil. It was the first gathering of the International Peoples' Assembly (IPA) Asia in eight years - the last had taken place in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2018 - and the first IPA event to be held in Sri Lanka.

Fifty years earlier, in August 1976, Colombo had hosted the Fifth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. The world addressed by that summit has since been transformed, yet its central question remains unresolved: whether the peoples of Asia can determine their own paths of development, choose their own alliances, and build their own futures. If anything, that question has become sharper, because formal independence now coexists with forms of subordination that work through financial systems, technological infrastructures, military agreements, and the organisation of political and cultural life.

This volume emerged from that gathering. *Hands Off Asia: A People's Call for Sovereignty and Solidarity* brings together thirty-three speeches by delegates, the Colombo Declaration adopted on the final day, and the lyrics of a song inspired by the conference and written in between sessions. The texts retain the movement and immediacy of arguments made before a live audience of comrades and interlocutors. Read together, they also develop a shared analysis, revealing the ways in which US imperialism acts across multiple fronts at once.

The IPA launched the Hands Off Asia campaign in 2026 as a call against US militarism in the region. Its immediate object was the arc of bases and alliances extending from Japan and South Korea through the Philippines, Guam, and Australia to Diego Garcia and the Gulf, together with the pacts and exercises that bind these installations into an architecture of confrontation. However, we understand that military encirclement cannot be treated as a self-contained problem. Bases are

sustained by political agreements, paid for through skyrocketing military budgets, and justified by narratives that present Washington's strategic interests as a form of collective security. Debt and sanctions narrow the room for sovereign development; rising far-right and authoritarian forces repress opposition at home; and control over media, technology, and data shapes what futures can be imagined. These are distinct processes that reinforce one another.

The Colombo conference was convened to understand these connections and to ask whether a common analysis could help anchor common fronts of struggle. Sovereignty, in this discussion, cannot be confined to the flag, the border, or the formal authority of the state. It must include the collective capacity of a people to decide how social wealth is used, which technologies are developed, what relations are built with other countries, and whose needs political institutions serve.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), former prime minister of Nepal and a leader of the people's war against the monarchy, gave this argument one of its clearest formulations in his opening address. Domination, he argued, has changed its clothes. Alongside occupation and military pressure, imperialism operates through debt, unequal trade, and control over technological and data infrastructure, so that 'economic sovereignty can be weakened without a single bullet crossing the border'. His words gave the conference a point of departure: democracy cannot be reduced to periodic elections, just as sovereignty cannot be reduced to the juridical authority of a state. Both acquire substance only when people possess the organised power to shape their collective life.

The military architecture confronting Asia remains the most visible part of this integrated attack by US imperialism. Figures cited at the conference counted some nine hundred US bases encircling the globe, roughly four hundred of them in Asia, accompanied by expanding military pacts, joint exercises, surveillance networks, and weapons systems stretching from the Persian Gulf through the South China Sea to Okinawa, Korea, and the Philippines. US military planners describe the emerging integration of sensors, strike platforms, and command systems as a 'kill web' – language that lays bare the intended function of a network directed above all against China and presented as defensive. Iran's heroic defence against

the ongoing illegal US–Israeli war sharpened the warning for Washington's allies. As one formulation at the conference put it, 'the base is not a shield; it is a target'. US military bases do not insulate their hosts from war, but turn the surrounding country into a battlefield.

Militarisation also reaches deep into public budgets. Resources directed towards foreign weapons and military infrastructure are resources withheld from food systems, public health, education, and climate resilience. In the Philippines, movements calculated that military expenditure at 3.5 percent of GDP would exceed total social spending and named this demand for rearmament a 'war tax'. For countries already constrained by debt, the choice is especially severe. Low- and middle-income countries carried $11.7 trillion in external debt and paid $1.6 trillion to service it in 2024, while 3.3 billion people lived in countries spending more on interest payments than on either health or education. Sri Lanka, the host of the conference, is living through its seventeenth IMF programme: fuel prices have tripled, state expenditure has been capped near 13 percent of GDP, and bank-held bonds have been protected while workers on poverty wages have been made to pay. One estimate presented in the volume places the wealth transferred out of the Global South since 1960 at $152 trillion. Here, the Global South names neither a latitude nor a collection of national failures, but a condition produced through colonial and neocolonial underdevelopment and financial subordination. Rather than being an accidental defect in the international financial architecture, this extraction is part of its design.

The political forms that sustain this order vary from country to country. Contributors traced how the Hindutva project in India has deepened the country's strategic subordination to Washington through the Quad, defence agreements, and the abandonment of non-alignment; how the Marcos dynasty returned to power in the Philippines as the country was drawn more tightly into US military strategy; and how Jamaat-e-Islami was rehabilitated in Bangladesh after the upheavals of July 2024. The far right does not advance through an identical script everywhere, nor can its growth be understood apart from each country's histories and class forces. Yet imperialism cultivates these forces as domestic infrastructure: they divide progressive organisations, discipline popular demands, and secure external alignment

through the language of authoritarian nationalism. The discussion of Indonesia raised a related tension, showing how the language of reclaimed sovereignty can coexist with remilitarised state enterprises and concessions over critical minerals. Institutional reform without a contest over class power is temporary; the forms of democracy can be restored while the substance of sovereignty is surrendered.

Across these military, economic, and political struggles runs an ideological contest over Asia's histories and horizons. The old Cold War category of 'propaganda' was never applied evenly. Western state and corporate media were presented as 'neutral', while voices emerging from anti-colonial and socialist struggles were dismissed as propaganda. Today, concentrated media ownership and digital platforms reproduce this hierarchy. Artificial-intelligence systems, trained largely on hegemonic sources, carry it into their basic infrastructure, shaping which histories are recognised, which voices are considered credible, and which futures can be imagined. The question of who can narrate Asia, through which infrastructures and in whose terms, is inseparable from the question of who can shape its future.

The landscape of Sri Lanka offered the conference an image through which to hold together this long history and the possibility of overcoming it. The island is ringed by forts left by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires. One speaker proposed that this should become the fate of every imperial installation – its bases rendered obsolete and in ruins, just like the fortresses of colonialism's past.

The Colombo Declaration adopted at the conference condensed the discussions into four connected commitments. Militarily, it calls for an end to foreign bases, AUKUS, the Quad, the war on Iran, the genocide in Palestine, and the encirclement of Asia. Economically, it opposes debt bondage, IMF conditionalities, tariff coercion, and technology blockades. Politically, it rejects regime change and the cultivation of far-right proxies. Ideologically and culturally, it defends Asia's histories, media, and imagination from colonisation. The alternatives discussed at the conference gave these refusals a necessary horizon: coordinated action against the region's race to the bottom in corporate taxation, an honest reckoning with the contradictions faced by left governments managing capitalism through a transition, and the struggle to come to power not to ornament the existing order but to

transform it. The aim is not only to loosen imperial constraints but also to enlarge the organised capacity of people to build another social order.

We offer this volume as one instrument in that work. The contributions have been edited for clarity and length, preserving the register and immediacy of the spoken address. These are texts meant to be used: in campaigns against bases, debt, and authoritarianism; in political-education programmes and study circles; and in the patient work of building relations among organisations confronting different parts of the same system. Political fragmentation in national contexts can make each struggle appear isolated, as if every movement were fighting one corner of a structure too large to name – an effect of capitalism rather than a fact about the world. Bringing these experiences into relation does not dissolve their differences; it allows us to ask what forms of solidarity those differences require and how common fronts of struggle can be built.

During the conference, Secretary-General of the Mazdoor Kisan Party in Pakistan, Taimur Rahman, took up his guitar and turned this shared search into a song. Its closing line from a poem by Vijay Prashad - 'Empires depart; the people hold the key' - did not offer history as a guarantee but named a collective task. The Declaration's insistence that 'the enemy is one and indivisible' carries an organisational demand: our answer must be capable of joining struggles across the military, economic, political, and ideological fronts without flattening their differences. Empires depart when people develop the clarity, confidence, and organised force to make them leave; the pages that follow are a contribution to that unfinished work.

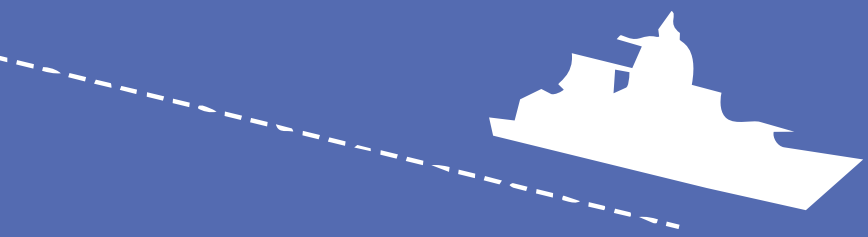
A special thank you goes to all of the conference participants and their organisations, the volunteers, and the organising team. In particular, we would like to extend our gratitude to the organisations in Sri Lanka who contributed to, or participated in, the conference – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Communist Party of Sri Lanka, Democratic Left Front, Frontline Socialist Party, Free Palestine Movement Sri Lanka, and Young Researchers Network. Hands off Asia!

Tings Chak and Atul Chandra

Tings Chak and Atul Chandra are co-coordinators of the Asia Desk at the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.

Chapter 1

Sovereign Paths and Socialist Horizons: Building a United Front for a Sovereign Asia



Towards a Just and Peaceful World

Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda)

Prachanda is the former prime minister of Nepal. He led the struggle that abolished the monarchy and established Nepal as a federal democratic republic, and he is currently the only former prime minister serving in Nepal's parliament. He is the coordinator of the Nepali Communist Party.

Something special has happened in Nepal: there are half a dozen former prime ministers, but unfortunately, currently I am the only one who is represented in parliament – and I believe I am also the only former prime minister with the opportunity to present here. That is both an opportunity and a challenge.

Distinguished leaders and delegates, comrades: I feel deeply honoured to be part of this important conference of progressive intellectuals in the beautiful city of Colombo, a city that has long stood at a crossroads of civilisation, culture, commerce and political ideas.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the organisers for bringing together political leaders, intellectuals, social activists, and representatives of people's movements from across Asia to deliberate on the issues that will profoundly influence the future of Asia and the future of world humanity. I thank the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research for supporting this very important and unique programme.

We meet at a time when the world is undergoing great turmoil, trauma, and transformation – a moment of extraordinary international geopolitical dynamism, in which a major shift is taking place. The Atlantic-centric power is shifting to Asia, our own region. A new international order appears to be emerging; the epicentre of power is slowly but surely moving towards Asia, pointing to the rise of China and other Asian countries. It is said that the twenty-first century is going to be the Asian century. The global order is also changing from unipolarity to multipolarity. This is a matter of delight for the countries and peoples of the Global South.

Unipolarity was hegemonic; multipolarity is more democratic, and the Global South will have its due voice and strength.

As the world order changes, the geopolitical, economic, technological, and ideological foundations of the global system are being reconfigured. The monopoly of influence enjoyed by a handful of countries for decades is gradually giving way to a more plural and contested international landscape. The central question before us, therefore, is not simply whether power is shifting from one region to another. The important question is: what kind of world order will emerge from this transition, and whose interests will it serve?

The principal ideological contradiction of the world at present is, as we know very well, the contradiction between imperialism and socialism. For many people, imperialism remains associated primarily with colonial occupation, military conquest, and direct political domination. While this form has not entirely disappeared, the models and mechanisms of domination have changed and become more sophisticated, taking multidimensional forms deeply embedded within the structures of globalisation. In the era of the fourth industrial revolution, imperialism often functions through economic dependency rather than territorial occupation. Techno-imperialism is a newer version of imperialism.

Imperialism always seeks to concentrate power and money in the hands of a few elites at the expense of the large sections of the population. Such a system only increases poverty, inequality, injustice, conflict, and war. We, the progressive people of Asia, must stand together to counter this imperialist onslaught in Asia and say loudly: Hands off Asia!

Developing countries find their policy choices constrained by external financial institutions, debt obligations, unequal trade arrangements, speculative capital movements, and the structural vulnerabilities of dependent economies. Economic sovereignty can be weakened without a single bullet crossing the border. Similarly, strategic competition among the major powers increasingly manifests through military alliances, security partnerships, military bases, arms transfers, and geopolitical rivalry.

Control over data, digital infrastructure, communication networks, artificial intelligence, and the information ecosystem is becoming yet another important source of geopolitical power. Digital platforms shape public opinion, influence electoral processes and determine access to information. The concentration of technological power in the hands of a limited number of actors raises fundamental questions about digital sovereignty and democratic accountability. These are the areas imperialism seeks to control in order to impose its hegemony.

We are witnessing the rise of information warfare. Disinformation campaigns, algorithmic manipulation, cyber operations, psychological influence, and narrative control have become powerful tools in contemporary international politics. Political destabilisation frequently occurs through indirect means: external actors often seek influence through economic levers, ideological penetration, media manipulation, and political engineering rather than overt intervention. This reveals that contemporary imperialism operates as an integrated system encompassing economic, military, technological, political. and ideological domination.

Sovereignty cannot be reduced merely to the authority of the state. Sovereignty must be understood as the people's collective capacity and expression to determine their own political, economic, social, and cultural destiny. National independence means little where a country's resources are controlled by external interests, where citizens remain excluded from decision-making, and where development benefits only a handful of privileged elites.

Similarly, democracy cannot be confined to periodic elections. Democracy must encompass meaningful participation in political, economic, and social life – a life in which workers, peasants, women, indigenous communities, youth, marginalised groups, and ordinary citizens have an equal share and active participation.

Nepal's modern political transformation emerged through the integration of armed insurgency, democratic movement, and revolutionary aspiration. The People's War was not simply an armed conflict; it represented a political response to deep structural inequality, social exclusion, feudal exploitation, centralised state power, and limited democratic participation. The people's movement subsequently created a

historic convergence of democratic and progressive forces. The abolition of the feudal monarchy and the establishment of a federal democratic republic represent a profound transformation in Nepal's political history. Nepal shows how armed conflicts can be resolved through peaceful means and a democratic process.

We were the first party to advocate the election of a Constituent Assembly and promulgate a new constitution through it. The constitution promulgated by the democratically-elected Constituent Assembly institutionalised the principles of federalism, inclusion, proportional representation, secularism, social justice, and republicanism.

But political transformation does not automatically produce economic transformation. Political change must be accompanied by institutional reform, economic democratisation, and social transformation. Progressive movements must learn from Nepal's experience in transforming society from a feudal setup into a democratic, socialist-oriented new system.

Throughout history, progressive forces have often achieved remarkable victories when united, and suffered serious setbacks when divided. If we progressive people act in unity, we can definitely achieve the desired result – Nepal is a clear example of this. Unity requires understanding of fundamental principles: democracy, sovereignty, social justice, equality, peace, environmental sustainability, and human dignity. Progressive organisations must place the interests of the people above narrow partisan interests. The future of transformative politics thus depends not upon sectarian competition but upon strategic cooperation.

The rise of the Generation Z movements – popularly called the Gen Z movements – in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and elsewhere raises many serious questions about social and economic transformation. Traditional political actors often misunderstand these movements. Many young people are not rejecting politics itself; they are rejecting exclusionary politics, unresponsive institutions, corruption, unemployment, and the concentration of power. Their demands are legitimate and deeply connected to contemporary reality. But in this regard we must also take into account the negative role played by the imperialist powers.

Comrades, delegates: the ultimate test of any political party and project is whether it improves the lives of ordinary people. An economic system that generates wealth without enhancing livelihoods inevitably produces instability. Extreme wealth concentration undermines democracy, social cohesion, and economic sustainability. Asia is among the regions most vulnerable to climate change, despite contributing relatively little to it. Sustainable industrialisation, renewable energy transition, ecological protection, and climate adaptation strategies must therefore become central pillars of our development position. Development should serve human needs rather than the exclusive pursuit of profit.

The future of Asia depends upon our ability to choose cooperation over confrontation. The growing strategic competition among the major powers presents good opportunities and challenges. The Asian countries must resist pressures that seek to divide the region into competing geopolitical camps. The principles of peaceful coexistence, sovereign equality, non-alignment, and mutual respect remain profoundly relevant; the Bandung spirit is still vital and important for us. Asia's prosperity will be strengthened not through confrontation but through cooperation. At the international level, solidarity remains the need of the hour. We reaffirm our support for the Palestinian people's right to statehood. We oppose occupation, indiscriminate violence, and violations of international humanitarian law by any country under any pretext. South–South cooperation should become a cornerstone of the emerging multipolar world, and all progressive people must join hands to counter any form of imperialism and intervention under any pretext. If we unite and act together, we will definitely succeed in achieving our goal.

Progressive movements must engage actively in intellectual and ideological work to build confidence, critical awareness, and informed citizenship. I therefore propose that we adopt a common development agenda of the Asian peoples. Such an agenda should unite the progressive forces around peace, sovereignty, economic democracy, food sovereignty, climate justice, digital sovereignty, gender equality, youth empowerment and regional solidarity. Political parties, trade unions, peasant organisations, women's movements, youth organisations, indigenous communities, academics, and progressive intellectuals should work together through such platforms of meaningful cooperation.

Finally, as progressive people, we must adhere to the spirit of internationalism. The emerging multipolar world must not reproduce old hierarchies in any form, including so-called new forms; it should be based on equality, mutual respect, shared learning, and collective responsibility. Let us move forward together with courage, wisdom, solidarity and determination. We will definitely succeed in creating a just and peaceful world.

Sovereignty Is Our Objective; Solidarity our Strength

Dammika Patabendi

Dr. Dammika Patabendi is the Minister of Environment in the Government of Sri Lanka and a central committee member of the of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP – People's Liberation Front), which is the leading organisation of the National People's Power (NPP).

Honourable guests, comrades, and friends: it is both an honour and a privilege to join you this morning at the opening of this international conference. On behalf of the JVP and the NPP, I extend a very warm welcome to all of you who have travelled from across Asia to Colombo, Sri Lanka. I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to the International Peoples' Assembly and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research for organising this important gathering, and I wish this conference every success.

I believe this is an opportunity for dialogue among comrades – for learning from one another's experiences and for strengthening the bonds of solidarity among those who remain committed to justice, harmony, peace, and the emancipation of working people.

Today, Asia stands at an important historical crossroads. Our continent is home to more than half of humanity. It is a centre of remarkable economic growth, scientific advancement, and technological innovation. Yet it is also a continent where millions continue to struggle against poverty, inequality, debt, external domination, and various forms of economic and political coercion.

These realities remind us that development without sovereignty leaves nations vulnerable, and that economic growth without social justice leaves people behind. The theme of this conference – Hands Off Asia, a people's call for sovereignty and

solidarity – invites us not only to analyse the challenges before us, but to imagine and build alternatives rooted in the aspirations of our own peoples.

Comrades and friends, this conference is taking place at a particularly significant moment in the history of my own country. Nearly one and a half years ago, the people of Sri Lanka delivered an unprecedented democratic mandate to the NPP. That mandate was not the result of a temporary political trend or an electoral accident. It was the culmination of decades of struggle, sacrifice, political education, and organisation among the people. For the first time in our country's modern history, a socialist political movement rooted in the struggles of workers, farmers, youth, women and ordinary citizens has been entrusted by the people with the responsibility of governing the nation.

The confidence placed in us carries enormous responsibility. It is also a source of hope – not only for Sri Lanka, but for socialist movements across the region – that social transformation remains possible when political movements remain connected to the people they represent.

To understand the significance of this moment, we must also understand the historical journey that brought us here. Sri Lanka, like many countries represented in this room, carries a long and painful history of colonialism. For centuries, our people endured foreign domination that fundamentally reshaped our economy to serve imperial interests rather than the needs of our own people. Our agriculture was reorganised around export plantations, our natural resources were extracted, and economic structures were designed to create dependence rather than self-reliance.

Though colonial rule eventually ended, many of the economic structures inherited from colonialism remained largely intact. Power passed to domestic elites whose outlook remained shaped by the same economic model. Over successive decades, governments changed, political parties alternated in office, and different leaders came and went – yet the underlying model remained remarkably unchanged. A few allied families became political dynasties, and nepotism became deeply rooted. Economic growth depended increasingly on external borrowing, while domestic productive capacity received inadequate attention. Public institutions were

weakened by patronage and corruption, and economic policy often prioritised short-term political interests over long-term national development.

As many of us witnessed, these accumulated structural weaknesses – and the ignorance of ruling politicians – eventually resulted in one of the gravest economic crises in Sri Lanka's history. The burden of that crisis was not borne equally; working people suffered most, struggling to retain their livelihoods, and facing enormous uncertainty and insecurity.

It was precisely against this historical backdrop that the JVP was founded in 1965. From its inception, our party was built on the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the conviction that liberating our people required organised political struggle rooted among workers, peasants, and youth. For six decades, our commitment has never been limited to parliamentary politics. Our strength has always been our close relationship with the people. Through our trade unions, student movements, youth organisations, women's organisations, and community work, we sought not merely to contest elections but to organise society. We believed then, as we believe today, that genuine political transformation cannot be achieved without the people's active participation.

Throughout our history, this commitment has demanded extraordinary sacrifice. Our party experienced periods of severe repression; thousands of our comrades gave their lives, and many more endured imprisonment, persecution, and immense personal hardship. Our movement faced devastating suppression twice, and there were moments when many believed the JVP had been destroyed forever. Yet history shows that a political movement built on genuine social foundations and a disciplined cadre with revolutionary spirit cannot be eliminated by repression. Our comrades rebuilt the movement with courage, discipline, and unwavering conviction – village by village, university by university, factory by factory, trade union by trade union. Over many years, the JVP developed into the most organised left political force in Sri Lanka, with functioning organisations extending throughout the country.

But perhaps the greatest lesson from our history is not one of survival; it is one of continuous struggle and renewal. Like every revolutionary movement, we have continually reflected upon our experiences. We have understood that remaining faithful to socialist ideas also requires understanding changing social realities. Political organisations must listen as well as lead; they must educate while also learning from the people themselves.

This understanding eventually gave birth to the National People's Power. The NPP was not created as a traditional electoral alliance designed merely to maximise votes, nor as an arrangement among established political allies. Rather, it emerged from a broader vision. We recognised that transforming Sri Lanka required bringing together all the progressive sections of society: workers, farmers, professionals, academics, intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs, civil society organisations, women's organisations, youth, community and religious leaders dedicated to social justice, and citizens who had become disillusioned with decades of corruption.

When we established the NPP, we pledged to the people that we would not form any alliance with those responsible for corruption, abuse of public trust, and the failures of previous administrations. That pledge was not merely an electoral strategy; it was a moral commitment. We believed that genuine political transformation requires public confidence, and that public confidence can only be built over time. The people responded not simply because of our policies, but because they recognised a consistency between our words and our actions. That trust became the foundation upon which a new chapter of Sri Lanka could be built. We approached people from all walks of life with our vision and our ideology, and organised them as social forces under the umbrella of education.

Dear comrades, Asia's experiences have taught us an important lesson: political independence alone does not guarantee economic sovereignty. A nation may seem independent, with its own elected government, yet still find that many of its most important economic decisions are shaped by external pressures – global financial institutions, unequal trading arrangements, or structural dependencies inherited from colonialism. This is not a challenge unique to Sri Lanka; it is a real issue confronting many countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. That is why

today's discussion of sovereign paths and socialist horizons is both timely and necessary.

Sovereignty is not merely the protection of territorial borders. It is a nation's capacity to determine its own development path according to its people's aspirations. It means the freedom to formulate economic policy without undue external pressure. It means ensuring that national resources serve national development, and creating productive economies that generate decent employment and improve the quality of life of vulnerable people. Above all, it means that people remain at the centre of national development. This understanding is especially important for Asia. Our continent has emerged as one of the world's principal centres of economic growth, yet many of our countries continue to face common challenges. Debt burdens constrain national policy; global financial volatility affects domestic livelihoods; climate change threatens food production and human security; technological inequalities create new forms of dependence; and growing geopolitical rivalries increasingly place Asia under competitive pressure.

In such circumstances, sovereignty cannot be understood as isolation. Rather, sovereignty requires greater cooperation among nations that respect one another's independence while working together to advance shared prosperity. No country can sustainably achieve development if its people are denied the freedom to shape their own future. The experience of Sri Lanka itself demonstrates how excessive dependence on debt, weak domestic production, and unequal economic structures can undermine national resilience. These experiences have strengthened our own determination to build an economy that is more productive, more equitable, and more self-reliant. Our objective is not isolation from the global economy – on the contrary, Sri Lanka believes in constructive international cooperation. But cooperation must be based upon mutual respect, equality and shared values.

Dear friends, there have been many occasions over the past several decades when commentators declared that socialism had become irrelevant. History, however, has often demonstrated otherwise. In Sri Lanka, socialism has never been understood as a rigid formula, nor is it a slogan. It is a commitment to building a society in which human dignity takes precedence over the pursuit of unlimited private

profit – where economic development is measured not only by national income but by improvements in education, healthcare, employment, environmental sustainability, and social equality. It is a vision of a society in which workers are respected, farmers are protected, women participate equally, young people can realise their aspirations, all ethnicities are respected and safeguarded, the living conditions of marginalised communities are gradually improved, and public institutions serve the common good.

Our own political journey reflects this understanding. The NPP received the confidence of the Sri Lankan people not because we promised miracles; we earned it because we offered honesty. We acknowledged the difficulties before us, spoke openly about corruption and the argument for rebuilding public institutions, and promoted accountability rather than claims. Most importantly, we placed ordinary citizens at the centre of national reconstruction.

This approach reflects an important lesson for progressive political movements everywhere. Our strength is ultimately measured by the confidence we inspire among ordinary people – and that confidence cannot be demanded; it is earned through consistency, integrity, and discipline, by remaining close to the people during both victories and setbacks, and by demonstrating that political power is a responsibility entrusted by the people, not a privilege to be enjoyed. For nearly six years, the JVP has sought to build that relationship with the people of Sri Lanka. Today, as part of the NPP government, we carry that responsibility with even greater humility because governing presents new challenges. It requires the application of ideas with practical realism, careful decision-making, dialogue, patience, competence, and, above all, accountability to the people who have placed their trust in us.

The socialist horizon before us is therefore not simply about changing governments; it is about transforming societies. It is about creating economies that produce wealth while ensuring its fair distribution; ensuring that scientific and technological progress serves humanity; protecting nature while promoting development; strengthening democratic participation; and ensuring that every child, regardless

of social background, has access to education, healthcare, and fulfilment. This is the horizon towards which progressive movements across Asia continue to strive.

Our paths may differ – each nation possesses its own history, culture, and political conditions, and there is no single model that can simply be copied from one country to another – but our aspirations often converge. We all seek societies founded upon justice rather than exploitation, cooperation rather than enmity, peace rather than conflict, human dignity rather than exclusion, and sovereignty that truly belongs to the people.

If sovereignty is our objective, then solidarity is our strength. No nation in Asia, regardless of its size or economic strength, can overcome the complex challenges of the twenty-first century in isolation. Likewise, no progressive movement can advance the cause of social justice without learning from, and standing with, others who share similar aspirations. A united front does not mean uniformity; it does not require every country to follow the same political system or every movement to adopt identical strategies. History teaches us that every revolutionary and progressive movement develops within its own national context, shaped by its history, culture, economy, and the aspirations of its people. Unity must therefore be built upon shared principles: the principle that every nation has the sovereign right to determine its own development path; the principle that disputes should be resolved through dialogue and mutual respect; and the principle that development must benefit the people rather than the privileged.

Asia today presents a remarkable paradox. Our region has become one of the principal engines of global economic growth and has made extraordinary advances in science, technology, industry, and infrastructure – the living conditions of billions have improved. Yet alongside these achievements we also witness persistent inequalities. Resolving these inequalities requires governments that place people's welfare at the centre of development, organised societies capable of defending the public interest, and progressive political movements that remain firmly connected to the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Today, our region also confronts increasing geopolitical uncertainty. Competition among the major powers is intensifying, and economic sanctions, technological restrictions, and military tensions continue to affect many parts of the world. In this context, small and developing nations often face difficult choices. Sri Lanka's own position is clear. We believe that lasting peace and development require respect for the sovereignty of all nations; that international disagreements should be resolved through dialogue, diplomacy, and adherence to international law; and that no nation should be compelled to sacrifice independent decision-making because of external pressure. Equally, no people should become the victims of conflict, occupation, or humanitarian catastrophe.

As progressive forces, we must also recognise that the struggle for sovereignty is continuously evolving. Today, sovereignty is challenged not only through military intervention, but through economic dependence, technological inequalities, disinformation, environmental degradation, and widening social disparities. Likewise, solidarity must also evolve: it should not be limited to declarations made at conferences – it must be reflected in practical cooperation among our peoples. One of the strongest messages emerging from this conference is that solidarity must move beyond expressions of friendship.

As progressive governments, political parties, trade unions, research institutions, and people's organisations, we have much to learn from one another. We can strengthen exchanges in education and political training; deepen cooperation in science and technology; share experiences in poverty reduction, public healthcare, food security, and sustainable agriculture; work together on climate adaptation, disaster resilience, and renewable energy; and strengthen cooperation among trade unions to defend decent work in an increasingly globalised economy. We need closer exchanges among youth and student organisations, greater collaboration among researchers, universities and intellectuals, and dialogue among progressive and socialist political parties. Above all, we can learn from one another's successes and failures.

The future of socialism in Asia will be determined in our factories, farms, universities, villages, workplaces, and local communities. It will be determined by whether

progressive and socialist political movements continue to organise, educate and inspire people. History has shown that organised people possess extraordinary power. The struggle for social justice, democratic participation, and genuine sovereignty continues in every generation, and it is now our responsibility to carry that struggle forward with determination, unity, and hope.

As I conclude, allow me to return to the central message that has brought us together in Colombo. The call of Hands Off Asia is not merely a slogan directed against external interference. It is a positive affirmation of the right of the peoples of Asia to shape their own destinies – a call to build societies founded upon sovereignty, justice, equality, and peace, and to place people, not narrow political or economic interests, at the centre of development.

We have experienced decades of economic dependency and political instability; we have experienced the consequences of corruption, inequality, and poor governance. We have also witnessed the remarkable strength of ordinary people when they unite with courage and determination. The people's movement of 2022 was a defining moment in our contemporary history. It reflected the frustration of a nation that had endured years of economic hardship and political disappointment, and it demonstrated that citizens are not passive observers of history: when democratic institutions fail to reflect the aspirations of the people, the people themselves become the driving force of change. For the NPP, that movement reinforced a lesson the JVP learned through decades of struggle: lasting political change is possible only when people are organised, politically conscious, and confident in their collective strength.

The trust the people of Sri Lanka have placed in us through successive electoral victories is not the destination; it is the beginning of a new responsibility. We understand that the true measure of a progressive government is not the promises it makes, but the confidence it builds through action. Our task today is to restore public trust in democratic institutions, rebuild our productive economy, strengthen the rule of law, eliminate corruption, protect the welfare of working people, and create opportunities for future generations. We firmly believe that when governance is

guided by integrity, accountability, and commitment to social justice, even the most difficult challenges can be overcome.

Asia represents immense cultural diversity, and its peoples have contributed profoundly to philosophy, science, literature, and human civilisation. The history of Asia is a history of resistance to colonialism, imperialism, and oppression – a home of socialist and progressive movements that refused to surrender hope even under the most difficult circumstances. That rich history continues to inspire us today. But history alone cannot shape the future; that responsibility lies with us. Our generation must demonstrate that another path is possible: a path where development is measured not only by economic growth but by improvements in people's lives; where public institutions serve the common good; where the environment is protected for future generations; and where technology becomes an instrument of human progress rather than exclusion. We are united by the common conviction that every people has the right to determine its own future, free from domination, coercion, and exploitation; united in our commitment to justice and equality; and united in our confidence that international solidarity remains one of humanity's greatest strengths. Throughout history, the greatest transformations have never begun with those who believed change was impossible. They began with ordinary people who organised around extraordinary ideas – the ideas of freedom, social justice, equality, and human dignity. Those ideas continue to inspire billions across our countries; they inspire the struggle for social justice today, and they will inspire the generations that follow us. Let this conference therefore be remembered not simply as another international gathering, but as an important moment for the peoples of Asia. Let us continue to learn from one another; let us respect each nation's sovereign path of development; and together, let us build an Asia that is peaceful, sovereign, socially just, resilient, and committed to the well-being of all its people.

Long live the solidarity of the peoples of Asia!

Hands Off Asia Means Socialism Today

Vijay Prashad

Vijay Prashad (born 1967 in Calcutta, India) is a historian and journalist who is the director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, an inter-movement research institute of the Global South associated with the International Peoples' Assembly. His weekly newsletter from the institute reaches almost two million people. He is the author of over forty books, most recently (with Grieve Chelwa) How the International Monetary Fund Suffocates Africa *(2026) and the two award winning histories* The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World *(2007) and* The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South *(2013). Prashad has twice been awarded the Muzaffar Ahmed Prize.*

This morning, I was thinking about what to say and decided to write a little poem:

> No empire can purchase the wind or the sea, The wheat guards its promise in root and in tree. The people remember what power must be: Hands Off Asia, let Asia be free.
>
> The bombs write treaties only dust can read, The fields keep faith with every buried seed. Empires depart; the people hold the key. Hands Off Asia, let Asia be free.

The International Peoples' Assembly (IPA) has two hundred organisations from around the world, and we are well represented in Asia – from Indonesia to Iran – by people's organisations, intellectuals, political parties and so on. We have the basic understanding that we need to unify people to solve our common problems and meet our general aspirations. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, one of the conveners of this gathering, is the research institute of the IPA, and we

have understood our task to be in the midst of the battle of ideas and the battle of emotions.

One of the interesting features of our time is that even as imperialism shudders and stutters in the face of reality, we sometimes feel as if we don't have the ideas for tomorrow. That we are not prepared for the next period. That we don't have the new development theory to advance the goals of the people's struggles when they attain social power and state power. The battle of ideas is not a secondary part of this; it is hand in glove with the struggle.

As we advance the confidence of the people in the fight against imperialism and capitalism, we must also advance the clarity of the people in the building of socialism. The confidence to fight against capitalism, and the clarity to build socialism are two aspects united within each other. We sometimes focus on the first, because the task of fighting capitalism is so intimidating that we forget that our job is not only to fight capitalism but to build socialism – not to build socialism in the future, but to build socialism now. In fact, we are building socialism now; we just don't see it.

We are building cooperatives. Marx was once asked what he thought of cooperatives, and he replied that they are very important – a possible form of communism. In our institute, we have started to theorise a concept we call 'the not yet'. We are building socialism – yes, it is 'not yet' socialism, but it is getting there. Collective forms of social production are not yet socialism, but they are getting there. Comrades, if people don't experience the future today, they don't build the confidence that we can get out of the present – out of the trap of capitalism. Capitalism begins to seem permanent; sometimes even our own comrades don't have the confidence that we can move beyond it. They haven't yet trained themselves to understand that we are building cooperatives which are not yet socialism – but they are getting there. For our movement, both aspects – the confidence to fight capitalism and the clarity to visualise socialism in our practice – have to be united in our struggles. The agenda of the International Peoples' Assembly and Tricontinental is to build the confidence to fight against the system as it is, and the clarity to start producing the system that we need.

I want to make three points, effectively amplifying the points made so well by comrades this morning. The first concerns what all of Asia is being hit by: the concept of the 'Gen Z rebellion'.

There is no reason why there shouldn't be a so-called Gen Z rebellion. The median age in our countries is remarkably low – in Bangladesh and Nepal it is twenty-six, which means half the population is under the age of twenty-six. Certainly, young people are agitated. But young people are not agitated about their generation. That is what *Time* magazine, *The Economist* and the US media like to promote: Gen X, Gen Z, Millennials. These are US concepts; they are not our concepts.

Of course young people are angry. They are the first generation in many parts of the world that will not enjoy the same life their parents enjoyed. They can't find housing; they can't find jobs. We told our children to go to school. They went to school, maybe even to college and then couldn't find jobs. They now look at us and ask: why did you tell me to go to school?

You can't blame young people for being upset. The very idea of employment has been taken away by precarity and gig work. Add to this high living costs, student indebtedness, stagnant wages, climate anxiety, and environmental destruction. For young people, Palestine is a symbol – not only of what is happening to the Palestinian people, about which we are all agitated, but a symbol of the structure of domination – of the absolute emptiness of Western leadership colluding in a genocide.

Young people are angry, whether in the streets of Indonesia or Malaysia. Of course they are angry; I am glad they are angry. But they are not angry merely because of their generation. This is a class rebellion which the bourgeois media wants to camouflage as a generational rebellion. They don't want to admit that it is a class rebellion; they want to package it as a generational rebellion. We need to fight to redefine these rebellions and understand them with clarity, so that we can organise them and not be suspicious of young people. One of the bad outcomes of the ideas of colour revolution and is that they make us suspicious of the youth's agitation.

We must not be suspicious. We should be among them, sharpening their sense of class realities.

The second point was also made by comrade Dammika Patabendi, and comrade Prachanda has made it over and over again – not just here, but when he was prime minister and when he was the towering leader of the struggle against the monarchy in Nepal. A left government comes to power to fulfil the people's aspirations.

But the left doesn't seek state power alone. We seek social power even before we have state power. We must take power over time and space through a mass movement in every crevice of society – the women's movement, the student movement etc. We must have power over society. State power is merely the instrument to realise our ambition. But we can only realise our ambition if we have an agenda. Many examples exist of the left coming into office under very difficult circumstances – debt, threat of military intervention, and so on – and then cracking apart. This is what is happening in Senegal today, where government is unable to find a path through the suffocation of the International Monetary Fund.

We need a new development theory – this is precisely what we are building at Tricontinental. We have to bring back the importance of public investment, industrial policy, technological upgrading, and expanded public services. Consider one example: in the state of Kerala in India, it was discovered that there was an attrition in public schools. One reason was that the buildings were not well maintained – toilets were not maintained, buildings were not painted, there were no decent computers. When the government went in and simply improved the infrastructure, it improved the confidence of parents that they could send their children there. Across Asia, you can walk into government buildings and find the toilets in disrepair – that small thing produces a sensibility in people that you cannot take this government seriously. Public infrastructure is key.

Equally important, if not even greater, is the building of productive capacity. We are studying carefully the experience of the Communist Party of China (CPC), just one hundred and five years old. The CPC decided they do not want to merely redistribute scarcity, they wanted to increase the productive capacity of our society.

They want to build new productive forces and go five steps ahead of the West in technological production. This is not going to be done by a technocratic class or caste – it needs popular participation. People need to feel that they are makers of history, not merely beneficiaries of state policy.

China decided to abolish absolute poverty. Show me a capitalist country that has abolished poverty. The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany – not one of them has abolished absolute poverty. Only the CPC has done it in China, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and other Left Front governments did it in Kerala, India. What these two places have in common is the leadership of the communists. You don't have to be a communist to do this, but you have to have policies that put people ahead of profit. That means you have to constrain and go beyond capitalism.

It is very important for us to understand that national dignity and material improvement reinforce one another. You can't just have national dignity. You are told by your prime minister that we are a great country and we have the oldest civilisation. But how can you be such a great country when everybody is starving? Mahatma Gandhi said that the test of the greatness of a civilisation is not the number of millionaires it has, but the absence of starvation among its citizens. We have to upgrade the latter to billionaires and trillionaires. The absence of starvation is such an elementary thing but capitalism doesn't understand the absence of starvation; it enforces starvation on our people.

The final point I want to make is on the concept of hyper-imperialism. Any time a government comes into power and says we want to end starvation, somebody comes and knocks on the door: excuse me, you can give these speeches outside but first you have to fulfil your debt obligations. Secondly, as part of fulfilling your debt obligations, you have to build a military base for us on your land. Thirdly – I don't have to knock on the door any more; I just open it and come in because I am the US ambassador. And fourthly, I will tell you what to do. Your sovereignty will be constrained because you have a debt obligation. And why do you have a debt obligation? Well, that is the history of colonialism.

We did a calculation in our institute: there are nine hundred US military bases around the world, and roughly four hundred of them are in Asia. Most, but not all, are in East Asia. Diego Garcia is due south of Sri Lanka. The largest concentration of these military bases is in Japan – about one hundred and twenty US military installations. South Korea has between seventy and eighty. Then Guam, the Philippines, and Australia. Australia is building more military bases, including in Darwin where the United States is going to bring nuclear weapons. There are tens of thousands of US troops permanently stationed in Japan and in South Korea, and moving around the rest of Asia.

The existence of these bases creates strategic pressure on governments that adopt independent foreign and economic policies. Currently there is a war of aggression that the United States and Israel have inflicted on Iran – it is an illegal war because there is no UN Security Council resolution authorising it. What Iran has demonstrated in its strategic victory against the United States is that a US military base is not a shield – it is a target. If the United States attacks any country in Asia, the base becomes a target. The South Koreans, the Japanese, the Filipinos and others had better reflect on this: they are not protecting themselves by hosting bases on their land; they are in fact threatening their own citizens with death because of those bases. The base is not just a place for weapons; it is a political instrument the United States uses to put strategic pressure on countries so that they do not pursue an independent foreign or economic policy. What we are saying to the base is: you are not a shield, you are a target. Get rid of the bases from your countries.

But 'Hands off Asia' doesn't merely mean getting rid of the bases. It also means we are going to have an independent development policy that meets the aspirations of young people. Hands off Asia also means hands off our financial and monetary policy, don't tell us what to do with our trade and development agenda. We don't want the International Monetary Fund (IMF) surveilling our monetary policy, telling us what to do with our fiscal policy, and how we should budget our money. We don't want IMF conditionalities; we don't want rating agencies and dollar dependence to discipline our governments. We want to defend our governments' right to have an independent development path. We want to fight against

capital flight; we want to fight to prevent exchange-rate crises; we want to fight against sanctions – because these things destabilise progressive governments. They are as much a strategic pressure valve on a country as a military base. The United States, for instance, tried to impose exchange-rate destabilisation on China, and did impose it twice on Japan, destabilising the Japanese economy so that Japan went into decades of stagnation. They use exchange-rate crises in the same way as they use military bases – to destabilise countries.

Because we live in a digital age, we must also have digital sovereignty. Our comrade Jeff Xiong "(Xiong Jie)" has a book about digital sovereignty. We need to build our own digital infrastructure – if not country by country, then regionally. The technology embargo is a function of economic warfare: sanctions, exchange-rate crises, technological embargoes, the military base – all are forms of strategic pressure on our countries, and we have to fight them.

It is true what comrade Prachanda said: the centre of gravity of world manufacturing has moved to Asia. But Asia is still experiencing a drain of finance. Some colleagues in Barcelona have shown that the Global South loses $3 trillion annually through unequal exchange and asymmetric terms of trade – and Asia accounts for the largest share of the losses because it is the world's principal manufacturing region. We know from the IMF that Asia generates about 60% of global growth; yet a substantial share of profits, intellectual-property rents, and financial returns goes back to Europe and the United States. Much of Asia's export surplus is recycled into Western financial markets, dollar-denominated, and military companies in the West. We are financing the military firms that then come and oppress; we are recycling our profits into the militarism that constrains our ability to develop.

Young people are rebelling because capitalism no longer offers them a believable future. They are angry, but they may not have clarity about why they are angry. It is our job to produce that clarity. They don't believe that capitalism is going to give them a future. Our governments and political movements can only retain legitimacy if we deliver on the aspirations of the people – their dignity, their participation in society and in public institutions. Our governments and movements operate under the yoke of hyper-imperialism: military encirclement, financial

discipline, technological monopolies, and ideological warfare. The central political challenge for us in a campaign such as Hands Off Asia is to construct sufficient popular power and regional cooperation to withstand these external constraints. We have to build our strength against these constraints. Hands off Asia means much more than closing bases; it means allowing the people of Asia to determine their own destiny.

In order to prepare my thoughts, I went back and looked at the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947, the Colombo Conference two years later, and the Bandung Conference of 1955. Comrade Hilmar Farid of the Megawati Institute would appreciate this. If you brought a speech by Sukarno from 1955 and read it out today, it still would sound contemporary. It doesn't mean that we have not advanced our struggles in the intervening period from 1955 to 2026. In Sri Lanka it was Sir John Kotelawala who was in power in 1955, now it is President Anura Kumara Dissanayake – a night-and-day difference. Nepal had a very different kind of dominion then, and Comrade Prachanda has been in the lead improving and fighting in Nepal in the intervening years. There have been lots of advances, but also reversals. There have been major reversals – in places like Indonesia and in Bangladesh – in the intervening period. History moves in zigs and zags. History does not intimidate us. We advance; we don't stop.

Take the case of Iran. The Iranians elected a democratic government in 1951. The imperialists decided that Iran should not control its own oil and in 1953, launched a coup d'état to remove Mohammad Mossadegh. From 1953 to 1978–79 the Shah ruled and the imperialists were very happy. When sovereignty was with the Shah, Washington was happy but we were not happy; we were with our comrades in Iran. In 1978–79 the Iranian people rose up in revolution and overthrew the Shah. We celebrated the overthrow of the Shah. From 1979 to the present, the imperialists have tried to overthrow the government in Tehran but failed. These two wars, in 2025 and 2026, were imposed by the US on the Iranian people, and we have supported the Iranian people against these wars.

The imperialists can destroy countries, but they cannot win legitimacy. This is a lesson we have to learn in Asia. I think the Iranians have already learned it: they

have lost a lot of civilians, a lot of infrastructure was destroyed, but they continue to stand with their heads held high and say, 'we will not surrender'. It is a lesson the Vietnamese taught us in 1975, when they defeated the United States. We need to be strong, comrades. We need to hold the confidence given to us by the Vietnamese people when we marched with them against US imperialism. We must not forget that struggle. Today, we are with the Iranian people. Victory will be ours, because the alternative is the destruction of the world.

Hands off Asia is not a plea to anybody. Hands off Asia is a demand – an existential demand for the future. Hands off Asia actually means socialism today. Socialism today, comrades.

Chapter 02

The Militarisation of Asia and the Architecture of Confrontation



Iran's Answer to US Imperialism

Setareh Sadeqi

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Last week, more than forty million people took to the streets of Iran and Iraq for the funerals of Ayatollah Khamenei and other Iranian leaders assassinated by the United States and Israel. I attended the funeral of Ayatollah Khamenei myself. I witnessed millions and millions of people moving through those streets for four men whom the Western imperialist media had spent decades trying to demonise and vilify.

The image the Western media had built was that Ayatollah Khamenei was unpopular and the Iranian people wanted him gone. The reality on the ground was very different from what they wished it to be. The vast majority of Western imperialist outlets ignored the funeral; many of them could not bring themselves to publish the pictures. Their headlines still tried to demonise an entire nation for wanting to grieve a leader assassinated together with members of his family, including a fourteen-month-old granddaughter.

That grief is Iran's answer to US imperialism: to give your life, and the lives of those you love, in order to pay the price. Iran has shown that it is ready to pay that price – not only for itself, but for West Asia and, I would argue, for the world.

To understand why dominant Western scholarship in international relations has failed to grasp how Iran managed to stand in the face of the strongest arms in the world – and not only survive, but push back – one has to begin from what I would call the Westphalian illusion. That is the notion that nations enjoy equal sovereignty. In practice, imperialism and hegemony do not permit any such equality.

The imperialist power claims sovereignty over other nations' territorial spaces. In a unipolar order, smaller states and non-aligned states are expected to subordinate their sovereignty as the price of doing business.

The concept of sovereignty is turned against those who refuse subordination. Resistance itself is framed as a danger to global stability. Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, and every other nation in West Asia that has stood against the United States has been framed this way. Under conditions of hegemony, sovereignty becomes conditional on acting as a submissive node inside a centralised global economy.

The extent of that hegemony is not always understood, even in the Global South. Iran is arguably the most severely sanctioned state in the world today. Iran has been cut off from the entire global financial and trading system. Iranians travelling abroad must carry cash because their banks are disconnected from the international banking system – disconnected even from banks inside our own region. A Swedish firm was, for years, the source of a specialised wound dressing needed by Iranian children suffering from what we call the butterfly disease – a rare and very painful skin condition in which the skin comes off. The firm stopped selling this treatment due to sanctions. Iran eventually developed its own dressings, but children died in the months and years before that. If the United States is able to do that to the Iranian nation, then Iran is entitled to use its geography to defy the entire architecture of that pressure.

Iran has built a counter-hegemonic model that reconfigures sovereignty as the active refusal of foreign spatial control. This model has two operational pillars.

The first is a spatial veto: localised control over a vital maritime passage. The Strait of Hormuz lies in the shared waters of Iran and Oman. Iran has held effective leverage over it for decades. Western-allied commentators are now asking, in outraged tones, how Iran can 'take the entire global economy hostage'. It is worth asking the mirror question. Why is it acceptable for the United States and the financial system it dominates to take the entire Iranian nation hostage through decades of sanctions? A great many countries in the region and beyond complied with those sanctions; some paid the United States as a punishment for daring to trade with us.

That is how Washington controls the system. Yes, Iran can use its geography. Our defiance is not only military, it operates in the economic and cultural fields as well.

The second pillar is the systematic eviction of extra-regional military forces. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research has co-published research arguing that US bases in West Asia have become bullseyes rather than shelters for the regional countries that host them. Iran has made this position explicit. Any country that hosts US bases in our region will become a legitimate target for those defending themselves against US aggression. Persian Gulf monarchies are now complaining that Iran is targeting them. Only weeks ago, those same monarchies were spending billions of dollars buying US defence systems and hosting US military bases – bases used to kill Iranian children, hit Iranian hospitals, and strike Iranian infrastructure. Nobody complained then that they were somehow unaware of what the US was doing from their soil.

The strategic geography of West Asia – beginning with the Strait of Hormuz, and in future perhaps extending to other regional straits – must be under regional control, not extra-regional control. Ayatollah Khamenei spoke of the Strait's strategic potential many years before the current war began. For decades, Iran offered free passage through those waters because we are not a nation that goes looking for wars or aggression. Only when we came under direct attack did we activate our leverage over the Strait to defy not only US sanctions and military adventurism in our region. US officials were warned that Iran would move but Washington continued because it underestimated our ability and willingness to fight.

The picture reverses if you read the map differently. Instead of an inevitable encirclement, one begins to see unique geographical features that can turn what looked like vulnerabilities into structural advantages. Iran's targeting of technological and financial hubs inside the region, including in the United Arab Emirates, is one instance: careful identification of the weak points in the imperial network, and calibrated action against them.

Iran has responded to economic and military pressure by developing forms of self-sufficiency that even the United States has been surprised by: technological

advances, missile capability, an integrated defence system, and asymmetric methods for defying the superiority of US military force.

The cultural dimension of that defiance is the 'Axis of Resistance': a decentralised, horizontal network of state and non-state actors across the region who fight US imperialism together. In this axis are Hezbollah, Hamas, and other resistance formations that have long been demonised and labelled 'terrorist organisations' by the United States. This is a familiar reflex in Washington. Nelson Mandela was on the US list of terrorists for decades. So, whenever the United States labels a country a 'terrorist' or a 'sponsor of terrorism', one may reasonably infer that the country in question is doing something great, and that this is precisely the reason it has come under attack.

Two central myths of US imperialism have been challenged in this war.

The first myth is the invincibility of US military power. Iran has demonstrated that it can inflict serious damage on US forces when it chooses to. A number of US bases in the region are now non-operational, though the United States does not particularly want to discuss it. US troops have been killed and wounded, facts that the Pentagon has worked to minimise. That is the power of the resistance Iran has shown.

The second myth is the impunity of the imperialist system. The United States and Israel have carried out genocides and massacres against peoples across the world without being held accountable. Iran has demonstrated another possibility. Where no international organisation and no international court can hold these powers accountable, a determined nation can raise the cost of imperial aggression until the imperialists reconsider.

The price has been heavy. Weeks ago, I was living in a war zone. Jets flew overhead, sleep was not possible, and every explosion in the distance became a question about whether the people I love were still alive. Classes at the University of Tehran continued online through the war, and students would send messages that the internet had dropped after another strike. We kept going.

That, in the end, is Iran's contribution to this conversation. We have strategic patience. We are willing to pay the price for standing.

An Okinawan Warning against Militarism

Keiko Yonaha

Keiko Yonaha is a former professor of English Language Education at Meio University and co-representative of No More Battle of Okinawa and the Dialogue Project. She has published poetry, essays, and translated works, including What We Can See from Okinawa, Okinawa's Sky, *and* Okinawa's Anger.

Okinawa is a chain of Ryukyu Islands lying between mainland Japan and Taiwan. It comprises 0.6 percent of the total land area of Japan – and today bears 70.6 percent of all US military facilities in Japan. That is a density of US bases 386 times the national average. This is the geography from which I write, and it is not incidental. It is the material precondition of everything I want to say about the war now being prepared in East Asia.

The Battle of Okinawa in 1945 began with the largest naval bombardment in the history of the Pacific war – what Okinawans came to call the Typhoon of Steel. Of the over two-hundred thousand people killed in the only ground battle fought on Japanese territory, over one-hundred and twenty thousand were Okinawans. This is what it means for a place to be turned into a battlefield.

Okinawa was a sacrifice in the defence of Japan. In 1951, the San Francisco Peace Treaty was concluded and Japan became independent, while the Ryukyu Islands were placed under direct US military occupation. Its effective date, 28 April, is remembered by Okinawans as a day of humiliation.

Two secret pacts accompanied the treaty. The first, on base rights, permitted the United States to maintain military bases wherever it wished on Japanese soil. The second, on command authority, stipulated that in the event of a crisis, operational control of Japan's Self-Defense Forces would shift to US command structures.

Under the extraterritoriality that followed, most US soldier-criminals were either acquitted or slipped back to the United States. Approximately seven hundred Okinawans were murdered by US service personnel during that occupation. From 1945 to the present, not one US soldier has been killed by an Okinawan.

From 1950 onwards, land was seized to build bases through what Okinawans of a certain age still remembers as bayonets and bulldozers. In the first two years of the occupation alone – 1945 to 1946 – one hundred and twenty-four sexual-assault cases were reported, and everyone knew that the reported cases were the tip of the iceberg. In one case, a five-year-old girl was raped and dumped. In 1996, a fifth-grader was raped by three US soldiers, and nearly a hundred thousand Okinawans gathered in protest.

In 1953, mainland Japan held eighty-nine percent of US military facilities while Okinawa eleven percent. Anti-base movements on the mainland forced the transfer of installations onto our islands. By the time of Okinawa's 'reversion' to Japan in 1972, our share had climbed to a majority. The disproportion has continued ever since. Today, 0.6 percent of Japan's land carries 70.6 percent of the US military footprint.

Three reasons drove the movement for reversion to Japan in 1972: the Japanese constitution, which under Article 9 renounces war and guarantees fundamental human rights; the recovery of education for our children; and the promise of peace without the US military bases. Only the third promise mattered, and the third promise was betrayed. Not only did the US bases remain, but the Japanese Self-Defense Force was newly deployed alongside them. Coexistence with foreign military bases became the frame for everyday life.

It was a great shock for the Okinawan people to see, in the local papers on Christmas Eve 2021, that Okinawa was to become a military frontline in the event of a US–China war over Taiwan – what came to be known in official language as the 'Taiwan Contingency'. I felt it, at the time, as a Christmas present from both the Japanese and US governments.

In January of the following year, we launched No More Battle of Okinawa to alert the public of the impending crisis, holding lectures and study meetings with military and political experts. Our fourth anti-war rally, held after the pandemic, gathered ten thousand people. Our third rally, organised by younger people, carried the slogan 'Today's Taiwan is Tomorrow's Okinawa'. That formulation says exactly what we feel.

Alongside the rallies, we launched the Okinawa Dialogue Project, which encourages exchanges between opposing sides so that different opinions and positions can be understood and, where possible, overcome. We held three symposia with participants from Taiwan and China. Taiwanese activists and journalists reminded us that the phrase 'Taiwan emergency is the emergency of Japan and the Japan–US alliance' is a wave of solution-by-force that in itself heightens the possibility of war. Others told us that a Taiwan Contingency is an extension of the US–Japan security architecture onto Taiwan, and not a matter of any Japanese territorial interest at all. A newspaper article from Okinawa in 2023 reported that most Taiwanese saw the unification question as one that will not be resolved for another ten years or more, and that they were not hostile to China. It was Japanese Prime Minister Abe who insisted that the Taiwan contingency is a Japanese contingency – not Taiwan.

Our Chinese guests offered an important warning. Neither Taiwan nor the Taiwan Strait, we were told, will see any incident – on the condition that the Japanese government does not cause a problem in the Taiwan Strait. The political situation in Japan, unfortunately, is moving in the opposite direction. The *2+2* documents commit Japan and the US to strengthening the SDF across the southwestern island chain and to expanding the joint use of US bases in Okinawa. Self-Defense Force units have been deployed across those islands, drilling *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* – a US Marine doctrine under which it is the residents who receive the counter-attack. And Okinawa has already learned the lesson of the Battle of Okinawa: the military does not protect residents.

Since 2021, joint Japan–US exercises have been conducted annually and have continued to expand. Japan focuses public attention on the 'Chinese threat'. In reality,

it is Japan and the United States that are creating the threat. Base upgrades are underway across western Japan; long-range missiles are being stationed. At the sound of a siren, residents are told to crouch inside nearby buildings with their arms over their heads – as if a nuclear-tipped missile could be shrugged off by a public-service announcement. Missile-evacuation drills of this sort are meaningless as protection. They serve only to normalise fear among the population.

The pattern is not new to those who look. The US wrongly predicted the timing of Russia's operation in Ukraine, it now predicts with equal certainty a Chinese move on Taiwan – within two to three years – with no proof or evidence of any Chinese preparation offered.

The Japanese journalist Okada Atsushi has documented in detail how US policy toward Taiwan since 2019 bears a strong resemblance to US policy toward Ukraine in the years before 2022: the largest-ever arms sales in both value and volume; repeated visits by cabinet ministers and senior officers; military aircraft flights and landings on Taiwanese airfields; frequent passage of US warships through the Strait; and the entry of a US military advisory team into Taiwan to train the Taiwanese military.

The policy that produced the war in Europe is being implemented in East Asia. US Lieutenant General James Bierman has said the quiet part aloud: 'The reason Ukraine is holding its own against Russia is that we set a theatre there. Now we are doing the same thing in Japan and the Philippines'.

In the current situation, we in Okinawa understand there are two root problems.

The first is that Japan remains under US military occupation. What we are subjected to is not, in truth, foreign policy but a form of dependence. What Japan must reclaim is the right to self-determination, the right to self-governance, and national dignity. What Okinawa is fighting to reclaim is more specific still: the right to self-determination, the right to self-governance, and the dignity of our local government.

The second is Japan's revisionist denial of its own past. Those who close their eyes to the past make its mistakes again. The Japanese wars were the Sino-Japanese War of aggression and the Pacific War against the United States.

The Battle of Okinawa was a sacrifice to preserve the Emperor system. Today's war preparation is a sacrifice to preserve another imperial polity – US hegemony. Under the Liberal Democratic Party's right-wing administration, and its ongoing pattern of secret agreements with Washington and violations of the people's right to know, war is inevitable unless we change the government.

Okinawa's forty-one mayors travelled to Tokyo to protest the deployment of the Osprey aircraft. Former Governor Masahide Ōta put it this way: 'I was more shocked by the citizens who stood by and watched than by the attacks from the right wing'.

It was in the autumn of 1969, after two great anti-war rallies in the United States, that President Richard Nixon cancelled what he himself called his madman plans for a massive escalation of the war in Vietnam, including the threatened use of nuclear weapons. It has been done before. It can be done again. The condition, in both places, is that the peoples on whom the war would be inflicted refuse to be bystanders.

Say no to the politicians who shout for war and yes to those who call for peace. We in Okinawa are, at times, tempted to give up. We have been defeated for a long time. But we still save each other, and we still take action for our children and our grandchildren – for a bright future for Okinawa, for Japan, and for the region.

Defending Community against Militarisation in the Philippines

Corazon Valdez Fabros

Corazon Valdez Fabros is co-president of the International Peace Bureau, a core member of the thematic circle on Peace and Security at the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum, and lead convenor of STOP the War Coalition Philippines. A lawyer and member of the Philippine Bar since 1979, she works on peace, anti-militarism, and nuclear disarmament, and is a founding member of the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers.

On 30 May 2026, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth declared that the United States cannot remain the sole primary security guarantor of the Asia-Pacific without reciprocal burden-sharing up to 3.5 percent of regional GDP. Those who did not meet that standard, he warned, would be pushed to the back of the line for essential arms transfers and strategic intelligence sharing. That was not a request or a recommendation – it was a threat.

For the Philippines, the numbers are stark. Calculated against our projected GDP, a 3.5 percent defence target demands nearly triple the country's current core base defence allocation – a sum that outstrips whole domestic social sectors. When the military budget line goes up, the education, health, and housing budget lines go down. That is the mathematics of what the United States is asking us to accept.

Above the Philippines sits what the United States has assembled as the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) bloc – Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Aotearoa or New Zealand – pulled directly into the Western global defence grids. Defence analysts confirm that the IP4 has now established direct operational coordination lines with NATO headquarters, creating long-term technological and structural lock-in. The jargon is interoperability. The reality is a captive arms market: nations like the Philippines are locked into buying identical Western weapons because our forces are drilled to run on nothing else. The result is a weaponised sea, land, and air.

As I write, RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Exercise) is running in Hawaii, with forty-one thousand troops from forty-one nations. Alongside it are Talisman Sabre in Australian waters and, back at home, Balikatan – our annual joint exercise with the United States. These are not routine manoeuvres. They are live tactical rehearsals aimed at sealing the key maritime chokepoints of what US planners call the First Island Chain – a geographical containment wall running from the Kuril Islands through Japan, Taiwan, and the northern Philippines to Borneo. Originally a Cold War design, it is now revived as a forward defence perimeter. Controlling its gaps – Bashi Channel above all – is critical to controlling the shipping corridors and naval access of the western Pacific. It is not only the northern Philippines that is being drawn in – the entire archipelago is being utilised.

The division of labour is now openly spelt out in the US–Japan–Philippines trilateral agreements. The United States is the strategic supervisor, providing long-range weapon networks, satellite command, and advanced strike arrays. Japan and Australia are the regional financial and technological engines, upgrading radar sites and building defence capacity. Japan, for instance, funds Philippine Coast Guard vessels while Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites provide US forces with tactical basing across key coordinates. The Philippines is asked to provide the physical real estate – strategic runways, ports, and dual-use logistical corridors.

In 1991, after decades of struggle, the Philippine Senate voted the United States out of Subic Bay and Clark Air Base. I come from the generation of activists that fought through the First Quarter Storm of the 1970s, when the Philippines' role as a rear area for the US war in Vietnam was the political education of a whole cohort of my generation. I did not think we would live to see the last plane leave, the last trip out of Clark and Subic.

I tell that story here not for its historical value but as a message to the younger comrades: you never know what may happen. Sometimes, there is a bonus on the other side of persistent struggle. But the condition of that bonus is that you begin the struggle, that you are part of it, and that you continue it.

However, militarisation back within a decade of that 1991 victory – not as bases under the old treaty framework, but under a chain of new agreements. Today, if you look at a map of the agreed locations opened to US forces in the Philippines, Luzon is smeared with red, and the pattern is spreading. Most of the agreed locations sit inside Philippine military installations. We call this the 'base within a base'. It is no longer only the north of the country. The southern archipelago, historically outside the US footprint, is fast becoming a hub for war logistics. These bases serve not only the United States, but militaries arriving from around world, including NATO.

The militarisation of our territory is increasingly disguised as economic development. The Luzon Economic Corridor was launched with great fanfare as a civilian trade initiative. Projects like the 45-mile fuel pipeline from Subic to Basa Air Base – signed by the Bases Conversion and Development Authority in March 2026 – reveal its true purpose. Security analysts note that the Subic–Basa pipeline links a deep-water port directly to an active EDCA site. By building fuel networks and cargo hubs directly into bases hosting foreign warplanes, dual-use infrastructure turns local development along our coasts into a military target. What is presented as economic growth is, under the surface, war planning.

Alongside the corridor sits a US-led technology alliance, which by the recent count includes some thirty-four countries. It has been established to build technological supply chains outside China – semiconductors, artificial intelligence, critical minerals, data centres. The Philippines is being invited in because it is rich in the mineral resources this infrastructure requires. In our country, the alliance is being built on approximately two-thousand hectares of land which will have to be cleared.

That means displacement, land grabs, and violence against the communities standing in the way. The alliance is also demanding diplomatic immunity for its personnel, tax exemption, and reduced wages for local workers. Between the diplomatic immunity and the reserved territory, what is being built is not a special economic zone but a strategic enclave.

Every modern missile and fighter jet imported to meet the 3.5 percent target is a direct theft of funds from social safety nets, public hospitals, and rural farmers. The Department of Education has confirmed a national classroom deficit that exceeds one-hundred and fifty-thousand units. Millions of Filipino children are studying in overcrowded rooms, on shifting schedules, and in structural decay. This is what the war premium looks like in practice.

I want to try a metaphor that puts the 3.5 percent into the frame my community would recognise. Imagine that a global group knocks on your door and says: your neighbourhood is now a war zone. Spend 3.5 percent of your income on weapons and a concrete bunker in your kitchen. You say, 'But my roof is leaking'. They reply, 'We do not care'.

The costs of militarisation are not abstract. During recent Balikatan and joint drills off Zambales and Northern Luzon, the Philippine government enforced extensive maritime exclusion zones, shutting local artisanal fisherfolk out of their own municipal waters for weeks. Local agricultural lands are seized for military security buffer zones. Intense naval sonar deafens marine life and destroys fragile coastal ecosystems. The consequence is that the Philippines cannot conduct an independent foreign policy while our territory is at the disposal of a foreign power. We cannot pursue independent development while our public resources are drained into militarism.

We know what we need. We need true neutrality – a rejection of the 3.5 percent NATO-style military target and a full return to ZOPFAN, the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality signed by ASEAN members in 1971 to keep Southeast Asia free from any form of interference by outside powers. Reclaiming that framework is entirely consistent with the historical regional treaties our own governments once championed. We need the peace dividend: the billions now allocated for multi-role fighter jets should be redirected to solve the classroom, hospital, and energy crises. We need an independent policy that bans all foreign military installations and refuses participation in aggressive multinational war games.

In the disputed waters we in the Philippines call the West Philippine Sea, our social movement has not yet built a united front. But we know the direction: an ecological alternative to a live-fire battleground. We must advocate for declaring it an international Marine Peace Park. The Spratlys act as a primary larval spawning ground for the entire South China Sea. Regional marine biologists widely support establishing international demilitarised protected zones to stop the ecological collapse now unfolding. Let scientists and local fisherfolk govern and protect the environment, replacing military destroyers with collaborative ecological research.

Our home – the Philippines, and the wider Asia Pacific – is a community of peoples, not a combat zone. True strength comes from healthy, educated, and free citizens.

The demand does not stop at our shores. Twenty years ago, when the International Network of No US Bases opened in Ecuador, we said that the call for unity and the internationalisation of our struggle was essential. That call is more essential now. 'Hands Off Asia' is addressed not only to the peoples of this region but to peoples across the world. I am privileged and honoured to be part of it. My Philippine comrades understand that I speak here for a shared commitment.

Taiwan Under US Ideological Control

Meei-shia Chen

Meei-shia Chen is the founding chair of the Diaoyutai Education Association and emerita professor of public health at National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan, China. She has been involved in movements for sovereignty and against US and Japanese imperialism for over fifty years.

Taiwan has been described as the most dangerous place in the world. We hear about the 'Taiwan question', and the separation between Taiwan and mainland China. Taiwan is a province of China and, historically, is very closely connected to Fujian province across the strait. So why has this situation come about? To understand it, we have to look at the long history of imperialist intervention in China, and at what US imperialism did to Taiwan after 1949.

In 1949, the Kuomintang (KMT) was defeated by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and retreated to Taiwan. That was the beginning of the separation of Taiwan and mainland China. In the years immediately following the World War II, the hostility between the capitalist system led by the United States and the socialist system led by the USSR became the major contradiction of world politics, and US imperialism intervened in the CPC–KMT civil war on the KMT's side, supporting it militarily, financially, and with other resources. That is the origin of the Taiwan question.

The US war on Korea in 1950 hardened US containment policy against the expansion of communism. KMT-led Taiwan became a key part of that containment. Washington interfered once again in the internal affairs of China. It brought with it a Cold War ideology of anti-communist liberalism and modernisation theory, dressed up as universal values: individual freedom, human rights, and Western democracy. Taiwan was cut off from mainland China. Cross-strait relations have been in troubled waters ever since.

Taiwan is a part of China. The islands were connected to the mainland by a land bridge tens of thousands of years ago. The indigenous peoples of Taiwan are mostly of mainland origin. Chinese state administration of Taiwan begins some 1,800 years ago. Han migration from the mainland to Taiwan begins around 900 years ago, and continues without interruption through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Today, Han Chinese account for 96% of Taiwan's population. Taiwan was part of Fujian province from 1684 to 1885, and a province of China in its own right from 1885 to the present. The land, culture, and people are connected, and have been connected for a very long time.

Against that longue durée, Taiwan has been disconnected from the mainland only three times – always by imperialist invasion and occupation. First, Dutch colonisation from 1624 to 1662 – thirty-eight years. Second, Japanese colonisation from 1895 to 1945 – fifty years. Third, through US military and ideological control from 1950 to the present. It is this third occupation, and how to end it, that I want to speak about.

The United States installed a military presence on Taiwan from 1950 to the late 1970s, in the height of the Cold War. In 1950, Washington sent its Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. In 1954, a Mutual Defense Treaty was signed between the United States and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. Military bases were established on the island from 1952 to 1979. This was a clear intervention in the internal affairs of China, conducted through economic assistance and ideological control.

With US backing, Taiwan lived under martial law for forty years, from 1947 to 1987 – the era of the White Terror. When the KMT arrived in Taiwan, the local resistance was killed. Many intellectuals and activists were murdered. The mass graves later discovered are a reminder of what a US-supported dictatorship looked like on the ground, and of what it meant, in practice, to be free under the ideological banner promoted by Washington.

The scale of US military presence overseas is not confined to Taiwan. There are 750 to 800 US military bases overseas – Taiwan is only one of them. But Taiwan

is where I want to focus, because the ideological dimension of US control is what I know from the inside.

By ideological control I mean a systematic apparatus: an educational system, media, and propaganda machinery organised around a study-abroad policy that funnelled the most promising young Taiwanese to the United States and trained them into a pro-US elite. Fellowships and foundations – prominently, the Asia Foundation – were the delivery mechanism. I am one of the people who benefited from that policy. I went from Taiwan to the United States to study. I know from the inside what that pipeline is designed to do, and what it did to my generation.

The content of the ideology is anti-communist liberalism, modernisation theory, and universal values - pro-US, anti-communist, and anti-China. Half a century on, this is still the mainstream ideology of Taiwan.

In 1979, the United States finally established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, on the condition that it sever diplomatic relations with the ROC, withdraw its troops, and terminate the Mutual Defense Treaty. The US did those things. But I want to emphasise, as clearly as I can, that the withdrawal of troops does not mean less evil than ideological control.

After 1979, US control continued through other means. The Taiwan Relations Act was passed the same year the PRC was recognised. Arms sales continued – every single US president from Jimmy Carter onward has continued them, and the most recent sale, on the figures I have seen, reached $400 billion. US personnel continued to train Taiwanese troops. The ideological machinery was, if anything, expanded.

How does one break through the ideological control of such a huge hegemony? In Taiwan, we have a term for this fight. We call it 'the little against the whale' – tiny in the face of enormous force. But if we can analyse how an ideology was developed, we can begin to break through it by changing the structure and the environment that produced it.

I want to share, briefly, one example of that patient work: the fifty-year movement to protect the Diaoyutai islands, which I have been part of from the beginning.

From 1945 to the late 1960s, the Diaoyutai islands were part of US trust territory, and Taiwanese fishermen were free to fish in their waters. In the early 1970s, in order to consolidate the US–Japan anti-communist alliance in East Asia, the United States 'returned' the Diaoyutai islands to Japan. This was itself a collusion between the two imperialisms – US and Japanese – against Chinese sovereignty and against the Taiwanese fishermen whose livelihoods depended on those waters.

The movement to protect the Diaoyutai islands began among overseas Chinese students in the United States and spread to Taiwan. Its instruments have been educational, cultural, and political. We have held educational camps and study circles. We have undertaken critical analysis of school textbooks – ideological control begins with children, and so counter-education must begin there too. We have organised protests, including at the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, which functions as a de facto Japanese institution on our soil. And we have used cultural forms – including traditional opera – to bring the arguments to grassroots audiences who might not read a pamphlet but who will attend a performance.

The pictures from five decades are enough to fill an exhibition. The point of listing them here is that this is what breaking through ideological control actually looks like: patient, cumulative, unglamorous, and stubborn – the little strength against the big whale. The people of Taiwan remain under both ideological and military control. We are still fighting.

Bangladeshi Notes on Militarisation beyond Bases

Fahreen Alamgir

Fahreen Alamgir is senior lecturer in the Department of Management at Monash Business School, Australia. Her research advances methodologies for studying violence in management and organisation studies, focusing on gendered and racialised global apparel production networks and employment relations in Bangladesh.

There is no US military base in Bangladesh. This is often the first thing said about the militarisation of my country and, in a narrow sense, it is true. But it is also a useful place to begin unlearning what militarisation. Militarisation does not require a base. It embeds in infrastructures, institutional values, cultural practices, the shape of a coastline, and the political economy of a refugee camp.

Militarisation is also relational; it has the capacity to work with human rights enterprises. This is marked by its ability to rehabilitate refugees who have been uprooted by political conflicts or natural calamities. Therefore, it is more powerful because it embodies political and cultural values, accommodates capital and religions, and, hence, works as an ideology.

Here, I want to raise more questions than I answer, because I think the questions we are learning to ask in Bangladesh are ones our comrades in other parts of Asia and the Pacific may find themselves needing to ask soon.

Much of the militarisation debate in Bangladesh today is centred on four seaports –each at different stages of rebuilding, expansion, or construction. Under the interim government that came to power in 2024, a controversial decision was reached to lease out Chittagong Port to DP World – the Dubai-based logistics firm whose operations extend as far as Somalia – which has close connections with the United States.

Why has a profit-making port, which contributes significant value to the national economy – estimated at $450 million – been leased out? This question has been repeatedly raised by trade-union federations and workers. Such observations are outcomes of the broader trend of the past four decades under the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programmes. Trade-union leaders and workers I speak with repeatedly return to the same questions. Why did the interim government take this decision when the port is not loss making? Furthermore, why was this specific logistics company chosen? What understanding of Bangladeshi sovereignty is at work in an arrangement that hands over port operations to a firm whose strategic footprint extends far beyond Bangladesh?

A second port, the Matarbari deep-sea port, is being built under Japanese finance. Its site was originally supposed to be at Sonadia – where a project financed by China under the Belt and Road Initiative had been agreed. In the end, that project did not happen. My working hypothesis is that Bangladesh, under the previous regime, did not want to be part of the Quad – and that its refusal was itself an expression of sovereignty. But because that refusal was strategic, other arrangements had to be found: the Chinese-financed deep-sea port did not proceed, the port project was moved and is now financed by Japan. I do not present this as an established finding. I present it as the question I want us to be able to ask.

Bangladesh was incorporated into Pakistan following the cessation of colonial rule, when the subcontinent was partitioned into two nations predominantly based on religious affiliations. Bangladesh subsequently became East Pakistan. While the Pakistani government endorsed the Bandung Declaration, it pursued development through industrialisation and private-sector expansion, increasingly influenced by the Washington Consensus. Jute mills were established in the 1950s and 1960s.

The workers in these jute mills organised collectively and played a vital role in the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in 1971. The Six-Point Programme, articulated in the 1960s, contained clear demands for workers' rights and social justice. These principles were subsequently reflected in the Constitution of Bangladesh in 1972. Indeed, from 1966 to 2008, the jute mills' workers and this industrial base posed significant challenges to both the project of militarisation and the wider

imperialist structure, particularly in a context of interrupted democratic politics in Bangladesh.

Then came 1975. The post-independence government was brought down by a bloody military coup. At the same time, the country agreed to World Bank and International Monetary Fund proposals to partially deregulate and privatise some of its jute mills. The post-independence government had made a strong commitment to the implementation of the Bandung declarations, which was also consistent with the four major principles of the 1972 constitution – of which the secular state and social justice were two. However, that commitment was among the first things dismantled after the military coup.

Militarisation does not necessarily entail direct violence or direct military involvement. It is also a matter of values, cultural and religious practices, and the institutional norms that shape everyday life. When militarisation as a practice becomes embedded in our institutions and society – and governance cycles through democratic government, military regimes, and interim governments – militarised infrastructures become embedded in these institutional processes. This is why, twice in recent years – first in 2007 and again in 2024 – our interim governments have been able to move quickly to implement the economic restructuring programme long advocated by the World Bank.

In 2007, when the then interim government attempted to finalise its Structural Adjustment Programme, all the workers of the state-owned jute mills in Khalishpur Industrial Town, Khulna, took to the streets and pushed back. Their movement lasted forty days. It had two significant impacts. First, the interim government was forced to halt the leasing of the jute mills – a strategy of privatisation that was presented as a way of deceiving and displacing the workers. Second, it had to announce a date for national elections.

The political parties that subsequently came to power as a Grand Alliance included the continued functioning of state-owned enterprises in their manifesto. I raise these observations because they help us understand Bangladesh's political and economic trajectory and its interconnectedness with the process of militarisation. At the same time, they help us recognise what was absent during the regime change

in July 2024: the organised working class. If anyone suggests that there was working-class representation, I would say that we have seen in the past how hunger, starvation, anger, and frustration can lead to regime change when they intersect with organised working-class movements. However, the organised working-class force that was once central to democratic struggles in Bangladesh was largely absent in July 2024. We must understand this absence in the context of three decades of transformations in trade-union organisation and working-class politics.

Over the past three decades, a new ruling class has consolidated its power through the ready-made garment industry, in a nexus with the civil bureaucracy and military. National labour laws and policy regimes have largely worked in its favour. For decades, garment workers have been denied the basic right to organise unions at the factory level; joining trade-union federations carried the risk of job insecurity. In Export Processing Zones, workers face even greater restrictions: they are not permitted to form conventional trade unions. These zones function as a kind of state of exception within the nation state.

We also need to be careful with this kind of analysis. An intersectional lens is essential to understand who we are talking about, whose frustrations are being expressed, and in which languages. This is why the new terminologies entering our vocabulary matter. Terms such as *mazlum* – now increasingly used as a blanket term to recognise all as subaltern – can flatten important differences. All subalterns are not equally subaltern.

When poverty and marginalisation have long been packaged through NGO development projects, the majoritarian fractions of the excluded can themselves become part of what we call the subaltern, and their frustrations can be mobilised in ways that do not serve the emancipation of all. What we need is an ethical capacity to listen carefully and translate faithfully what we have heard.

The entire Bangladeshi coastline has increasingly been placed under the authority of the navy and the army, while private investment along the coast is channelled through military-owned business interests. If this coastal-industrial infrastructure requires human labour, nearly one million Rohingya refugees constitute a readily

available labour force. This is where the geographical and geopolitical positioning I want to emphasise becomes crucial.

We cannot forget that nearly one million stateless Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are now sheltered in the coastal district of Cox's Bazar. In 2023–24, it was reported that around $210.46 million in investment had flowed into the area. It is also important to note that the Bangladesh Army has been a visible actor in receiving and 'settling' the refugees.

What follows is what I have been calling 'relational militarism': the entanglement of militarisation with human rights enterprises such as NGOs and the wider rehabilitation economy. The military has become increasingly capable of speaking the language of human rights. This is an entanglement that our analysis must work harder to disentangle.

Aside from this, we must note that three distinct political economies have developed around the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, operating fully since 2017, with a longer trajectory dating back nearly four decades. The first is a relational-humanitarian economy running through the international NGOs that arrive to rehabilitate the refugees. The second is a consumer economy. Refugees, even stateless ones, spend money as consumers even though they are not allowed to work. These people are ready to be employed in economic zones at any cost, because everyone wants to have a livelihood. The third is a surveillance economy – I suspect the government is increasingly spending on surveillance technology in order to 'look after' them.

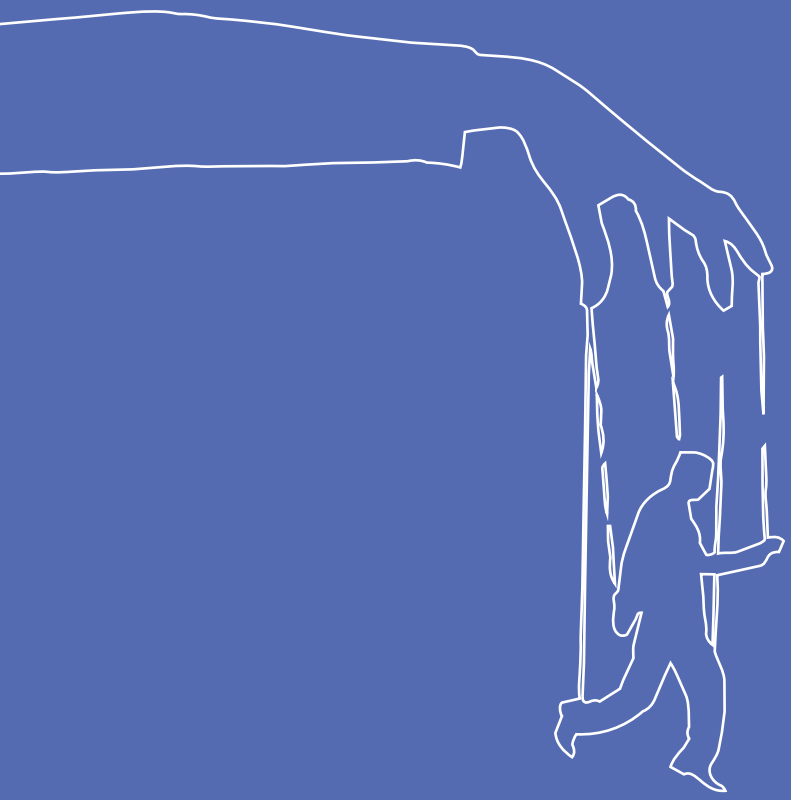
Academic discourse is, as we know, both innovative and strategic. People and their potential – their very bodies – are increasingly represented through the language of 'unlocked human potential'. Why not put these people to work? The humanitarian crisis is thus being reframed through the vocabulary of the business and human rights.

Militarisation does not always require a military base. It requires a coast, a port, a lease, a set of institutional values, a refugee population, a surveillance-technology procurement system. When necessary, the working class comes to the streets,

fights on its own, and confronts the security apparatus – where both the police and the army can be used against them. Any anti-imperialist analysis of the current conjuncture in South Asia must be attentive to all of these, and to what their entanglement tells us about the imperial architecture we are now facing.

Chapter 03

Hegemonic Recomposition: Regime Change, Political Destabilisation, and Imperial Interference



Neocolonialism and Mass Struggle in Bangladesh

Nur Ahmed Bakul

Nur Ahmed Bakul is General Secretary (In Charge) of the Workers Party of Bangladesh. He is also a lawyer. A teenage freedom fighter in 1971, he has led leftist student and youth movements and played key roles in democratic coalitions, anti-war-criminal campaigns, and progressive party-building.

I must begin by drawing the attention of comrades in this room to the situation of my party's president. Rashed Khan Menon is 84 years old and in jail. He held no ministerial post; he was an allied partner of the previous government, part of the fourteen-party alliance. He has been placed under a special court – the International Crimes Tribunal, which is controlled by the present political forces – and seventy-eight murder cases have been filed against him. Another comrade, Hasanul Haq Inu of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, has been sentenced to ten years by the same tribunal. These are the conditions under which the Left in Bangladesh now speaks. I hope you will raise your voice for our leader.

Every nation passes through defining moments that reshape the course of its state. The events of July and August 2024 undoubtedly constitute such a moment in Bangladesh's contemporary history. Yet the true significance of what happened cannot be measured merely by the fall of one government or the emergence of another. History will judge these events by far more searching standards. Did they extend democracy? Did they defend justice? Did they save our national sovereignty? Did they preserve social harmony? Did they improve the dignity of ordinary people's lives? These remain the fundamental questions before our nation, and history's answers depend on them.

Whether the events of July–August 2024 are described as a student uprising, a mass movement, a popular revolt, or even a revolution, there is little disagreement that they have fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of Bangladesh.

The immediate catalyst was the quota issue – a debate over reserved seats for public employment. But this was not, in any serious sense, the reason the movement gathered the force it did. It was the trigger for a much broader accumulation of public frustration: economic hardship, political polarisation, governance failures, and growing dissatisfaction among sections of the younger generation.

These grievances were genuine. But forces operating far beyond the movement's immediate demands subsequently used them, strategically and directly. On my party's analysis, sections of what is commonly described as the deep state – associated with US imperialism – together with both domestic and international collaborators, played significant roles in shaping the political direction and the ultimate outcome of what unfolded.

These collaborators included extremist religious right-wing organisations, segments of the NGO sector, and elements of the intellectual community. The army controlled the last three days of the mobilisation in particular. The army opened the doors of the National Parliament House and the Prime Minister's residence. That is not what a spontaneous popular uprising looks like.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of these events has been the emergence of an intense ideological struggle over Bangladesh's future identity. There has been a systematic destruction of monuments associated with the Liberation War of 1971, attacks on historical symbols, proposals to rename public institutions, and continuing debates over our national identity. This is not opposition to a particular political party. It is a wider challenge to the political, constitutional, and historical legacy established through the Liberation War itself.

These debates will profoundly shape not only the immediate future of our politics, but the long-term character of our state, our democracy, and our national development.

Let me turn to the political realignment following the parliamentary election. The result has produced an unprecedented concentration of power. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party has formed a government with an overwhelming parliamentary majority, while Jamaat-e-Islami has emerged as the principal opposition party. In practical terms, no other political party enjoys meaningful representation in parliament.

The election operated under significant constraints, and its outcome has fundamentally narrowed the political landscape. For the first time in many years, our political arena is polarised around a very small number of major forces, and progressive and left-democratic parties in parliamentary politics have been substantially reduced.

At the same time, it is equally important to recognise that the two dominant parties share considerable ideological proximity on many fundamental questions. Despite their practical disagreements and their competition for political dominance, the distance between them is not enormous. Any realistic assessment of the present government must therefore take into account both the areas of cooperation and the areas of contradiction between the ruling party and its principal opposition.

The future of the Awami League, the party overthrown in the July–August events, is uncertain. At present, it has not been able to re-establish itself as an effective participant in mainstream political life. For progressive and democratic forces, this changing political reality demands careful analysis rather than emotional reaction.

A clear understanding of the new balance of political forces is indispensable to any effective strategy for defending democracy, secularism, national sovereignty, and the rights of working people in the years ahead.

The aspect of the present political polarisation that concerns us most, comrades, is the evolving realignment within the Left itself. The political position of those left-wing parties that participated in the July movement has become increasingly complex. Some have concentrated their criticism primarily on Jamaat; others have directed their principal attention toward US imperialism.

Yet in assessing the nature and the consequences of the July movement, many continue to face – and are likely to continue facing – the difficulty of arriving at a clearly defined political objective and a coherent strategic framework. Some of the left parties that were part of the fourteen-party alliance continue to share broad political principles. But time and sustained political dialogue will be required before they can reach a common position on the new political reality that has emerged.

In these circumstances, it is politically imperative that our party stand firmly upon its own independent political foundation, while remaining open to principled unity on issues of common struggle.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the present ruling forces in Bangladesh align themselves with imperialist intervention and with the broader strategic interests of Western capital. The recent treaty concluded between the interim government and the United States in February 2026 represents, in our analysis, a long-term framework of political and strategic subordination to imperialist interests.

Signed by the interim government under Professor Muhammad Yunus, the agreement is, in substance, a treaty of neo-colonialism by the US. It is a new arrangement, of a kind our country has not seen before.

Only through sustained mass struggle can an alternative political force emerge in Bangladesh – one capable not merely of changing the government but of transforming the very structure of society, and laying the foundation for a new political and economic order based on democracy, equality, social justice, national sovereignty, and the interest of the working people. We believe the future political polarisation of Bangladesh must move in this direction.

The challenges before us are large. But history has repeatedly shown that when people organise around clear political objectives, principled leadership, and unwavering commitment, even the most formidable obstacles can be overcome.

Let us therefore strengthen international solidarity among progressive and working-class forces throughout the world. Let us continue our common struggle

against imperialism, exploitation, oppression, communalism, and every form of reaction. And let us reaffirm our commitment to peace, democracy, social justice, and the emancipation of working people everywhere.

Long live international solidarity! Long live the revolution! Hands off Asia!

A Nepali Communist's Reflection on the Political Technology of Fragmentation

Balram Prasad Banskota

Balram Banskota is a former member of Nepal's National Assembly and a leader of the Nepali Communist Party. He works on democratic and agrarian transformation, social justice, food sovereignty, climate justice, and anti-imperialism. As an active leader of the International Peoples' Assembly (IPA), he works to strengthen solidarity among people's movements across Asia and the Global South.

Asia was long known as the land of grain. Today, we are more often defamed as the settlement of poverty and hunger. Asia has become one of the epicentres of geopolitics – but military intervention is no longer the only, or even the primary, weapon deployed against patriotic and progressive movements in our part of the world. Increasingly, fragmentation itself has become a political strategy.

The question we usually ask, when a progressive movement fails, is why. I want to reverse it. The more useful question is how – how are progressive political forces fragmented, before they become capable of transforming the situation? Nepal offers one important example, but the lessons extend across the Global South.

During the twentieth century, imperialism relied openly on military and authoritarian repression to break the movements it feared. Those methods have not gone away. But a new strategy has been added on top of them. Rather than destroying movements directly, they are increasingly weakened through disintegration from within.

Political parties fragmented. Trade unions fragmented. Peasant movements fragmented. Youth organisations fragmented. Public opinion fragmented. Division itself has become a political technology.

Fragmentation emerges through a specific set of interactions: the manufactured crises of neoliberal capitalism; deepening inequality; weakened public institutions; platform capitalism and social media; corporate media saturation; domestic political failures; and, cutting across all of these, geopolitical competition and external strategic interest.

We should reject simplistic explanations. Neither external pressures alone nor internal mistakes alone can account for fragmentation. It occurs where domestic contradictions intersect with the structures of global capitalism and geopolitical competition.

And the key question is not simply who causes fragmentation. The more important question is who benefits from it.

The pattern repeats with striking regularity. First an economic crisis; then public anger; then an inadequate or absent progressive response. Into that gap enters a manufactured anti-establishment politics – digital, curated, presented as a fresh break with the old order. Then organisational fragmentation, and finally the breaking of progressive consensus.

Public anger is genuine. Corruption is real. Unemployment is real. Migration is a life-or-death question for our neighbours. The question is not whether people should be angry. The question is who organises that anger. Where progressive movements fail to organise legitimate anger, someone else will.

Manufactured anti-establishment politics usually advocates a specific set of things: good governance, efficiency, new faces, neither left nor right. Its content is a kind of lumpen idealism. It offers technocratic solutions and pointedly avoids the questions that matter: challenging capitalism, class perspective, corporate power, financial domination, structural inequality and injustice, state responsibility, and imperialism. This is the post-ideological moment. It borrows the language of change while carefully avoiding structural transformation. It teaches citizens to criticise politicians rather than the political economy. Politics becomes administration.

Alongside this, a generational discourse takes over. Young people face genuine problems – unemployment, migration, housing, digital insecurity, climate anxiety, economic insecurity. Their frustrations are legitimate. The danger arises when those frustrations are decoupled from class analysis. Instead of a politics of labour versus capital, we get a politics of young versus old. Historical memory disappears. Organisational continuity breaks.

Platform capitalism accelerates all of this. Algorithms reward outrage, spectacle, and personal branding. They discourage political education, collective organisation, mass movement, democratic deliberation, ideological development, and internationalism. These outcomes are not accidents. They are what the economic model rewards: attention through views, likes, and shares, with polarisation converted into profit. Politics becomes personalised; movements become audiences; candidates become influencers.

Nepal today shows all of these global trends at once. A history of people's struggle and progressive victories, cross-cut by organisational fragmentation, the rise of anti-establishment politics, digital polarisation, generational divides, geopolitical competition, declining public trust, and external influence operating openly through influencers.

Nepal is not unique. It is more like a laboratory. Many countries across Asia are confronting similar dynamics; comparative international analysis is essential.

Under conditions of geopolitical competition, political fragmentation increases a country's vulnerability. External influence today operates through many channels at once: through financial capital and class structure; through development programmes; through information and data collection; through technology and diplomacy; through strategic and military partnerships. Fragmentation creates opportunity. External actors work an already-divided political landscape, weakening sovereignty and the capacity for decision making.

But I do not want to place the blame only on external forces. No serious movement should. Our own weaknesses matter, and matter a great deal.

Weak ideological education. Opportunism. Personality politics. Electoralism at the expense of movement work. Declining democratic centralism. These have real consequences. Regular leadership renewal, meaningful inclusion of youth, disciplined political education, robust internal democracy, honest criticism and self-criticism: these are the conditions for rebuilding public confidence in a communist party. Unity cannot be imposed; it must be earned.

Within South Asia we can already see three different lessons unfolding side by side. In Sri Lanka, positive lessons: our comrades are now in a position of power, and are working for the people. In Bangladesh, the establishment of what looks like a one-party political dictatorship – though our Bangladeshi comrades can explain that better than I can. And in Nepal – our own experience.

When we were in power in Nepal, we were confident. We thought that anyone who opposed us would fail, that the people were with us. But we were not careful enough about imperialist encroachment. The imperialists were intervening through the International Monetary Fund, and we were silent. Through the World Bank – silent. Through the Asian Development Bank – silent. And internally, within a net of conspiracy we did not adequately track, we ourselves were complacent. I was among the confident. When our comrades in Bangladesh told us what was happening there, I still thought: if something like that were to happen in Nepal, I would face it, I would be the leader. That thinking was wrong.

We have to learn how the imperialist forces – US imperialism above all – have been conducting a long conspiracy: in the name of aid, in the name of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, in the name of State Partnership Programs, in the name of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. They have been able to use us. We have to realise that we were used.

The situation has now changed for us. Because of divisions within the communist faction, our party has lost about a hundred seats out of two hundred and seventy-five; we have no significant weight in parliament any longer. That is the reality. It is due to the failures of our thinking, to lumpenism entering our own house, to our not caring what socialism means and how to implement it. As Vijay Prashad

put it earlier at this conference: we don't want socialism for the future; we want socialism for now. I agree with him on that. And there are political mistakes we have to own. Our party is now collecting feedback from our cadres, and we will soon publish an honest account of why we lost this election. We are confident that we will regain what we lost, and will win the next round.

The programmatic tasks flow from all of this. We must renew ideological education. We must institutionalise youth leadership – meaningfully, not as decoration. We must include women and other oppressed and suppressed communities. We must strengthen the practice of internal democracy and implement democratic centralism seriously. We must connect identity with political economy, and not allow the first to be weaponised against the second. We must build a serious digital strategy and defend our digital sovereignty. We must, above all, deliver tangible improvements in people's daily lives. Progressive politics must be experienced, not only argued for.

We must deepen international solidarity. Youth leadership must be meaningful. Political education must be continuous. Mass organisations remain the primary instrument. Technology should strengthen democracy, not degrade it.

Long live international solidarity! Long live socialist transformation! Long live the International Peoples' Assembly!

A Class Analysis of the Thai Political Struggle

Benyasiri Eimviriyapong (Siri)

Siri is an editor, translator, and publisher at Dindeng, a journal and publishing collective that seeks to decode the semi-feudal, the semi-capitalist, and the semi-colonial of Nanyang (the south seas). Her professional focus is on ecology, state power, and the application of revolutionary feminist politics in daily life. She speaks English, Thai, and Mandarin, and maintains a close relationship with socialist developments in her ancestral home in mainland China.

I represent an organisation called Dindeng. In Thai, *Dindeng* means 'red soil' – the soil of the northeastern part of Thailand, one of the most poverty-stricken regions of the country. It stands, in our work, for something more than a region. It is the blood-soaked soil of our ancestors and elders. We continue their struggle in every way we can.

Thailand is often thought of as the country of coups. We have had thirteen successful ones. Seventeen in total, if you count all of them, each signed off by a royal decree. The political struggle of Thailand today is defined by a deep and continuous class conflict between the rural poor and the urban elite. The rural and rural-migrant populations provide the labour to our country's export-driven economy. This struggle has been consistently mediated by the powerful monarchy–military complex, which uses a mix of judicial, political, and military tactics to maintain its dominance. Our most recent election, in February, was the culmination of this: the victory of the ultra Right appears to have successfully neutralised the parliamentary threat from the populist Left for the next eight years.

Thailand's Article 112, the *lèse-majesté* law, makes it a criminal offence to speak of the monarchy in any degrading way. This is what it means to think politically

inside our country. But to understand Thai politics, we have to honestly look at its class structure, layer by layer.

At the top sits the monarchy–military complex: a deep, established alliance between the Thai monarchy and the military, historically the centre of power in Thailand. It presents itself as the guardian of the nation's traditional social order, a bulwark against populist political movements, and it invokes that role to justify intervention – including coups – in the name of 'protecting the monarchy and the country's stability'. The military and the monarchy are mutually codependent. Together they form an establishment that overshadows civilian government at every turn. The recent Thai–Cambodia border war was, in my reading, manufactured by the ruling classes of these two countries.

Below sits the civilian elected government. Our previous elected government was in fact a rural-based populist party that was able to deliver socialist results without using the word socialism: land for farmers, universal health care, rural infrastructure. Our current civilian government is a supporter of a right-wing royalist fascist ideology, and openly aligned with the monarchy-military complex. This is the civilian face of the current alliance.

Below that sits the ruling elite – capitalists centred in Bangkok, the traditional aristocracy, military-linked leaders, and large corporations. Their wealth is built on their connection to the state and their control of capital, and they have historically benefited from Thailand's hyper-dependency export model. We call them the 'Yellow'.

And below all of them is the rural majority – the larger population living in the rural regions, who serve as the cheap-labour pool for the *latifundia* and for the industrial export sector. They form the key voting base of the populist parties. This is the group I identify with. We are the 'Red'.

The Thai communist insurgency ended in the early 1990s. From that point on, Thailand did not have a fighting arm of the Left. The political voice of the marginalised was largely absent from national politics. This was the moment of what we

would call 'ideological finality' – the sense that there was no serious alternative to liberal capitalism, reinforced constantly by IMF and World Bank pressure.

Politics was Bangkok-centric. Nationalist elitist parties dominated an unstable parliament. Southeast Asia was in its economic-boom decade, and Bangkok was building skyscrapers as US and Japanese capital poured in and established major factories. Those factories – Toyota, for example – were assembly operations only. There was no genuine technology or knowledge transfer. What Thailand was being integrated into was a global capitalist market on strict terms: an US ally, an IMF client, subjected to Article XIV consultations that forbade us from having special economic relations with other Global South countries. We could not conduct South–South trade without IMF approval. Foreign capital ripped Thailand open on imperial terms.

That fragile system collapsed in what came to be known as the Asian Financial Crisis – or, to those of us in Thailand, the Tom Yum Kung crisis. The massive concentration of wealth in Bangkok became a financial bubble. When it burst, it produced one of the most brutal periods in the modern history of the Thai working class: mass layoffs, mass suicides, rural workers who had migrated to Bangkok returning to their villages with nothing. This was when the IMF stepped in with nearly $20 billion in bailout money – all of it used to pay off foreign investors. The Thai working class was left to die. The IMF crisis was so devastating in Thailand precisely because our welfare system was weak – the US-funded poverty programmes originally designed to fight communism and the Communist Party of Thailand had been abandoned at the end of the Cold War.

Two projects illustrate the pattern of external development-as-extraction that followed. The Pak Mun Dam, initiated by the fascist Thai government together with the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, was built with only 10% World Bank investment and delivered environmental and economic destruction on a large scale: 1,700 households displaced, nearly 300 fish species killed, and not even enough electricity to power one Bangkok shopping mall. What the United States now does in Taiwan – the ideological work of colonising a society through *research* and *environmental data* – was being done to us on infrastructure projects like this.

A hydroelectric dam in Laos Nam Tuen Song (Nam Teun 2) was a colonial dam facilitated by Thailand. The United States effectively forced this development on Laos through wartime pressure, as a warning to the revolutionary government there. 6,200 families were displaced. The electricity did not go to the people of Laos; it went to Thailand. The dam eventually broke and flooded a village overnight.

Another relic of the IMF structural adjustments in Thailand is austerity measures. To restore market confidence and strengthen the fiscal position, the IMF required Thailand to increase its value-added tax (VAT) rate from 7% to 10%. This rate hike worsened the economic recession (GDP contracted by 10.2% in 1998). In response, the IMF and the Thai government reversed course in March 1999, cutting the VAT back to 7% as part of an economic stimulus package. While intended as a temporary measure, this 7% rate has been repeatedly extended and remains in effect to the present day through successive royal decrees.

To understand what came next, we have to talk about a very controversial figure. Thaksin Shinawatra is an elite capitalist billionaire who emerged as the champion of the rural poor in the late 1990s. In the former Thai Rak Thai party, he assembled a coalition of military officers, elite business figures, former communist insurgents, and Western-educated academics, and built a political movement that defied Western left/right categories. He created what were, in effect, economic miracles – lifting millions of people out of poverty – while simultaneously developing the very mechanisms of capital that had produced their poverty.

The Thai Rak Thai policies were serious: A 30-baht universal health-care programme, a three-year farmer debt moratorium, and a one-million-baht locally-managed rural development fund. Strategically, this was a shift away from IMF austerity. At the time, Thailand was being forced to accept structural adjustment orthodoxy, Thaksin directly rejected it and called it stupid – 'The UN is not my father, so they cannot tell me what to do'. He injected money directly into the rural areas and stimulated mass consumption from the grassroots up. The strategy also aimed to keep productive forces circulating inside the country – the exact opposite of what the IMF and the World Bank advise poor nations to do.

These policies were not socialist. But they gave the rural poor a material foundation for a better life, and built their political potential without directly confronting the capitalist class. Thaksin combined leftist-inspired social welfare with neoliberal privatisation and international trade – sometimes inside the same policy. And in the process, he handed political agency to people who had never before had it: the rural poor. That made a great many peoples in Bangkok angry, and it eventually led to his downfall.

The numbers were significant. Nationwide poverty fell by 10%. The incomes of the poorest regions rose by 46%. Access to health care went from 70% to 96%. Thailand was able to pay back its IMF loans two years ahead of schedule – something that is not supposed to happen to a Third World country.

For all of this, Thaksin became a direct challenge to some of the most powerful figures in the country, and he made much of the Bangkok middle class angry as wealth flowed outward. In 2006, while he was in New York, the military drove into the parliament, and a coup deposed him. It marked the beginning of a decade of instability, and demonstrated that our elite would use extra-democratic means to protect its power. Every subsequent civilian government elected through popular vote was disbanded, again and again.

The current royalist-fascist alliance did not arrive by accident. The Eastern Tigers – a very powerful faction of the royal guard – emerged from the Cold War, fusing anti-communism with royalist nationalism against the Vietnamese and Cambodian socialist forces. Their institutional mechanisms remain with us. After the 2006 coup and the writing of a new constitution, they weakened public infrastructure, restructured the governing board of the universal health-care scheme, decentralised authority under the Ministry of Health – whose minister at the time is our current right-wing prime minister – and maintained the shell of popular welfare policies precisely to keep the population stable without giving rural people any real political agency. On top of this now sits a state architecture of judicial mechanisms – riding-out constitutions, a constitutional court that has deposed civilian governments.

Into this landscape a new party arrived, presenting itself as modern, progressive, and left-wing – the 'Orange'. In fact, the Orange is aesthetically middle-class and Western-centric. Its politics is a politics of cleanliness and dignity – of *style* – rather than of material change. Its supporters are largely urban middle-class, university-educated voters. They look down on the Red as if we were duped peasants without political understanding. Their inspiration is Western social democracy, and they promise a European-style welfare state without ever confronting the actual class structure of our country. For the Orange, the conflict between rural poor and urban rich is not a class antagonism at all. It is a matter of 'corruption' or of the 'greed of the old'. This pushes Thailand away from class consciousness – away from the material divide – and toward a politics of aesthetics that masks the class structure underneath.

The structural harm of the Orange is concrete. They voted for the current right-wing fascist prime minister without taking any ministerial position, allowing him to shuffle his key officials and win a landslide in the recent election. Like the machinery of the BJP in India or the People's Party in Cambodia, the Orange has helped in facilitating the key playbook, used by Bhumjaithai, the current fascist government, for ensuring that democratic elections deliver right-wing outcomes. And they have ridden the nationalist wave that followed the border wars with Cambodia, campaigning on a hard-line nationalist line despite calling themselves a progressive force. They have appointed to their Bangkok governor's team, a core architect of the Yellow Shirt conservative network – one of the very forces that pushed for the coup against Thaksin in 2006. By splitting the anti-military vote, the Orange has succeeded in weakening the Red's parliamentary dominance.

The Red, for all its compromises, retains something the Orange does not: the ability to deliver material improvements to poor people and build political ground from that base. That is what we in Thailand need to defend. What we should be careful of is the imposition of a Westernised liberal template onto our politics when we already have our own model of indigenous, hybrid socialism – what we have at Dindeng call rainbow agrarian populism.

To close, I want to share a passage from one of our articles: 'Socialism is about changing the economic system, and in the twenty-first century that is going to take experimentation. The conditions today are not those of 1917, and they require strange experiments and unlikely alliances – as they did then. Those who struggle and fail do so because of that experimentation. They do not fit the end of history template, but they offer an alternative to it. That alternative is compromised. It is a form of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie. But it can still be seen as a stepping stone for mass mobilisation – and, in the meantime, it puts food on the plates of workers'.

Timor-Leste's Perspective on Hegemonic Pressure and Political-Economic Intervention

Agustino Perez

Agustino Perez is general secretary of the Workers & Farmers Union of Timor-Leste, and a former member of the Arbitration Council and of the National Council of Labour Relations from 2000 to 2018.

The history of Timor-Leste is a long history of struggle for self-determination, for the defence of sovereignty, and for the construction of a nation free from the domination of external powers.

Timor-Leste's geographical location between Indonesia and Australia, together with the rich oil and gas resources of the Timor Sea, has made this small nation strategically significant to regional and international powers. This historical experience has shaped Timor-Leste's perspective on hegemonic powers.

For the people of Timor-Leste, pressure on sovereignty occurs not only through military force, but also through political influence, economic interests, the control of natural resources, diplomatic relations, and dependence on foreign aid. The experience of Timor-Leste must therefore be understood in the context of the relationship between a small nation and powers with greater economic, military, and diplomatic capacity.

Timor-Leste, known as Portuguese Timor during the colonial era, was under Portuguese colonial rule for several centuries. The political changes in Portugal after the Carnation Revolution of 1974 opened the way to the decolonisation of Timor. In that context of political instability, a competition emerged between various local political parties, including the UDT and FRETILIN.

FRETILIN proclaimed the independence of Timor-Leste on 28 November 1975. However, this process was short-lived. Indonesia launched an invasion in December 1975 and subsequently integrated Timor-Leste as its 27th province in 1976. The United Nations (UN) never recognised the annexation and continued to affirm the right of the Timorese people to self-determination.

The Indonesian occupation, which lasted approximately twenty-four years, was the most important experience in the formation of modern Timor-Leste's political identity. Resistance to the occupation was carried out through armed struggle, political movements, the Church, civil society, and various diplomatic efforts at the international level. From Timor-Leste's perspective, this experience demonstrated that sovereignty means not only the possession of territory and government, but also the right of the people to determine their own political future.

The political changes in Indonesia after the fall of President Suharto opened new opportunities to resolve the question of Timor-Leste. On 30 August 1999, under UN supervision through the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), the people of Timor-Leste voted to determine whether they accepted or rejected special autonomy within Indonesia. The referendum results showed that 78.5% of voters rejected the special autonomy proposal and chose to begin the process towards independence. Approximately 98% of registered voters participated in the referendum.

After the referendum results were announced, a wave of large-scale violence was unleashed by pro-integration groups, including murders, arson, and forced displacement. Subsequently, the international force INTERFET was deployed to restore security. In October 1999, the UN established the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which assumed administrative, legislative, and executive functions during the transition period.

On 20 May 2002, Timor-Leste officially gained independence and became a sovereign state. This experience offers an important perspective on Timor-Leste's foreign policy: international intervention can be viewed differently depending on its context. The Indonesian occupation was seen as a violation of the right to

self-determination, whereas the UN's role after 1999 was generally seen as supporting the process of transition and the development of state institutions. This shows that, for Timor-Leste, the fundamental question is not simply whether there is external intervention, but who sets the agenda, for what purpose, and to what extent the sovereignty of the local population is respected.

After independence, Timor-Leste no longer faced the threat of occupation as in the past, but it continued to face more subtle forms of pressure. As a small country with a limited population and economic capacity, Timor-Leste interacts with neighbours significantly larger in economic, political, and military terms.

The relationship between Timor-Leste and Indonesia evolved from a history of conflict into diplomatic relations and cooperation. However, the memories of the occupation remain part of Timor-Leste's national consciousness. Therefore, relations with Indonesia require a balance between pragmatic interests as a neighbouring country and the need to preserve national identity and sovereignty.

Australia, on the other hand, holds a strategically important position due to its proximity across the Timor Sea and the presence of significant oil and gas resources in the region. The government of Timor-Leste regards the struggle to determine maritime boundaries as part of its struggle to maintain national sovereignty. The question of maritime boundaries illustrates how power imbalances can affect relations between a smaller nation and a more powerful one.

Before Timor-Leste's independence, Australia and Indonesia had made various agreements concerning resources in the Timor Sea. After independence, Timor-Leste sought to establish permanent maritime boundaries on the basis of the principles of international maritime law.

In 2016, Timor-Leste initiated a compulsory conciliation process under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This process culminated in the 2018 Maritime Boundary Treaty between Timor-Leste and Australia. The treaty established a permanent maritime boundary between the two countries and represents a significant achievement in Timor-Leste's struggle to uphold its sovereign

rights in the Timor Sea. From Timor-Leste's perspective, this experience is significant because it demonstrates that a small country can still use international law, diplomacy, and multilateral institutions to balance the power imbalance with more powerful nations.

Hegemonic pressures on Timor-Leste cannot be analysed solely from the political and military dimension. The economic dimension is also crucial. After independence, oil and gas became the main source of state revenue. Offshore oil and gas production began in 2004 and has provided significant revenue to the government. Timor-Leste established the Petroleum Fund as a mechanism to manage oil revenues and preserve that wealth for future generations.

However, dependence on oil also creates forms of economic vulnerability. The oil and gas sector functions as a sector relatively separate from the domestic economy, while the private sector, agriculture, and national industry still have limited capacity.

This situation can be understood through the concept of economic dependency. A country may have formal political sovereignty but still depend on external sources for trade, investment, aid, technology, and markets. In Timor-Leste's context, this challenge becomes increasingly evident as oil and gas production declines. According to the World Bank, Timor-Leste's offshore oil and gas production will continue until 2025, while the country currently faces an urgent need to diversify its economy.

In June 2025, the Petroleum Fund still held approximately $18.74 billion, but fiscal pressure is increasing due to high government expenditure and dependence on revenues drawn from the fund. This situation shows that natural resources can be a both a sovereign asset and a source of vulnerability. If the economy becomes excessively dependent on a single commodity and an external market, the space for national economic policy autonomy becomes increasingly limited.

Timor-Leste also has a complex experience with international institutions. The UN played a crucial role in the referendum process, the restoration of peace, and

the building of state institutions. UNTAET, for example, served as a peacekeeping mission and also assumed administrative functions during the transition period, until Timor-Leste's institutions could function independently.

On one hand, this international presence helped Timor-Leste overcome the institutional fragilities resulting from conflict. On the other hand, this experience showed that a newly independent country can find itself in a situation where certain state functions depend on international organisations and external donors. Thus, Timor-Leste's relationship with international powers must be understood as a two-dimensional relationship.

Foreign aid, investment, and international cooperation are necessary for development, but excessive dependence can limit autonomy in decision-making. The main challenge for the Government of Timor-Leste is to benefit from external relations without losing the capacity to set its own development agenda.

In the face of these pressures, Timor-Leste has developed an approach that emphasises diplomacy, multilateralism, and the diversification of external relations. The country cannot depend on a single major power. Instead, Timor-Leste seeks to maintain relations with Indonesia, Australia, Portugal, the countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and international institutions.

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN on 26 October 2025 is a significant development in this strategy. By becoming the 11th member of ASEAN, Timor-Leste gains a stronger platform to expand economic, diplomatic, and political ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. ASEAN membership is also strategically important because it reduces the risk of isolation for a small country. In an international system marked by power imbalances, regional institutions can serve as mechanisms to strengthen the voice and influence of small states.

In this context, Timor-Leste's foreign policy can be understood as an effort to build strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy does not mean rejecting all forms of foreign influence, but ensuring that cooperation with external powers does not diminish the state's capacity to determine its own national interests.

Based on this historical experience, Timor-Leste's perspective on hegemony can be summarised through several fundamental principles. First, sovereignty and the right to self-determination are essential elements of national identity. The experience between 1975 and 1999 made the question of sovereignty extremely sensitive in Timor-Leste's politics.

Second, a power imbalance does not always mean that a small state has no alternatives. The struggle to determine maritime boundaries with Australia shows that diplomacy and international law can be used to balance material differences in power.

Third, economic dependency can be a more subtle form of pressure. Dependence on oil, imports, foreign aid, and foreign investment can limit economic autonomy, even when a country enjoys political independence.

Fourth, multilateral institutions are important instruments for small states. The UN, UNCLOS, CPLP, the G7+, and ASEAN provide spaces for Timor-Leste to expand its diplomatic influence without having to depend entirely on its own material capabilities.

Fifth, relations with powers that were historically dominant must be built on shared interests and reconciliation. The relationship between Timor-Leste and Indonesia shows that a history of conflict does not always prevent the emergence of more constructive relations.

Timor-Leste's perspective on hegemonic pressures and political-economic intervention cannot be separated from its history of colonialism, Indonesian occupation, the struggle for independence, the 1999 referendum, and the process of state-building after 2002. These experiences have made sovereignty, self-determination, and control over national resources fundamental elements of Timor-Leste's political identity.

However, the challenges faced by Timor-Leste after independence have changed. Military threats and occupation have been replaced by challenges related to power imbalances, economic dependency, the influence of foreign investment, oil

resources, and the need for international assistance. Under these circumstances, sovereignty no longer means simply defending territory from aggression, but also ensuring that the state has the capacity to make independent political and economic decisions.

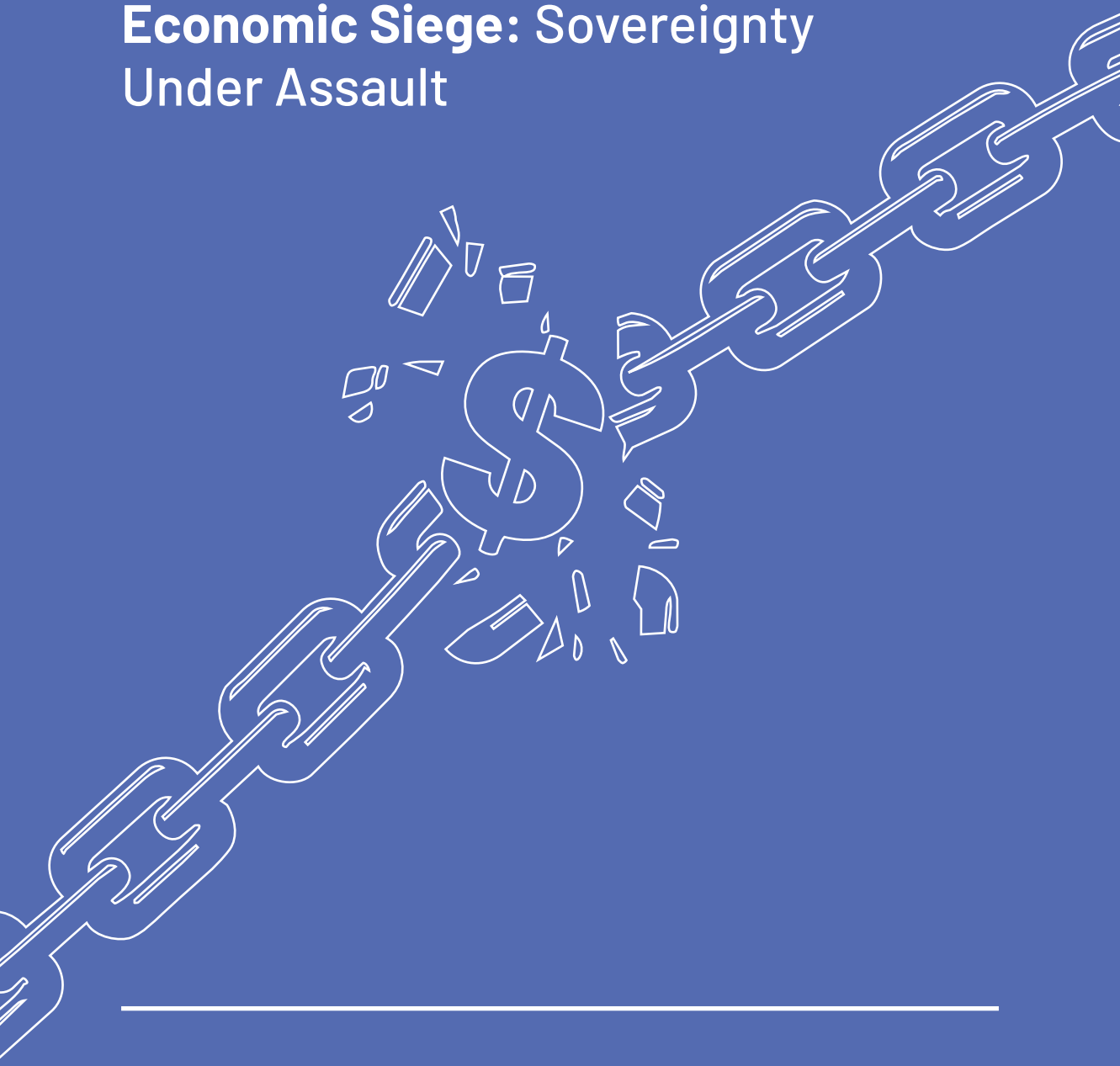
The struggle to determine maritime boundaries with Australia shows Timor-Leste's capacity to use diplomacy and international law to defend its interests. At the same time, accession to ASEAN opens new opportunities for regional integration and the diversification of external relations. Thus, the experience of Timor-Leste shows that a small state does not have to be a passive victim of hegemony. Through diplomacy, multilateral institutions, international law, and economic diversification, a small state can strengthen its autonomy.

The main challenge for the future is to translate political independence into stronger economic sovereignty, particularly through the development of the private sector, agriculture, tourism, energy, the upgrading of workforce skills, and economic development that is less dependent on oil.

In other words, Timor-Leste's struggle did not end with independence on 20 May 2002. That struggle has now entered a new phase: ensuring that political independence can be translated into economic autonomy, sustainable development, and the capacity to determine the country's own future.

Chapter 04

Debt, Tariffs, and the New Economic Siege: Sovereignty Under Assault



Sri Lanka Between IMF Discipline and the Struggle for Alternatives

Ahilan Kadirgamar

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If you want to understand the world today, you can almost understand the whole global order through the history of Sri Lanka.

We were colonised for close to four and a half centuries – first by the Portuguese from 1505, then the Dutch, then the British. If you travel around Sri Lanka now, you will see the Portuguese forts, the Dutch forts, and how the British reused them. These forts are now all in ruins. That is what we want to see with the US bases too. The World Bank wants to come and rehabilitate the old European forts into tourist sites. No. Let the ruins remain as ruins, so that anyone who walks past them sees what empire leaves behind. That is what the legacy of empire should be.

Sri Lanka went through tremendous colonial extraction. When empires want to make changes, they do them at the pace they need to. The British abolished slavery in 1833 – but in Sri Lanka, they extended it to 1844. Why? Because my hometown, Jaffna, was producing tobacco through slavery, which was the highest source of colonial revenue. Soon after, indentured labour was brought over from South India – slavery under another name. Land was taken from the people under the Wastelands Ordinance and turned into plantations. Even in the twenty-first century, we still have those plantations. Do we, in South Asia, still need plantations? The hill-country Tamils who live in them – some of whom are my students at the

University of Jaffna – still have no land rights and still live in line houses. That colonial history is not history. It is ongoing.

Sri Lanka also has another side. For various reasons, we did not have a strong anti-colonial movement, though the movement did begin here – with the Jaffna Youth Congress, initiated by young people. They invited Mahatma Gandhi to Jaffna. The British, for their own reasons, made an experiment: they gave us universal suffrage in 1931, the first country in Asia to have it. So, some of the institutions of a modern polity did come to us through colonialism – the question is what we do with them. We have made some use of them. Sri Lanka has not had a military coup. At every election, the pendulum swings. And when elections have not been enough – you would have seen this on your televisions four years ago – hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Colombo and chased away the most feared Defence Secretary who had made himself president. That, too, is Sri Lanka.

But there is another story from the same era, and it is where our present begins. J.R. Jayewardene, later prime minister and then executive president, is the man who brought us the presidential system – the curse of this country, and one of the things that helped drive us into civil war. Long before he brought the presidency in 1978, he was finance minister at independence in 1948, and he was known as a 'fox'. He knew already in 1948 that the winds were changing. He did not go to London. He went to Washington and brought John Exter, a Federal Reserve official, to Sri Lanka to build our central bank. Exter told us: now that you have political sovereignty, you need monetary sovereignty; you need your own central bank and your own monetary policy. And so we got one. Our first central bank governor was John Exter: US monetary sovereignty. That is what has continued to this day. Who now decides our economic policy? Washington.

Sri Lanka was also the first country in South Asia to liberalise its economy, in 1977, under Jayewardene. Neoliberalism came to us early. Its full implementation was slowed, however, by the civil war – itself a war partly shaped by US geopolitical involvement from the late 1970s.

When the civil war ended, brutally, the West said: look, Sri Lanka is stable now; authoritarian, but stable. This coincided with the global financial crisis. Capital was pushed onto so-called 'emerging markets'. Sri Lanka was not merely an emerging market – it was a 'post-conflict emerging market', and it had the best-performing stock market in the world in 2010. Many of us saw this from close up, and I was writing in 2013 that this was the second wave of neoliberalism and it would end in a debt crisis. Sri Lanka started floating international sovereign bonds, around the same time as Ghana and Zambia, in the late 2000s. All three of us defaulted around the same time. For Sri Lanka, it was the first time in our history that we defaulted on our external debt.

When we defaulted, the US was smiling. They knew they had us. And we were told what we always get told: this is not sustainable; you have to default and restructure; everyone will help you. And then what happened? The IMF programme itself took over a year to negotiate. In that time, they squeezed everything out of us.

Under the IMF programme, our fuel prices tripled or quadrupled through market pricing of energy. In the debt restructuring, the international bondholders demanded – on the technical basis of what they called 'comparability of treatment' – that our domestic debt be restructured too. Here we should be very clear about what that meant in practice. They did not go after the banks or the finance companies. Not one rupee of the treasury bonds held by banks or wealthy investors was touched. They went after the Employees' Provident Fund – the compulsory pension savings of plantation workers, garment workers, estate labourers, and ordinary working people. On my calculation, about 47% of the real value of workers' EPF savings will be lost over the next sixteen years as a result of the domestic debt restructuring. That is the class content of 'comparability of treatment'. Finance and debt accumulate the wealth of the big bondholders, hedge funds, and the Colombo elite. The workers pay.

The programme itself binds us in ways it is worth stating plainly. The IMF has set our primary budget surplus target at 2.3% of GDP – a target no other country carries. We are prohibited from spending more than 13% of GDP. Even more remarkably, the IMF pushed through a set of statutory instruments – twenty or so,

including a Public Finance Management Act – which literally write these numbers into our national law. Who ever heard of a country's statute naming the number of a fiscal target? Our economy is now remote-controlled from Washington.

We know the problems. The urgent question is what the alternatives are.

Sri Lanka in the 1930s went through something worse than the Covid pandemic: a malaria epidemic that killed 2% of our population. The response gave us the modern institutions of our public life. Our left movement was born in that crisis. Their struggle led to free education all the way through university – all our universities are state universities – and to free healthcare, both of which we still have. It also gave us a universal food subsidy, which liberalisation eventually took away. Crises are moments in which the direction of a society is decided. The global order is now unravelling. The question is what we build out of the coming decade.

We need our own industrial policy. If a country has sovereignty, it decides what it produces. When the World Bank came to Sri Lanka on a major mission in 1950, they told us to stick to agriculture and not develop industry. We do need agriculture, but we also need the capacity to upgrade our industries. That requires development banks. Sri Lanka had two development banks in the 1990s, both privatised and commercialised under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank. We are now working towards starting a new one.

We also need our cooperatives. Sri Lanka had a very powerful cooperative movement in the 1970s, largely dismantled by liberalisation. We are rebuilding it. I chair the Northern Cooperative Development Bank – a federation of 1,200 cooperatives in the Northern Province – and we are now beginning to replicate co-operative models inside the plantations themselves.

And we need to rebuild the people-to-people solidarity that once bound our countries together. The Non-Aligned Movement conference held here in Colombo in 1976 is my earliest childhood memory. I sat on my father's shoulders and watched the motorcades of Third World leaders driving into the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, which the Chinese built for the occasion. Our states are in a different position now. Our governments cannot do what those

governments did. But that only means the task falls to our movements. We are the ones who now have to provide the direction.

I am convinced that the 2020s are what the 1930s were. The old world is coming apart. It can end in fascism, or it can end in something progressive – something socialist. It is we who have to decide.

The old is dying, my friends. The new is about to be born. What are we going to do about it?

South Korea's Unequal Partnership with US Imperialism

Hwang Jeongeun

Hwang Jeongeun is general secretary of the International Strategy Center and heads the International Solidarity Committee of the Justice Party, where she works on international issues and solidarity activities. She has been active in the Korean social movement for over a decade.

South Korea is one of the world's largest economies, with globally competitive advanced manufacturing industries – semiconductors, automobiles, and shipbuilding. The South Korean government defines the country as one of the United States' most reliable allies in Asia. But the more useful question is: what is the real nature of that so-called alliance?

The administration of President Donald Trump does not maintain US hegemony through military power alone. It also uses tariffs, economic sanctions, export controls, and supply-chain restructuring. These economic measures are closely connected to military strategy. I want to walk through three of them – the tariff war, the technology blockade, and the military alliance – as South Korea has experienced them, and then to propose something concrete about what we, as movements across Asia, might do next.

South Korea and the United States signed a free trade agreement in 2012. Despite strong public opposition at the time, our government pushed it through. Under the Trump administration, however, tariffs have become a weapon of negotiation used even against allies like us. Following the Korea–US summit on 29 October last year, reciprocal tariffs on major South Korean exports – including automobiles and auto parts – were set at 50%. Under the free trade agreement, those exports had been very close to zero-rated. The Korean government spoke of the outcome as a good negotiation, saying it had prevented even higher tariffs. That was the frame it

chose. But the substance is that South Korea also pledged $350 billion of investment in the United States – $200 billion in direct financial investment and $150 billion in shipbuilding cooperation – and further agreed to purchase $25 billion worth of US weapons by 2030.

The tariff war showed something important: even formally concluded state-to-state agreements can be changed at will whenever they conflict with US economic and strategic interests. Washington is using tariffs as leverage to demand direct investment, the relocation of production facilities, and the purchase of US weapons. The pressure came from Washington, and the South Korean government accepted the demand in the name of pragmatism, aligning South Korean industrial and supply-chain policy with US requirements. Some large Korean companies may benefit from this process. The more important question is who will bear the costs. Large-scale investment abroad weakens domestic industry and employment. The government will provide enormous support to private corporations. The cost will ultimately be passed on to workers and ordinary people in South Korea.

The second instrument is the technology blockade. This is most clearly visible in South Korea's semiconductor industry. South Korea is home to two of the world's leading semiconductor companies – Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix. But advanced manufacturing capacity does not automatically mean technological sovereignty. Semiconductor production requires advanced manufacturing equipment, design software, core patents, and key technologies – a significant share of which is controlled by companies in the United States and its allied countries.

In April this year, a bipartisan bill was introduced in the US Congress that would strengthen export controls on advanced semiconductor equipment to China, and require US allies to apply the equivalent export controls. It would also authorise unilateral US action when allied countries were judged to have insufficient controls. If this bill is passed, it will have significant consequences for South Korea. There are already concerns about Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix, both of which operate factories in China. Since the end of last year, the US administration has replaced the previous Validated End User status that allowed Samsung and SK Hynix broad approval to move equipment into their Chinese facilities, and has

moved to an annual approval regime. Industry representatives have already said that if the scope of US export controls expands, it could affect factory operations in China – including even equipment upgrades.

The governments of South Korea and the United States repeatedly say that their relationship is expanding from a security alliance into an economic and technological alliance. But the rules of that economic and technological alliance are not being made on equal terms. They are largely determined by the United States, in ways that serve US interests.

The US military began its presence in southern Korea in 1945, after the end of the World War II and Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule. It entered as an occupation – on the day the Japanese flag came down, the US flag went up. Today, approximately 28,500 US troops are stationed in South Korea, on somewhere between 70 and 80 US military bases across the country.

Recently, the United States has increasingly emphasised that US Forces Korea should play a central role in its Indo-Pacific Strategy. The stated rationale is China's rapid military build-up and the growing regional cooperation among China, Russia, and the DPRK. On this basis, the United States is pushing to use US Forces Korea as part of a broader regional posture and pressuring South Korea to participate in that strategy. Washington calls this the modernisation of the alliance.

From the US perspective, modernisation does not simply mean maintaining the current alliance structure. It means expanding the role of US Forces Korea beyond the defence of South Korea and toward the containment of China. Under this framework, South Korea is expected to sharply increase military spending and assume greater primary responsibility for its own defence, while simultaneously integrating more tightly with the United States, Japan, and other Indo-Pacific partners. At the Korea–US Summit, our government agreed to gradually raise military spending to 3.5% of GDP – what Corazon Fabros correctly named yesterday a war tax.

This modernisation carries serious risks. If Washington's demands are implemented, then greater strategic flexibility will be granted to US Forces Korea and South Korean forces will be integrated into the containment of China. South Korea will effectively become a forward operating base against China. As we have already seen in this conference, forward operating bases do not guarantee security. They are more likely to become military targets. At the regional level, bloc confrontation will only deepen.

Everyone in this room already understands how US tariffs, technology blockades, economic pressure, and military threats are unfolding across Asia. What I want to propose, as one concrete outcome of this Hands Off Asia conference, is that we build a real Hands Off Asia network – a regional working network under the same name.

The core work of that network would be to organise joint struggle against US military bases across Asia. US military bases remain in our countries under the language of security, while concealing serious problems: not only regional militarisation and the crimes committed by US personnel, but also environmental destruction, the seizure of land and public space, the misuse of economic resources, and the theft of our young generation's future.

We should bring together local residents fighting US military bases; peace activists opposing militarism; workers, women's movements, environmental movements, young people, students, and anti-imperialist forces – into a united front. Those of us gathered at this conference have already worked with dedication in our own countries and communities. We have exposed the reality of US imperialist domination. We have organised the people and built solidarity. But in my view, that alone is no longer enough.

The struggle in South Korea must be connected to the struggle in Japan. The struggle in Japan must be connected to the struggle in the Philippines and Okinawa. That struggle must then extend to Thailand, Australia, Iran, and across the whole of Asia. We must come together as a single anti-militarist and anti-imperialist movement.

Practically, this means organising regular meetings of the organisations and activists across Asia represented in this room. It means preparing joint actions and joint statements. It means establishing a secretariat that can connect struggles across countries. The International Strategy Center, the organisation I am part of in South Korea, will take initiative in this work.

We need a form of solidarity that can issue statements together, take to the streets together, and act together when necessary. When one country is attacked, movements in other countries must respond. When a struggle begins at one US military base, solidarity action must follow across Asia. US military bases have already connected Asia into a single system of war. Our resistance must also cross borders and become united. If the United States connects its military alliances, we must connect our people's solidarity. If the United States expands its military bases, we must expand our centres of resistance. If the United States tries to divide Asia through tariffs, technology blockades, and military threats, we must respond with a stronger, broader united front.

Let us not allow Hands Off Asia to remain only a slogan. Let us turn it into a real network for action.

The Anatomy of Global South Debt

Taimur Rahman

Taimur Rahman is secretary-general of the Mazdoor Kisan Party, Pakistan. He is lead guitarist and spokesperson for the progressive band Laal and teaches at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

I want to open by asking comrades in this room to raise their voice for one of our party leaders, Salar Amjad Ali, who has recently been arrested. We will send you the information; I hope you will carry it in your organisations' papers and journals.

I speak here as a Pakistani discussing debt in Sri Lanka – and I hope the poetic dimension of that is not lost on you, because Pakistan and Sri Lanka are, arguably, two of the most indebted countries in the Global South.

Let me begin with numbers, most of which come from UNCTAD, the United Nations, and the World Bank. The total external debt of what we can consider the Global South – low- and middle-income countries – now stands at $11.7 trillion. That is a massive number, and it has been steadily rising through the past decade. What is more, and this is reported by the World Bank itself, debt outflows have hit a fifty-year high.

Debt servicing – the money we in the Global South are actually paying back – now exceeds the financial inflows we are receiving in new lending. Developing countries paid out $741 billion more in principal and interest than they received as new loans. That is not what the loans amount to; that is the net difference between what came in and what went out.

Every year, the Global South is transferring $1.6 trillion in debt-service payments to the Global North. We are, quite plainly, borrowing to pay back previous loans. We take with one hand and give with the other.

Whenever we go to our governments and ask for healthcare, education, housing, or any of the public services our people need, we are told there is no fiscal space. That expression is now used by every economist. Here is what fiscal space looks like in practice. Some 3.3 billion people – two out of every five people on the planet – live in countries that spend more on debt servicing than on health, education, agriculture, and social protection combined. Public debt service has been growing fastest in low-income countries. In 2024, the lowest-income countries spent about 18% of their government revenue servicing public debt. It should be the opposite. Low-income countries have the greatest need for investment in public infrastructure, and yet they are the ones from whom the most is being extracted.

Between 2018 and 2024, 73% of developing countries experienced a reduction in fiscal space. Interest payments alone have increased by over 100%, while government revenues have risen by only about 40%. That gap – interest costs rising more than twice as fast as revenue – is the mathematical shape of the squeeze. Least-developed countries now spend up to 22.3% of government revenue on external debt.

Most of this debt is not owed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It is owed to private creditors, who charge higher interest rates and are much less likely to restructure. These are international banks, hedge funds, and bondholders, and they receive hundreds of billions of dollars a year in interest and principal payments – and this is before we even count trade. About 20% of Global South export revenue is going straight into servicing debt. So, if a country earns a billion dollars from exports, a fifth of that is not for its own people; it is for its creditors.

The interest-rate structure is a further scandal. Rich countries borrow at between 2–4%. Poor countries borrow at 8–15% – sometimes higher if the country is judged to be in distress, as Sri Lanka was and Pakistan is. That means poor countries are borrowing at twice or four times what rich countries pay. This is, on any reasonable calculation, an insane level of interest, and the justification – that these are high-risk borrowers – conceals the political economy of a system in which debt-service pressure is highest precisely where it should be lowest.

The IMF is the gatekeeper, it is not the major institution lending the money. It lends about $100 billion, which is still a huge amount but a small share of an $11.7 trillion debt stock. What the IMF does is give the thumbs up. Ninety countries are currently under IMF programmes. When the IMF signals its approval, commercial lenders will lend to you – often at high interest, but at least they will lend. When it does not, they either refuse to lend or charge rates that force you to refuse yourself.

Look at the record. Zambia defaulted in 2020. Ghana's debt exceeded 90% of its GDP before restructuring. Argentina – the IMF's single largest borrower, with more than twenty IMF programmes – has an economy in shambles. Fifty-four countries are in extreme distress today. On the map of that distress, Pakistan is in red. Sri Lanka is in red. Argentina is in red. A great swathe of Africa is in red. These are exactly the countries that, on any development logic, should have the easiest access to credit. They are the ones being squeezed hardest.

Pakistan owes approximately $130 billion in external debt – that is, not counting domestic debt. We spend a whopping 55–56% of the government budget on debt servicing. Roughly 60% of that goes to Pakistani banks, roughly 40% to international banks. Our external financing need is between $20–25 billion a year – almost half of Pakistan's total export earnings.

Adding together the government budget lines, about 56% goes to debt service. Another 20% to the military – the official figures are lower, but if you include the items hidden in other headings, it is around 20%. That is already 76% of the budget gone before anything else has happened. Another 24% goes to the basic running of the state: salaries, offices, electricity bills. What is left, in practical terms, for development of infrastructure, health, and education is almost nothing – and that share is declining proportionally each year.

The picture at the aggregate level is worse than at the country level. The net resource transfer to the developing world in 2024 was about $25 billion – that is what officially came in.

The drain is the shocking figure. A recent study by Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan calculated the total flow of resources from the Third World to the First World from 1960 to today. It comes to $152 trillion in current prices.

Let that number sit. On average, every year the Global South transfers about $10 trillion of value to the Global North. Meanwhile, the total external debt stock of the South is $11.7 trillion. Every year, we transfer to them, through debt service and through unequal exchange in trade, an amount equivalent to the entire external debt stock we are supposedly working off. In exchange for that, they lend us small portions of the money back, trap us in extreme debt, restructure our economies to keep the flow going, and then transfer a small share of the surplus to the domestic bourgeoisie in Third World countries while taking the lion's share to their own industrial and financial centres.

Lenin spoke about the export of capital from the First World to the Third World. What we now have to name, and to organise against, is the far larger transfer of surplus that runs in the other direction.

Barefoot Software Developers for the Global South

Xiong Jie

Xiong Jie (Jeff) is the secretary-general of the Global South Academic Forum. He is also director of the Centre for Global South Studies at East China Normal University. His research focuses on digital sovereignty, digital governance, and strategies against big-tech hegemony. He is an author, translator, and media commentator on technology policy, algorithmic regulation, and data privacy.

Speaking here as a comrade from China, I feel obligated to bring some positive information to this room to make people a little bit happier. While we are meeting here in Colombo, the World AI Conference is under way in Shanghai. This morning, President Xi Jinping gave the opening speech and announced, among other things, scholarships in artificial intelligence (AI) for developing countries and support for building AI application and technology centres across the Global South. That is the context in which I want to speak – not because a Chinese speech is by itself the answer to our situation, but because the moment we are in is a genuinely different one from where we were a year ago.

Artificial intelligence is no longer merely a technology. It is becoming infrastructure, in the same way electricity is infrastructure. It penetrates every corner of the economy, politics, education, healthcare, and the military. If the world's AI technology and market were absolutely monopolised by a few companies in a single country, then the economy, society, and politics of every other nation would be subordinated to that single infrastructure. That would be the new norm of imperialism. The more countries depend on US AI, the more data flows through the United States, and the stronger US AI grows – then the harder it becomes for any country ever to break free from that dependence.

Until recently, China was the only country able to compete with the United States in fundamental AI research. Over the past few years, the United States has steadily

tightened its chip export controls against China to try to win the race. Washington's *AI Action Plan*, released last July, declares that the US must achieve unrivalled, unchallenged global technological dominance. One commentator has called this a digital Monroe Doctrine. Through chip export controls and other measures, Washington hopes permanently to foreclose the possibility of China (or any other country) competing with it in AI.

The good news I can report is this: the blockade has already failed.

When the United States placed Huawei on the sanctions list in 2019, the consensus was that Huawei would fade away within a few years. Six or seven years on, Huawei's global market share in telecom equipment has widened, not fallen. Its Ascend series of AI chips now holds roughly forty percent of China's domestic AI chip market – making Huawei the country's largest AI chip supplier, larger than the US incumbent.

A decisive marker came in January of last year, when DeepSeek released its R1 model under an open-source licence. The research paper describing its method was featured on the cover of *Nature*. R1 uses pure reinforcement learning; it compressed its training cost to about $5.5 million on 2,000 GPUs. Even $5.5 million sounds large to most of us here, but to give the industrial context, training a frontier model at US companies costs billions of dollars.

DeepSeek did it at about one percent of the US cost. Following DeepSeek – and joined by GLM, Qwen, and others – an explosion of open-source model development has broken the black-box monopoly that a small number of large US companies used to enjoy over frontier AI. Global downloads of Chinese open-source models have already surpassed downloads of US models. This year, models like DeepSeek v4 and GLM 5.2 have closed and, in some capabilities, surpassed their US counterparts – and they increasingly train and infer using domestic chips.

The US strategy of blockade has failed. Along with that blockade, the dream of US AI companies to monopolise the market and extract monopoly rents has also failed. The price of AI tokens is converging on the true marginal cost of the compute;

none of the companies can command a monopoly premium any longer. The current cost of DeepSeek v4 is about 1/20 that of GPT and 1/30 that of Claude.

As far as I know, eighty percent of new Silicon Valley startups are now using Chinese models. AI has largely been turned into a commodity. Users are free to choose the AI that offers better value, better return on investment, and stronger information security.

On that last point – information security is another concern here. Anthropic and OpenAI have openly stated that they read users' conversations and share information with the CIA. Increasingly, users are not being locked in to any single company or any single country's companies.

Our research last year on digital sovereignty mapped the structural predicament of Global South countries: deep dependence on digital infrastructure created by the United States; passive acceptance of Western norms in governing digital space; and a systematic deficit of digital capability.

Investment in the information and communications technology industry has grown so large that building self-reliant ICT infrastructure now requires trillions of dollars – and most Global South countries do not have that. This has produced a genuine pessimism in the movements I visited in Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Ghana, and elsewhere: We do not have the money to invest, so we cannot see the way out.

With the rapid development of AI, I think we can see a new possibility. The Global South does not have to build large language models from scratch. It does not have to train its own frontier models to compete against Anthropic or DeepSeek. Large language models are already a substitutable commodity. They are no longer monopolised by a small number of US companies. DeepSeek, GLM, and others already have the capability to compete against their US counterparts – and they are open source, meaning that any country, or even a sub-national entity like a province or a state, can download and deploy those models to serve its local population.

Even without achieving digital sovereignty over AI research and development, Global South countries can absolutely achieve sovereignty over AI inference. That is the practical opening.

One useful experience the Global South can learn from is China's 'AI-plus' model. The point of AI plus is that you do not think of AI as its own industry, or as a pure development of science and technology. You use AI as an enabler of other industries – manufacturing, education, healthcare – to help ordinary people develop their own AI applications. The move breaks the position of passive victim of technology development that so many people in the Global South currently occupy.

Rongjiang, a rural county of about four-hundred thousand people in southwest China, is one of the poorest counties in the China. It was among the last nine lifted out of extreme poverty. Starting last year, Rongjiang set out to popularise AI across the county, with the target of ensuring that at least one-hundred thousand people are capable of using AI in their lives and their production. The focus was not scientific research; it was grassroots application, delivered through tiered training. Government officials learned how to draft documents with AI. Shopkeepers learned how to run live-stream sales. Young people learned how to make short videos. Elderly residents learned how to do their day-to-day information lookups. The result has been more than a sixty percent improvement in the efficiency of government work – and, more importantly, a rural population that has become active users of a technology that was supposed to leave them behind.

The second example is from Brazil. The MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or Landless Rural Workers Movement) has developed an agroecology knowledge base called IARAA, now open to millions of Brazilian peasants. IARAA contains thousands of books on agriculture and ecology – books that sit in libraries where peasants cannot easily access them, and which peasants do not have time to read cover to cover. With IARAA, a peasant can ask an agricultural question and receive answers drawn from a family-farming and agroecological perspective, not from an agribusiness one. That system was not built by a Silicon Valley firm. It was built by MST cadres in São Paulo. I visited Brazil last month and met the team; most of them had never written a line of Python before. Nobody really

programmes anymore anyway – even the high-tech workers in Silicon Valley let the AI write the code. As a user, if you know what is possible and know a few small tricks to start, you can ask AI to write code for you. The whole IARAA system runs on top of Chinese open-source models. It uses no US model at all.

MST have proved something important: their own cadres, drawn from a rural peasant base, can do this. If the trade unions, cooperatives, political parties, universities, and media of Global South countries build thousands – tens of thousands – of intelligent systems serving their own people, then countries that do not (yet) have the capacity to build AI infrastructure from the ground up would already be creating enormous value for their populations.

I would offer a three-step plan to inference sovereignty.

First, avoid being locked into any single vendor. Use large language models from several companies at once – start by using, say, Google and Anthropic side by side and build in the habit of substitutability.

Second, once substitutability is in place, use Chinese models to replace some functionalities of the US models. They are cheaper and, at minimum, do not leak your data to the CIA and the NSA.

Third, because the most popular Chinese models – GLM, DeepSeek, Qwen, and others – are open source, work with your universities, movements, and government to host those open-source models domestically and offer inference as a public service to your own people. Doing so achieves a large measure of AI inference sovereignty without your having to build the underlying models.

Think of it this way: let the big companies do the model-building and compete against each other. Our task is to state the needs of our people to those companies through the international mechanisms now emerging. The World AI Cooperation Organization, announced today by President Xi, is one such mechanism. Through it, we should be able to say to China: 'We are using your models to serve the daily life and work of millions. They still have problems here and there. Help us

improve them. Let us discuss how to deploy your models in our country, how to use the data together without China taking data away from Sri Lanka, and how to exchange more experience in regulating the digital space'. We are already doing this in Ghana, where we are working with parliament on regulation of digital space. Ghanaian parliamentarians learned from the Chinese experience, and we learned a great deal from Ghana's situation.

Let me close where I began. I have written a great deal about grassroots applications, and I do not believe that people should wait for the elites in Silicon Valley, Shanghai, Shenzhen, or Bangalore to decide what software our people get to use. I believe we should have millions of 'barefoot software developers' – just like the barefoot doctors in China – learning how to use AI to build information systems for themselves and for their people. Those are the people who will break the monopoly of the United States.

Australia's Role as Junior Partner to Empire

Nicholas Dobrijevich

Nicholas Dobrijevich is a researcher, Indonesian-language translator, and Asia-Pacific solidarity activist based in Sydney. He is completing a PhD on Australia–Indonesia left-wing connections, helped build the youth section of the International Peoples' Assembly, and co-founded the anti-imperialist organisation Red Spark.

Compared to most of the speakers on this panel and to most of the delegates in this room, I am speaking from a country that is *not* part of the Global South. I am speaking from a country that has been a constant source of imperialist and colonial aggression, occupation, and oppression throughout Asia and the Pacific. I want to explain why Australia has played that role for so long; how the current alignment with the United States and the AUKUS agreement fit into that history; how the agreement is manufactured and reproduced inside Australia; and, finally, what I take the tasks of the internationalist movement to be.

For at least one hundred and fifty years, Australia has been part of the network of colonial and imperialist countries in the Global North – much of whose wealth is drawn from the exploitation of the Global South. Australia itself was created through a genocidal invasion of the continent and a settler occupation. Already by the nineteenth century, Australia was one of the richest territories in the world – established as a settler outpost of British colonialism. That history also helps us understand the racism, and specifically the anti-Asian racism, that has always existed in Australia and is drawn upon to this day.

Australian foreign policy has always been determined by its role as an imperialist country and junior partner of a larger imperialist power. In the early part of Australia's history, that meant junior partnership to British imperialism. During the Second World War, Australia shifted its strategic alignment to the United States.

After the British military catastrophe at Singapore, Prime Minister John Curtin – himself from the Australian Labor Party (ALP) – made the shift formal. In 1941 he said, 'without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it clear that Australia looks to America free of pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom'.

The Australian state, a tool of the Australian capitalist class, has always aligned with the imperialist bloc as a whole. While the Australian capitalist class advances its own interest, it does so within a broader strategy of maintaining the stability of the wider imperialist bloc – the United States and Western Europe. That is where agreements like AUKUS come from.

The contemporary focus of Australian policy in the Asia-Pacific is a heightened campaign of hostility toward China. That is not new. Australian imperialism has been hostile to every Global South society in the region that has tried to pursue a socialist path, or even simply to pursue its own alternative path. What is distinctive now is that this posture is being consolidated through alignment with the United States and its own 'pivot to Asia'.

Barack Obama addressed the Australian parliament in 2011 and put it plainly, 'After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region'. Under later administrations, Obama and Clinton's pivot has been given greater weight, as the 'war on terror' was replaced with 'great-power competition'. That has manifested in the expansion of NATO into Asia, the revival of the Quad, and the announcement in September 2021 of a new military alliance – the AUKUS Pact between the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia.

The hallmark of AUKUS is the plan to acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. The proposed budget is over $368 billion with $10 billion already spent. It is worth pointing out that AUKUS is unashamedly hostile to China – no serious effort is made to hide that in the Australian government's own communications. It is also worth pointing out that China is the largest importer of Australian goods. So, one of the specific contradictions of Australian imperialism is a massive

campaign of hostility against the country that imports more Australian exports than any other.

How are ideas of that magnitude propagated and reproduced in Australian society? One of the most important and enduring channels is the long tradition of racism, and specifically anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism, that has existed throughout Australia's colonial and imperialist history.

There is an entire genre of Australian invasion literature, dating from the 1880s, which imagined that Australia would at some point be invaded by an Asian country. Sometimes it was Indonesia, sometimes China, sometimes a nameless generic Asian threat. That kind of fear-mongering began in the 1880s and continues, in updated form, to this day. Because of it, the Australian ruling class can constantly and systematically agitate longstanding unconscious and conscious racism to manufacture consent for the broader agreements of the imperialist system.

One of the first acts of the Australian parliament in 1901 was the Commonwealth Immigration Restrictions Act, better known as the White Australia policy. It gave the government the power to stop any non-European migration into Australia. A symptom of what we might call the decay that exists in an imperialist country is that one of the most active supporters of White Australia was the trade union movement itself.

In recent decades, the strength of the Australian capitalist class has grown relative to the strength of the progressive movement. Since the 1980s, with the decline of social democracy and the trade unions, the ruling class has been able to run racist propaganda and xenophobic campaigns – against refugees, in the 'war on terror', now as fear-mongering against China – without a significant pushback. The stability of imperialism in Australia is greatly strengthened when the working class can be won to a chauvinistic, nationalist, and racist outlook. Otherwise, there is a real danger that workers in imperialist countries like Australia will realise their comradeship with exploited people everywhere. Solidarity across borders is the thing the Australian ruling class most needs the working class not to feel.

I have so far described the racist and chauvinist tradition. But there is also, importantly, a strong internationalist people's history in Australia, and it is worth naming – both to reclaim in Australia and for comrades here.

One early instance was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), established in Australia in the early twentieth century. Industrially militant, they were also one of the main forces opposing the First World War (a very popular war in Australia at the time) and were opponents of the White Australia policy. In the 1920s, a 'Hands off China' campaign was established by trade unionists and community activists. It gained particular momentum after the 1931 Japanese invasion of northern China, when Chinese maritime workers and wharf labourers began boycotting ships that were bringing supplies to Japan.

In 1938, a ship called the *Dalfram* arrived at Port Kembla, a coal-mining port about an hour south of Sydney. Its task was to load three-hundred thousand tons of pig iron for shipment to Japan – to be used in the manufacture of Japanese war materials. The Waterside Workers Federation refused to touch the ship. The government responded with repressive anti-union legislation but could not break the boycott. BHP, the company supplying the pig iron, fired four thousand workers for refusing to load. The wharf labourers held out until the Waterside Workers Federation received an assurance from the Australian government that this would be the last such shipment to Japan – at which point they loaded the pig iron under protest.

In September 1945, after the proclamation of Indonesian independence, Australian trade unions launched a boycott of Dutch shipping. A thousand members of the Brisbane Branch of the Waterside Workers Federation met and voted to place black bans on Dutch ships in Australia. They announced, 'To assist the Dutch in any way is to assist avaricious Dutch imperialism against Indonesian democracy. The workers of Australia are solidly in support of Indonesian workers'. After Brisbane, the black bans spread to every major Australian port. Over thirty trade unions refused to touch supplies destined for Indonesia. Together with Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian workers in Australia at the time, the movement paralysed over five hundred and fifty vessels and around a thousand landing craft. This seriously

hampered the Dutch attempt to reassert colonial control. Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, called those actions 'a magnificent, freedom-loving stand'.

Another example, less well known even inside Australia, is the campaign of solidarity in the 1990s with East Timor and with pro-democracy movements in Indonesia against the Suharto dictatorship. Marches, sit-ins, occupations, public forums, conferences, and rallies were organised throughout the decade. When the violence intensified in Timor-Leste in 1999, significant demonstrations were held across Australia. In 2002, immediately after Timor-Leste's independence was restored, the Australian ruling class placed listening devices in Timorese government buildings so that Canberra could spy on the new government's discussions and manipulate its ability to negotiate over its oil and gas. To get access to Timorese oil in the first place, Australia had run a long global campaign to redefine the maritime boundary in its own favour, drawing not the equidistant line that international law would suggest but a line based on the extension of the continental shelf. This was done alongside – and made possible by – Australia's hundred percent support for the Suharto dictatorship throughout the years of its occupation of East Timor. Military and non-military imperialism are not opposites. They are two working hands of the same body.

I want to close with the practical question of what to do next.

The first thing to say is that the anti-imperialist and revolutionary left must grow in the Global North – in Australia and in every other imperialist country. The stronger the left inside a Global North country, the less free its ruling class is to do whatever it wants in Asia. If there is a revolutionary upsurge anywhere in Asia in the coming period, the strength of the progressive movement in Australia will be decisive in preventing our ruling class from stepping in on the side of counter-revolution. All the historical campaigns I have named – the boycott of pig iron to Japan, the black bans on Dutch shipping – were possible only because the left in Australia was, at those moments, in a much stronger place than it is now.

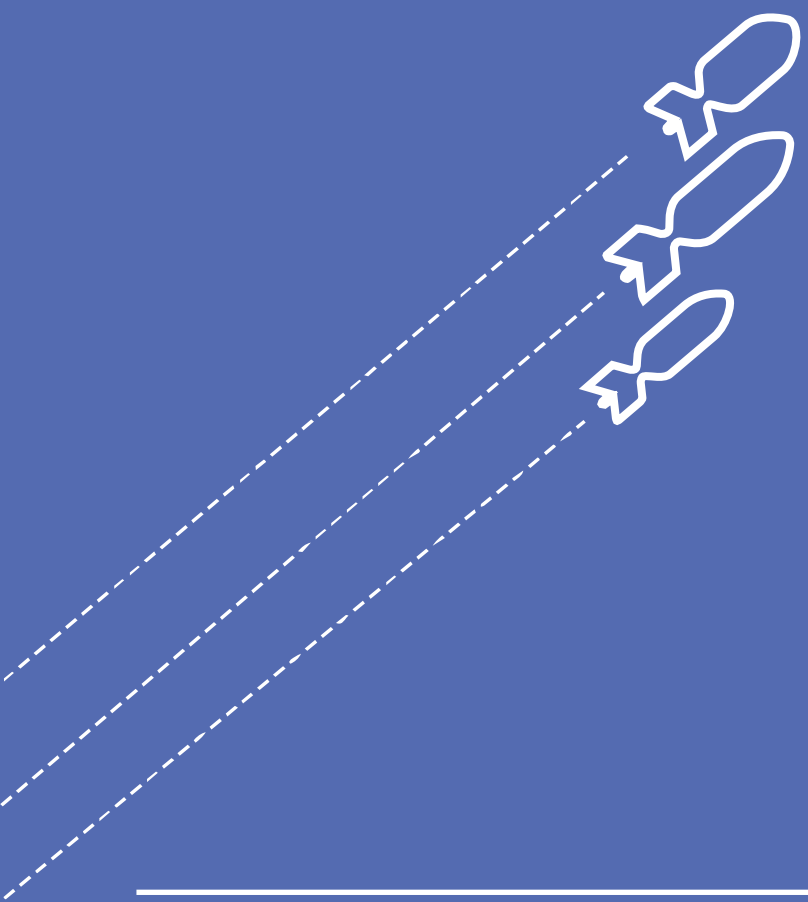
It has been over a century since Lenin and the Third International produced their analysis of imperialism. One thing they analysed was why the super-profits

extracted from the Global South and re-invested in the Global North produce a clear political effect in imperialist countries: conservatism, class collaboration, racism inside the working class. It is a powerful analysis. But nowhere in it did Lenin (or anyone else) say that the working class inside Global North countries has lost its revolutionary potential. Because of the social conditions and the differential levels of development and income, we do need different tactics and strategies to organise the working class in a country like Australia. What we do not need is generation after generation of the Australian left concluding, from Australia's conservatism and from the class-collaborationist tactics of much of the workers' movement, that revolution here is not possible. Revolution in a Global North country is not the same task as revolution in the Global South. But it is a task.

I will end with a proposal for the Hands Off Asia campaign. Revolutionary social change in the United States itself would probably be the most significant tipping point in shifting the global balance in favour of the progressive movement. How, in our campaign, can we link up with the progressive forces in the United States? How can we support the growth of anti-imperialism inside the country that is the primary architect of the militarisation of Asia? That is a conversation I would very much like to have – and it is, I believe, one of the concrete forms that Hands Off Asia can take.

Chapter 05

The Far Right, Authoritarianism, and the Domestic Infrastructure of Empire



Indonesia's Far Right and the Task of Clarity

Hilmar Farid

Hilmar Farid is an Indonesian academic, activist, politician, and translator. He served as Director General of Culture at the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology from 2015 to 2024. He currently heads the Megawati Research Institute.

Two years ago, in Indonesia, a former army general – Prabowo Subianto, the son-in-law of Suharto, who ruled Indonesia under authoritarian rule for thirty-two years – was elected president. Prabowo himself was responsible for the kidnapping of activists whose disappearances left several of my comrades' children fatherless. He bore responsibility for the violence in East Timor that Agustino Perez spoke about at this conference yesterday. And yet, when he ran, he did so with rhetoric some Indonesians heard as socialist: anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF), anti-globalisation, anti-oligarchy, and promising to deliver basic services against the interests of the rich.

In some circles, he is now believed to be a socialist president fighting for social justice against the IMF. That confusion is where I want to begin, because as Vijay Prashad argued in his opening speech to this conference, one of the most important tasks before us now is to clarify for social movements and young people where we actually stand.

My argument is simple: authoritarian populist rule and the far right are not evidence that something has changed. They legitimise what has not. I want to show what that means concretely, and to show how the very cracks in that legitimation are also our openings.

The empire itself is not fixed. The post-war order ran on multilateral institutions – the IMF, the World Trade Organisation – and combined extraction with a

rules-based frame. The very powers that built it are now dismantling that order. The post-war order rested on soft power and ideological alignment. The rising far-right, transactional order operates on raw utilitarian leverage – the language billionaires speak fluently.

The composition of the imperial core is now shifting to make room for figures like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, whose platforms control the digital public square and the logistics pipelines of global commerce. By controlling the flows of information and goods, they also hold structural leverage over the very political actors dismantling the multilateral institutions.

As the old international order fractures into isolated transactional deal-making, these multi-billionaires operate as modern-day sovereign company entities – corporate powers that states now negotiate with, rather than regulate.What we are examining in Southeast Asia is a periphery adapting to that changing core, not a separate story. And what I want to tell here is not a story of domination. It is a story of the vulnerability of domination – of the cracks and fissures in the imperial order that our task is to identify and exploit.

The infrastructure of domination in any country rests on four pillars:

First, is the coercive apparatus – military and police – whose real function is protecting capital and elite power.

Second, is the class alliance fusing state power and capital accumulation, in which the domestic elite is not separate from international capital but transnationally embedded – holding offshore assets, co-investing with foreign funds.

Third, is the ideological layer. In some countries, a far-right form of nationalism, developmentalism, and anti-communism, together manufactures consent so that overt violence is not required at every moment. This is the Gramscian order of hegemony.

Fourth, is the institutional plumbing – laws, courts, land tenure, regulation – that is durable enough to outlast any single government.

Each of these systems requires active maintenance. None is self-sustaining. This continual need for upkeep is what makes them prone to failure – and produces the cracks and openings through which transformative change becomes possible.

Indonesia gained independence in 1945. From 1945 to 1965 – twenty years – our first president, Sukarno, used the state apparatus inherited from the colonial period to pursue full decolonisation. He nationalised Dutch assets. He built anti-colonial solidarity through the Bandung Conference of 1955. He moved us toward a genuinely independent economic path. That political project was defeated not by ideas but by force.

The lesson of Sukarno's fall is not simply that he had powerful enemies – that much was clear. The lesson is that the apparatus he was trying to bend toward decolonisation was never built for that purpose. It was built under colonial rule precisely to subordinate the whole society to extraction. You cannot fully decolonise through a state structure engineered to prevent exactly that outcome. Sukarno tried to bend the inherited apparatus toward national sovereignty. The apparatus, still oriented toward the interests it had been built to serve, broke under him instead. We learned the same lesson again in 1998, in a different register.

Working inside inherited institutions without contesting what they were built to do has a ceiling. 1965 is the clearest possible demonstration of where that ceiling sits. The new foundation was poured in the 1965–1966 mass killings, which took the lives of no fewer than one million Indonesians and installed Suharto's New Order. Those killings were not incidental Cold War violence. They were a template. Their content was the elimination of the organised left through slaughter, the imposition of a militarised developmental state, and the opening of the country to foreign capital. The template repeated. In Congo in 1960, Lumumba fell, and Mobutu rose. In Iran in 1953, the removal of Mosaddegh and the rise of the Shah. Mobutu, the Shah, Suharto – the same design.

Each time a government moves to actually control its own resources, it is removed. A client strongman replaces it; the country is reopened to capital; the coercive

apparatus operates in the open. This is not a coincidence. It is a repeated action, wherever a post-colonial state tries to exit the position for which it was designed.

By the 1980s, however, Suharto had stopped merely managing that arrangement. He had become a direct participant. He had built personal business empires layered onto state contracts, with monopolies run through his children and a tight network of cronies. The class alliance had a name and a family attached to it, and here the strain has a specific shape.

The New Order had been built on destroying Sukarno, the popular national movement around him, and the organised left. It justified that destruction with a promise: liberation from mismanagement and misdirection under Sukarno. But what it delivered was a version of exactly what it had claimed to fix – now organised more efficiently, protected by more violence, and lasting three decades longer. Its own founding promise became the measure of its failure. That is why anti-communist stigma is still deployed today against organisers who have no relationship to the historical party. It is not a habit. It is the ongoing work of concealing a promise broken from the start.

The story of Suharto's fall began in 1997, with the Asian Financial Crisis. As in South Korea, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries, the IMF stepped in. Suharto initially refused to comply, then relented – and it was already too late. The student movement had risen; mass protests and urban riots had already taken thousands of lives; Suharto resigned.

But the crack that ended his rule came from two directions at once, and this is worth considering. The first was from below: grassroots student and labour mobilisation, some of whose actors are in this room, accelerating sharply as the financial crisis hit. The second was from above: international capital's confidence in Suharto was breaking down at the same moment. After he refused to comply with the IMF's terms, international capital concluded he was a lost cause and withdrew support. That is how he actually fell. Suharto most likely did not fall on domestic protest alone. It took both directions arriving at the same time.

Here, however, is the crucial problem. The opposition to Suharto did not arrive with an alternative leadership. No governing agenda could hold power once he was gone. The reform movement could unite around removing one man but could not agree on what should replace the system that had produced him. That absence is why the reform agenda – *reformasi* – so often stopped exactly where its name promised to go further.

I do not belittle its achievements. The formal separation of the military from the police, which for the first time allows the police to bring military officials to justice; the establishment of the Corruption Eradication Commission; the establishment of a constitutional court – these were real institutional gains. But the dominant class alliance underneath was never dismantled. It was only transformed.

After decentralisation, that alliance itself decentralised: instead of one concentrated family controlling everything at the centre, we now have that family's counterparts across Indonesia, each running its own small kingdom.

Given time and no organised alternative contesting the class relation itself, the alliance simply reached back up and recaptured its own reforms. In 2019, the Corruption Eradication Commission was revised in ways that weakened its independence, triggering the largest student protests since *reformasi* itself, remembered by the phrase 'reform has been corrupted'.

In 2023, the Constitutional Court changed the presidential eligibility rules in time to let Joko Widodo's son run as Prabowo's running mate – while the Chief Justice was Widodo's brother-in-law. The institutions created during *reformasi* were recaptured by the elite. The lesson is that institutional reform without a contest over class power is temporary. This is the single most important lesson our history has to offer.

Prabowo's presidency requires the class alliance and the coercive apparatus to persist. His far-right nationalist rhetoric has grown louder – specifically around reclaiming sovereignty and standing up to foreign extraction. His government now

claims to be on the side of the people against international capital. Let us test that claim by what the government is actually doing.

The claim: the establishment of *Danantara*, a sovereign wealth fund, aimed at centralising state control over nickel, coal, palm oil, and mineral exports – justified by the figure that Indonesia has previously lost no less than $1 trillion to undervalued exports. Danantara, we are told, is in place to correct that.

The record: an amended military law now returns active officers to civilian state-enterprise posts, and Danantara has accordingly been populated at multiple levels with ex-generals. Instead of centralising state control over resources, the new sovereign wealth fund is being used to remilitarise the entire bureaucracy.

On capital flows, Indonesia is now co-investing with foreign capital even as it centralises domestic control – a $2 billion contract with the Qatari government on critical minerals was concluded on this basis. On anti-imperialism, Prabowo, faced with a thirty-two percent US tariff threat, conceded US access to Indonesian critical minerals, committed to buy Boeing jets, and moved to restart protection provisions benefiting US companies.

Indonesia joined BRICS – and, at the same time, signed on to a US Board of Peace framework in exactly the opposite direction of what BRICS was meant to be. These are contradictions. They are the cracks and openings we should watch if we want to pursue transformation.

By mid-2026, the strain had deepened into an open crisis. The rupiah stood at a record low, near 18,190 to the US dollar. The stock market was down more than twenty-six percent. The balance of payments swung into a $9 billion deficit. Internal conflicts within the government re-opened. Prabowo dismissed Sri Mulyani, who had been the government's link to the international financial institutions, and reshuffled his cabinet six times in twenty months.

In June 2026, the government amended its own financial law to grant legal immunity from prosecution to purchasers of Danantara bonds. This is not a government

confidently reclaiming sovereignty. It is a coalition struggling to hold itself together, discarding even the technocratic legitimacy that once reassured capital – while the currency tells a different story than the speeches.

In August 2025, the Indonesian parliament granted itself a lawmaker housing allowance of some 50 million rupiah – roughly 20 times the minimum wage. That became public knowledge, and once the numbers became legible on social media, other scandals became legible.

A single incident – the killing of a motorbike-taxi driver – sparked a response, and protests spread across the country. The crack had become an opening. The problem, again, was that the organised sectors and political organisations were not ready with an alternative. It ended as a riot. Thousands of students remain detained, some in brutal conditions.

We are working in solidarity with them. But we still have to answer the same underlying question: openings appear all the time; cracks appear all the time. What is required in order to exploit them in our direction is a struggle agenda with an actual socialist horizon – one that addresses land, labour, and the ownership of the resources this entire infrastructure exists to extract.

This is not, in the end, a struggle for anti-corruption or for good governance. It is a struggle for fundamental change. That is where analytical clarity matters most, and it is what our organisations across Asia now most need to build together.

The Pakistani Student Movement Against Militarism and Austerity

Fatima Shahzad

Fatima Shahzad is general secretary of the Progressive Students Federation (PrSF) in Pakistan. She is also an artist and editor at Surkh Sawera magazine, and a founding member of the Socialist Reading Group (SRG), which promotes left analysis, translations, and revolutionary theory.

Most people today only know the Pakistani left as a fringe movement. However, it has not always been so. Our country has a rich and vibrant history of communist politics and organisation of left students, and it was the deliberate work of a specific state project to make the left as marginal as it now is. Understanding how that project worked is the precondition for understanding what it now takes to organise students in Pakistan.

After partition, in the 1950s, the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) was formed under the Communist Party of Pakistan. In 1953, students at Dow Medical College in Karachi – not at the time affiliated with DSF – came out in peaceful protest demanding more spending for their campus and an additional campus building. The government's response was to open fire on those peaceful protesters. That politicised the students, who saw their problem as systemic, not local. They connected with other students, developed a concrete ideological analysis of the country they lived in, and many joined the DSF. The DSF's Karachi unit became a serious political force.

In 1955, the Communist Party and DSF were both banned in Pakistan. The government then formed a new body called the National Students Federation (NSF) – not intended to be a left organisation. DSF cadres, however, had seen the ban coming and had already joined the NSF structures. Through rigorous political education and agitation, they had turned the government's own creation into the

largest left student organisation in Pakistan by the 1960s – sweeping union elections across the country. Ironically, an organisation founded by the government became one of the major forces that toppled Ayub Khan's military dictatorship in 1968.

That was one of the glorious periods of the Pakistani left. Workers, peasants, left parties, and students came together with a programme: national equality for all the nations then within Pakistan – East Pakistan, Balochistan, Sindh, KPK, Punjab; nationalisation of large-scale industry; land reform; a Pakistan out of the pro-US camp in the Cold War with a robust anti-imperialist politics and full membership of the Non-Aligned Movement. The military establishment found that programme unacceptable.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged, in my view, for the things he did right, not for what he did wrong. After Bhutto, the left had largely fragmented. The trade-union movement had declined. General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq feared the student movement above all, because it had proven capable of bringing down Ayub Khan.

Under General Zia, the two projects intertwined: the Afghan war and the privatisation of education. The Afghan war project and the building of *madrasas* required the Pakistani state to privatise education. If public education is genuinely accessible to all young people, then there is no room for a madrasa-run private sector to grow. Large-scale privatisation and commercialisation of education began during Zia's rule precisely at the moment the Afghan war was starting.

The last student-union elections in Pakistan were held in 1984. At Quaid-i-Azam University – one of the biggest public-sector universities in the country. The NSF still swept the elections, even though the state was arming and sponsoring the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba on campuses. That is when Zia realised what was in front of him: students in Pakistan will choose the left whenever they have a democratic campus culture and can exercise their political rights. Student unions were banned that year. Forty years later, my generation has no memory of what a student union looks like. We have been doing student politics without the right of unionising ever since.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is not a welfare institution for the Third World. When it lends, it lends with conditionalities and structural-adjustment packages that impose severe austerity. In Pakistan that austerity has hollowed out the very idea of public education. Almost no major university in Pakistan is still entirely under the public sector; they now operate through public-private partnerships. Fee hikes are relentless.

In the university I attend – which I will not name, because when I go back it would create a problem for me – there are two-hundred self-finance seats, which students who can pay several lakhs of rupees can take, alongside just two merit-based seats for Islamabad, one of which I hold. That ratio is not unusual. Every year the self-finance intake grows, and the merit intake shrinks. Facilities on campuses – hostels, transport – are priced beyond the reach of many students.

We also now have a category of military universities in Pakistan – NUST, NUML, Air University – owned by the military and run by retired military personnel. Those campuses leave no space for politics, democratic dialogue, or free discussion of any kind.

The left student movement of the earlier era was also anti-war and anti-imperialist. That was intolerable to a state whose regional posture was aligned with the United States. Crackdowns on the labour movement, the ban on student unions, and the sponsorship of religious extremist student organisations are all part of the same project. It is no coincidence that groups like the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba took form and were empowered during the same period.

Today, while student unions are banned and left organisations are not permitted on campus, these far-right organisations face no such restrictions. They receive substantial funding for their annual events. They intimidate and beat students. They morally police women. They victim-blame women who face harassment. The culture they build on campus is one in which any boy and girl found sitting together in proximity will be reported and threatened.

The story used to justify the ban on unions was that student politics prevents students from focusing on their studies and promotes violence on campuses. Since the ban in 1984, campus violence has only grown, not the other way around.

Every student admitted to a Pakistani university now signs an affidavit undertaking to stay out of any political activity while studying. There is thus no formal space for a left organisation to have its structure on any campus – no democratic environment at all. Campuses have become microcosms of the undemocratic system that governs the country: militarised, dominated by the far right, and hostile to the left.

A series of cases sparked what became a revival of the student movement in 2018 and 2019. In 2017, a student named Mashal Khan was lynched in Mardan. He was progressive and secular, and he publicly criticised the university administration for failing to use funds it received for student welfare. The administration launched a false blasphemy accusation to silence him; far-right activists lynched him on campus and beat him to death. It was livestreamed. Nobody stopped it. The video circulated on social media and triggered a wave of outrage.

There was the case of Dr. Nimrita Chandani, a medical student at Chandka Medical College in Larkana, Sindh, who was raped by a member of the administration and then murdered. Her death was first called a suicide, until organised protest forced an investigation and the killing was acknowledged. There was the killing of Hayat Baloch, a student at the University of Balochistan not affiliated with any political organisation, who was shot seven times in his house – in front of his mother – by armed officers.

Progressive organisations – ours and thirty-five others – formed the Student Action Committee and organised the Student Solidarity March in 2018 and 2019: ten thousand students in Islamabad; over five thousand in Lahore; marches held across 43 cities. Our demands were simple. Restore student unions. Establish anti-harassment committees. End the privatisation and commercialisation of education. We did not win those demands. But we succeeded in raising the agenda of student unions in the mainstream.

Debate opened in the Senate and in the media. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in Sindh passed a bill to restore student unions – which, to this day, has never been implemented. That non-implementation says everything you need to know about the PPP: progressive in rhetoric, indistinguishable in policy from the other reactionary parties.

Why is it that students and young people in Pakistan cannot achieve a decent life? The current Pakistani budget tells the story clearly. Debt-servicing plus direct and indirect military spending make up sixty-eight percent of the budget. Add in the payments to independent power producers and other structural costs, and only a very small share – around one trillion rupees – is left for social services and public spending.

The reason we have unemployment; the reason we have twenty-five million children out of school; the reason education has stopped being a right guaranteed to every young person and has become a commodity for the middle class and the rich: All of these are consequences of a government that has no interest in pursuing sovereign development policy, that will not build up the country's productive forces, that under IMF pressure has de-industrialised over recent decades rather than industrialised, and that will not invest in the welfare of its people.

Our Progressive Students Federation was formed after the ban on the NSF has fragmented Pakistani student politics. Over the last five years, we have built units at more than thirty-five universities. We have run solidarity campaigns for Palestine. We have taken up housing-rights struggles – filing and winning a High Court case against the Higher Education Commission's mass eviction plans in Islamabad two years ago. We continue to organise the marches and the political-education work, sometimes off campus if we cannot hold it on campus. In recent years, we have seen a real growth in enthusiasm among young people to come to the left.

I want to end with a verse from Shaikh Ayaz, a communist poet of our region.

My brave ones, my ones who have a vision – even if your feet are wounded, keep walking forward; despite the clashes of stone and iron on the long and difficult path, keep your chains shining, and march forward.

How Empire Divides Malaysia

Zikri Rahman

Zikri Rahman is a cultural worker, writer, and programme coordinator at Pusat Sejarah Rakyat and Under the Banana Tree. His work focuses on Malaysia and Singapore's people's history, oral histories of protest movements, critical pedagogy, cultural movements, censorship documentation, and regional theatre networks.

My intervention shifts the scale slightly inward. What are the domestic political structures that make imperial power durable and dominate our condition today? How does our experience in Malaysia help us understand the enduring infrastructures of empire? Malaysia is very much involved in, and active in, neoliberalisation and the capitalist market, from its colonial time to its current national formation.

What would be interesting for us to explore is the systematic production of communal divisions – particularly of race, and currently the emerging and intertwined role of organised religions – as technologies of political discipline. It is far from being natural; rather, it is actively nurtured through different modes of political participation. History tells us something very different. Communalism is manufactured, and it is actively reproduced. And because it is historically produced, it can also be historically dismantled. It remains an albatross that we need to confront.

The British colonial logic of 'divide and rule' in Malaya did not simply extract resources. Fundamentally, it reorganised society itself. Through the logic of divide-and-rule, different ethnic communities were incorporated into distinct economic functions: poor Indians and Malays concentrated in the rural and semi-urban plantation and agriculture sectors, with the Chinese specifically in small and informal manufacturing and retailing sectors.

These divisions were not accidental demographic developments. They were administrative technologies designed to prevent the emergence of a unified anti-colonial

politics. People experienced colonialism differently, but the political objective remained the same: to fragment labour, communities, and, ultimately, resistance.

This colonial inheritance did not disappear after independence. Instead, it became embedded within the architecture of the postcolonial state.

The Malayan Emergency (1946–1960) highlights the war which entangled both British colonial and local elites in prosecuting a costly effort to halt the advance of multiple anti-colonial forces, from leftist-progressive nationalists to communism.

During the Cold War (until 1989), Malaysia inherited not only colonial institutions but also colonial ways of organising political life. The Cold War further deepened this trajectory. As Meredith Weiss argues, looking at the brewing anti-colonial struggle in Malaya during the Cold War period is critical in locating its lasting impacts on Malaysian politics, particularly in the realms of 'political ideologies, settlement patterns, restrictive legislation, and Malaysia's geo-political positioning'.

Even with the marginalisation and heavy suppression of the Malayan Communist Party, the threat of communism – and then the spectre of a convenient communist bogey – has resonated across the Malaysian polity. The Emergency as a mode of ideological formation is far from over. In other words, the Cold War did not simply shape foreign policy. It fundamentally reorganised the relationship between the Malaysian state and its own citizens.

What emerges through decades of state-building around communal identities and its many afterlives is a hierarchical form of ethno-religious consociationalism. In other words, constant compromise between the elites of different communities, with Malays accorded political dominance.

Electoral authoritarianism has been continuously manipulated by the powers that be – in Pepinsky's terms, 'integral to the regime's stability but where they are neither free enough nor fair enough to be democratic'. This marks a decisive condition throughout Mahathir Mohama's twenty-two-year tenure, and it was only in 2018 that the first changes at the federal level occurred in Malaysia.

A continuous process of 'otherisation': demonising various minority groups and non-citizens (refugees, stateless) – the 'liberal' (and by association 'Islamophobic') West, including Christians, ethnic Chinese, Shi'a Muslims (since Malaysia's official religion is Sunni Islam), human rights activists, and LGBTQ people.

Such trajectories, as conceptualised by Farish Noor in Malaysia's dominant political imagination and historiography, embed what he calls the logic of the 4M: Malay, Male, Muslim, Middle-class – amplified within multiple tangents.

On that note, we need to confront it from another important domestic infrastructure of empire: knowledge production within the Malaysian context. If we are to understand how the colonial powers remain durable, it is inseparable from how they have access to knowledge, particularly of the linguistic and cultural realm, and continue to be mobilised as a tool of domestic discipline – particularly by right-wing elements in the country.

Here, I would like to contextualise the work that I am currently engaging with, and how it provides the double-edged swords of limitations and possibilities to further our understanding of the phenomenon.

First, the SEA Artistic Freedom RADAR Database. It provides empirical evidence of how such afterlives continue to form Malaysian negotiation – not only with its past and present, but also in confronting its future. For the record, Malaysia contributes the highest number of censorship cases in Southeast Asia for the past fifteen years. Political subjects and contentious artistic productions continue to be governed. Though many censorship cases are rather absurd in nature, they capture how arbitrary the authority is in wielding its power, particularly through sets of legislation that Malaysia inherited within the colonial framework (such as the OSA, Sedition Act, Printing and Publication Act, etc.) and how the powers that be are utilising it from time to time.

And with Pusat Sejarah Rakyat, as an engaged movement focusing on the history and memory-making process, through publication, archival activation, and the production of sonic essays, we are looking at how Malaysia continues to struggle

to come to terms with its multiple histories – particularly pertaining to what is perceived as leftist or socialist themes; any artistic and cultural productions that fall under the vague categories of 'communism' were significant recurring targets over the past decades.

It is within this consciousness that we are also building a regional network of independent archival organisations looking at the people's histories in Southeast Asia, Under the Banana Tree.

Looking at concrete examples of political-based censorship further illustrates the point that knowledge-based movement is strategic in the process of dismantling the infrastructures of empire.

One such example is the recent banning of the memoir of Shamsiah Fakeh, an anti-colonial freedom fighter and a member of the Malayan Communist Party. Though it has been circulated for more than 20 years, it highlights two different nuances:

First, how convenient it was for the government to use communism as a bogeyman, alongside hundreds of other communism-themed publications since Malaysia's formation. Second, only the Malay edition was targeted, and not the English version.

Both highlight a continuous trend that we need to confront in Malaysia. This is far from being an isolated case; rather, it is a pattern of how Malaysians are being deprived of, and governed from, our own contentious history.

It highlights effective ways in which history itself is remembered, and within such a strategic language spoken by the majority population in the country. They are mechanisms through which historical imagination is regulated. If people cannot remember earlier traditions of solidarity, they become more willing to believe that communal division has always existed and is the only way politics can be practised.

Expanding this further, it should be noted that the authorities are justifying such measures under the shadow of nationalism founded on a 'national security' ideology.

Its reason of existence is to maintain the exclusionist and hegemonic expression of its so-called cultural and historical purity.

By tracing through the nature of the works highlighted above, it is critical to work towards thinking of new forms of resistance and dissent required to respond to the shifting political present – particularly on how intertwined and hegemonic ethno-religious sentiment can be in Malaysia.

This is precisely where the work of Pusat Sejarah Rakyat is situated. When we speak about people's history, we are not merely recovering forgotten stories. We are challenging the political architecture that determines whose history deserves to exist. Far from working in isolation, through networks – such as with social movements in Malaysia and the regional network of Under the Banana Tree – we provide the possibilities of solidarity between the evolving notions of peoples. These histories remind us that solidarity has often crossed ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries. History therefore becomes evidence that communalism is neither natural nor inevitable.

This leads to my final point. Perhaps we need to rethink one of the most important political words in Malaysia: *rakyat* – citizen, masses.

Today, rakyat is frequently used rhetorically. But historically, rakyat represented something much more radical. It referred to political communities organised not around race or religion, but around shared conditions of oppression and collective aspirations for justice. Recovering this meaning matters.

Communal politics asks us one question: who belongs to my race? People's history asks a different question: who shares my struggle? That shift – from identity to solidarity – is fundamentally political. It opens possibilities for building movements capable of confronting authoritarianism not as isolated ethnic communities but as people facing common structures of exploitation.

If communalism functions as the domestic infrastructure of empire, then people's history becomes part of the infrastructure of resistance. It expands political

memory. It reconstructs solidarity. It makes visible those whom history has deliberately rendered invisible. Perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that authoritarianism is never sustained by coercion alone. It also depends upon controlling the stories people tell about themselves.

Recovering those stories is therefore not simply an academic exercise. It is a political practice of democratic imagination.

The Indian Student Movement Against the Far Right

Aishe Ghosh

Aishe Ghosh is an Indian student activist. She is the former president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) and a member of the Students' Federation of India (SFI).

India no longer has colonial powers ruling directly, but a very active hegemonic project works to reproduce the effects of colonial rule from within. What is happening in India is very similar to what my fellow panellists have described from Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

A similar toolkit and playbook are being used almost everywhere: a domestic infrastructure is being built through media, institutions, the police, the army, and – critically – the ideological work that creates a class of people who will rally behind these forces of their own accord. This toolkit uses both force and the manufacturing of consent.

India has historically had a vibrant student movement, but I will focus here on what has changed since 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. The BJP is now in its third term in government. Since 2014, we have seen excessive commercialisation of education and the systemic dismantling of public education. This has been done, as fellow panellists have documented in their own countries, to serve the interests of the corporates – both domestic and Western.

In recent years, India has also been used more directly to serve external interests. As the genocide has been carried out in Gaza, Indian soldiers and Indian companies have been sent to Israel to serve such interests. This, however, has been the state's action, not the people's consent.

For the far right, capturing educational institutions has been a central project. Education has never been neutral. It has always been a political project. Post-independence, it served the bourgeois class in specific ways – successive governments made sure of that. What the right-wing government wants is to capture those educational spaces themselves to ensure they rally with right-wing ideology and politics. That is why we see a serious attack on organised student activity across all Indian campuses.

The first wave of attack on Indian campuses came in 2016. It targeted both the university I study at, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and a student named Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University. Rohith – from a marginalised community – had his scholarship stripped because of student activism, and he died by suicide. That event erupted into student protests across the country.

At the same moment, the government began a coordinated campaign to vilify JNU. JNU was one of the universities speaking clearly about what was going wrong with the government's policies – the fund cuts, the anti-student policies that would most affect students from marginalised communities.

The label deployed was anti-nationals – universities were the hub of anti-nationals. This slogan spread across every mainstream media platform. It was a story designed to make any serious student in India stop listening to what JNU was saying. In fact, JNU was one of a small number of universities defending the idea of public education. Very few Indian universities now retain that structure. Most now have self-finance seats where students must pay several lakhs of rupees for the same degree. In a country with a very large university-going population, predominantly from working-class or marginalised communities, fees are impossible to pay without student loans.

The universities that resisted – JNU, Hyderabad Central, Jamia Millia Islamia, and a few others – were exactly the ones the government moved to vilify.

In 2020, the BJP government passed the National Education Policy (NEP). If you only heard the name, you might wonder why we oppose it. Of course, a country

should have a national education policy. But, the intent is what matters here. The NEP was not designed to help students access affordable education. It was not a plan to close the gap in higher and school education. It was designed to widen the existing gap.

The NEP was passed in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic. There was no discussion in parliament. There was no space for voices from the opposition. During a health emergency, the government pushed through an education policy that will shape Indian students, faculty, and campus workers for a generation – precisely because the government knew that students could not take to the streets to resist.

Since 2020, we have watched the extreme and deepening commercialisation of education. The University Grants Commission and comparable public funding institutions are being dismantled and replaced by a Higher Education Funding Agency. Under the new model, when a university must take out a loan in crores of rupees if it wants to build a new department. Those loans must be repaid through student fees.

This isn't happening only at central universities. The model is being pushed onto state and federal universities as well, making it more difficult for any student from a working-class or marginalised background to enter higher education at all.

In 2019, when this commercialisation reached JNU, the university administration announced a very large fee hike. At the time, we had a left students' union led by the SFI. Our argument was direct: if a fee hike of that size goes through, students from marginalised communities and poor backgrounds will not be able to study. The government's answer was to send right-wing goons to our campus to beat us, myself included, and the organised resistance.

Since 2020, we have watched a fear psychology being deliberately manufactured. If you resist, if you speak against the policies of this government and you defend public education, then you will face physical attack or be jailed.

The Citizenship Amendment Act arrived in the same period. Students who tried to resist it faced the same response. Umar Khalid and other student leaders and

activists have been in jail for six years under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. This is how the space to protest is being closed.

In parallel, a strategy of outsourced violence has been developed against writers, thinkers, and social activists in regional languages. The government itself says nothing. But the political outfits associated with the ruling party harass and kill of activists writing on scientific temperament, public awareness, and communal harmony. Some assailants are chosen and quietly released. What is being manufactured is an environment, especially on educational campuses, in which writing itself turn is risky.

In recent months, a national student movement has re-emerged in India, triggered by one of the most brutal recent institutional failures. Some 22 lakh students were pushed out of central examinations when the exams were contracted to corrupt agencies. Approximately 22 students died by suicide as the examination pattern collapsed around them. The movement's demand was simple: accountability from the education minister.

Every time our government officials evade accountability, we lose something structural about what democratic representation was supposed to mean. Protests demanding a comprehensive response are now underway across the country.

Physical intimidation continues. Extreme commercialisation continues. Student unions are banned on several campuses. Where we still have union elections, the environment is not homogeneous. But we have continued to organise.

SFI has been building broader platforms with progressive organisations to defend public education and democratic spaces on campus, and to keep the far-right communal agenda from consolidating on our campuses.

We are also seeing the specific effects of commercialisation on women students, who face the sharpest dropout rates when fees rise. When we are inside our own countries and campuses, it is easy to feel like we are fighting our battles alone. But

platforms like the Hands Off Asia conference remind us that we are not. Such is the value of this platform.

Across South and Southeast Asia, and across the wider Global South, students and young people are in a common fight for public education, democratic spaces, and a habitable political culture.

Resistance in one campus makes resistance possible elsewhere. That is the internationalism I have taken from this conference, and it is the one we now have to build.

The Return of the Marcos Dynasty and the Struggle for People's Power in the Philippines

Khyl Ramos

Khyl Ramos is a Filipino activist and community development practitioner working on climate justice, labour rights, and grassroots organising. He is a National Council Member and Youth Coordinator of Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM – Party of the Labouring Masses) and Deputy Project Manager at the Transform Asia Gender and Labor Institute, advancing political education and regional solidarity.

On 18 February 2009, in Albay, Philippines, a woman named Jocelyn and three children – Ina, five years old; Daisy, four; and Rafaela, one – had just finished lunch at her sister-in-law's house when they heard gunfire in the distance. They prepared to run for safety, but before they could, a grenade struck the house. Jocelyn and her children were all wounded. So were her sister-in-law and sister-in-law's son, Julius, and daughter, Nene. Rafaela was the most seriously injured, with wounds to her back and nape. They were all rushed to the hospital. Rafaela died about twenty-four hours later.

The grenade was part of a US–Philippines Balikatan exercise – *Balikatan*, in Filipino, means 'shoulder to shoulder'. That is what shoulder-to-shoulder can look like at the receiving end.

The return of the Marcos dynasty – with our current president Bongbong Marcos Jr., son of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., who ruled for over two decades – is not simply the comeback of a political family. It is a consolidation of a dynastic-authoritarian project that strengthens the domestic foundations of US imperialism in the Philippines.

The Marcos restoration demonstrates that authoritarianism in the Philippines is not an exception to democracy. It is a mechanism through which elite rule reproduces itself, secures foreign interests, and suppresses organised resistance. To understand why the Marcoses returned, we have to understand the political system that made their return possible.

The Philippines is often celebrated as one of Asia's oldest democracies, especially since the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) People Power Revolution of 1986. Beneath the regular elections, however, lies a political system monopolised by a handful of elite families. Political dynasties are not merely a symptom of weak institutions; they are one of the principal mechanisms through which political and economic power is reproduced across generations.

Today, around seventeen of the twenty-four senators belong to political dynasties – three of them are groups of siblings. Approximately eighty percent of the members of the House of Representatives come from political families. At the local level – governors, mayors – the same husbands, wives, cousins, sisters, and brothers rule respective provinces as single ruling families.

Political power has increasingly become inherited wealth. Democratic representation has become family succession. This concentration allows a small number of oligarchic families to dominate legislation, public resources, local government, and the priorities of national development – often because those in office are also the businessmen building destructive infrastructure across the country. Elections become contests between competing factions of the ruling class, rather than genuine democratic alternatives for the Filipino people.

The 1987 Constitution, drafted after Marcos Sr.'s ouster, explicitly prohibits political dynasties as may be defined by law. Nearly four decades later, no such law exists. Congress has deliberately failed to pass an effective enabling statute. This failure is not accidental, as it reflects the reality that political dynasties are expected to regulate themselves. The very institutions we have tasked with dismantling dynastic politics are controlled by the dynasties themselves. It is a joke played on us by our own government.

In May 2026, the House of Representatives passed a proposed Anti-Political Dynasty Act through House Bill 8389. We call it a fake bill. Rather than prohibiting dynastic rule, it merely limits the prohibition to relatives within the second degree of consanguinity, while allowing family members to rotate positions. Political dynasties will continue to exist. The bill's principal proponents are themselves dynasty members – including Representative Sandro Marcos, the president's own son and the House Majority Leader. It obviously raises the political question: can political dynasties legislate their own dismantling – or are these reforms designed to preserve elite rule while projecting the appearance of democratic change?

The return of the Marcoses in 2022 was not simply the result of a successful election campaign. We saw the fifteen-million-vote gap between Marcos and his closest opponent. It was the culmination of a decades-long political project.

When Marcos Sr. was overthrown in 1986, the dictatorship did not simply disappear. The family lost Malacañang but it never abandoned its political ambitions. Over nearly four decades, it patiently rebuilt its influence through provincial political bases, legal rehabilitation, historical revisionism, and a sophisticated propaganda campaign. This long process was financed by the vast political resources and machinery accumulated during the dictatorship itself – wealth the Philippine courts have repeatedly recognised as ill-gotten. The objective was not only to return to power but to transform public memory into their favour.

The rehabilitation reached its political culmination in 2022 with the alliance of the Marcos and Duterte dynasties. Sara Duterte, current Vice President, is the daughter of Rodrigo Duterte, who is now at the International Criminal Court for the bloody war on drugs that killed thousands of people in the Philippines. Before Marcos came to power, they united the country's two most powerful political machines, consolidated elite support, and mobilised regional vote bases – Marcos from the north, Duterte from the south. It was strategic.

Although the alliance has since fractured (Sara has since attacked Marcos publicly, at one point saying on live television that she wanted to have the President killed),

the political consolidation the Marcos restoration achieved does not depend on any single family holding together.

The Marcos restoration required rewriting history. Historical distortion and social media disinformation became one of the primary battlegrounds. A well-funded disinformation network rebranded the Marcos name to describe the dictatorship as the golden years – notwithstanding the documented realities of widespread torture, enforced disappearances, thousands of documented human-rights violations, massive foreign debt, and the plunder of billions of dollars in public wealth.

This matters because authoritarian restoration is not simply about one family. There are many families in the Philippines running their own black propaganda and their own ideological work. The rehabilitation of the Marcoses is one ideological project that creates the domestic political conditions necessary for deeper militarisation, neoliberal restructuring, and closer alignment with the United States.

More than a century after the end of formal US colonial occupation, the Philippines is not truly independent. Our economy, our military, and our foreign policy remain deeply embedded within US strategic interests. The Marcos administration is not merely cooperating with the United States; it is actively reorganising Philippine institutions and development priorities around Washington's geopolitical interests.

Between 2023 and 2025, US military presence in the Philippines has increased visibly, as fellow panellists showed us yesterday. In 2023, we had five sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA); by 2025, we have nine. The sites span northern Luzon, southern Luzon, and the west Philippines facing the South China Sea.

Officially, they are for disaster response, but we know what they are for. Meanwhile, the annual Balikatan exercises continue, and the Philippines is being positioned as a staging ground for another imperial war.

At the same time, a US-anchored AI and semiconductor project connected to the Luzon Economic Corridor, Pax Silica, would transform approximately

four-thousand acres in New Clark City – displacing indigenous communities to make way for it. Facilities like these subordinate Philippine development to US geopolitical competition with China, reinforce our technological dependency on foreign capital, and feed the US–Israel war machine now intensifying the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

Filipino communities pay the price of these arrangements: land conversion, displacement, ecological degradation, intensified extractivism of our resources.

Balikatan exercises kill people – as they did in Rafaela's story. Communities bear environmental degradation. That is why we are calling now to shut the Pax Silica initiative and US bases down in the Philippines.

For the Filipino masses, imperialism is experienced through everyday realities. The Partido Lakas ng Masa organises across provinces and communities to confront imperial aggression and war. That work is coupled with continuous campaigns, mobilisations, and international solidarity work.

In January, we joined comrades to organise the Counter People's Forum against the World Economic Forum at the University of the Philippines.

We are one in the fight to stop the wars – from the Philippines to Palestine to Iran to Cuba, and every land under attack by the United States, Israel, and other imperialist powers.

Over the past year, growing public anger against corruption and elite impunity has produced a visible new phase. Last year in the Philippines, a flood-control scandal broke open: public safety funds meant for disaster preparedness had been diverted, with billions of pesos redirected. The youth response has been intense. Spontaneous protests spread across Philippine universities, communities, factories, and workplaces. This is the domestic infrastructure of authoritarianism producing its own counter-force.

Our organisation has also opened a socialist school to make political education more accessible, and continues to publish through the *Ang Masa para sa Sosyalismo (The Masses for Socialism)* blog and other outlets. Comrades interested in collaboration and exchange are welcome.

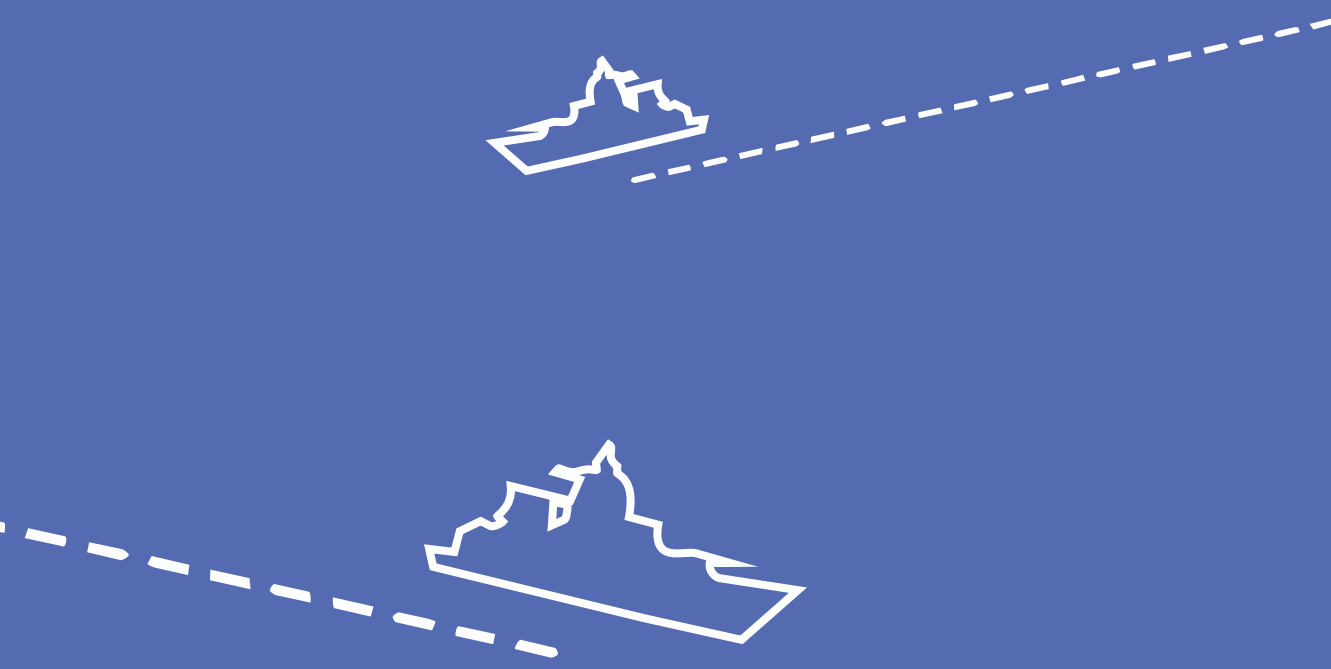
The Partido Lakas ng Masa calls for a government of the masses to reverse the domestic infrastructure of authoritarianism, and we join the collective call for socialism today – for, as comrade Vijay Prashad reminded us yesterday, the alternative to socialism today is not a return to a comfortable liberal order but the destruction of the world.

Down with US imperialism – or as we say in Filipino, *imperyalismo, ibagsak*! Hands off Asia! Hands off the Philippines!

Together with the peoples of Asia and of the world, comrades: we resist, and we fight, as we have a world to win.

Chapter 06

Defending Sovereignty and Advancing Multilateralism in an Age of Crisis



Cuba's Case for Sovereignty and Multilateralism

Patricia Lázara Pego Guerra

Patricia Lázara Pego Guerra is the resident Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Cuba to Sri Lanka.

I am honoured to represent Cuba at *Hands Off Asia*, and to speak on this panel about defending sovereignty and advancing multilateralism in an age of crisis. Both are central concepts, and both are under attack. The current international scenario is marked by imperial arrogance, extreme unilateralism, the proliferation of armed conflicts, growing geopolitical tension, interventionist practices, and doctrines that promote *peace through force* – to the detriment of international law and the sovereignty of states – as well as by the persistence of deep economic and social inequalities and the worsening impacts of climate change. Against that backdrop, a gathering like this one is a platform to reaffirm our commitment to peace, multilateralism, and international cooperation, and to denounce the tightening of hostile and unilateral policies.

The United Nations Charter is more relevant now than at any point in recent memory. So too is the permanent denunciation of imperial policies by social and progressive movements like the ones gathered here. The purposes of the Charter are the fundamental basis for preserving international peace and security and for strengthening international cooperation in addressing our common challenges. Double standards, selectivity, inconsistency, and political manipulation undermine that cause.

The list of countries in the world – and particularly in Asia – which have suffered the consequences of invasions, foreign naval bases on their territories, military aggression, and unilateral sanctions in blatant violation of the Charter is long.

The ongoing violations of the Charter's principles – the threat and use of force, interference in states' internal affairs, policies of regime change, the imposition of unilateral coercive measures – attempt to impose a hegemonic vision that undermines the international order and endangers global stability. The defence of the Charter requires safeguarding the sovereign equality of states, the right of peoples to self-determination, respect for independence and territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs.

We strongly condemn the genocide against the Palestinian people, and reiterate the urgent need for a just, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the conflict in West Asia, based on the creation of two states that would guarantee the full exercise of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. We share the international and regional concerns about the growing instability in the region, particularly the illegal Israeli and US attacks against Iran.

Cuba has suffered and resisted – and will continue to resist – what is now the longest sustained economic aggression in contemporary history. Over the last seven months, under the Trump administration, that aggression has become harder still. It is a blockade that asphyxiates and kills silently. It is compounded by the arbitrary and unjust decision to include Cuba on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, and by new coercive measures – including recent executive orders aimed at tightening the blockade on fuel supply, the so-called oil blockade – whose object is to cause economic and human damage to undermine Cuban sovereignty.

In the last few months, the humanitarian damage to the Cuban population has intensified. Families are suffering through blackouts, water shortages, shortages of medicines and medical supplies, and food shortages, as prices for essential goods rise. Access to fuel is delayed by unilateral coercive actions and by the intimidation of tankers by the US military. People with cancer lack access to life-saving medication. Cuba's infant mortality rate, which stood at four per thousand live births, rose to 9.9 in 2025.

On 7 July, the UN General Assembly resumed its consideration of the US blockade against Cuba. The Assembly annually addresses the necessity of ending the

blockade. Most recently, in October 2024, it adopted a resolution to that effect by a recorded vote of 165 in favour, 7 against, with 12 abstentions. At the beginning of the July meeting, the US representative objected to reopening the item and reminded delegations that member states had considered it in October. The Assembly voted to open the additional debate on the blockade by 136 votes in favour to 9 against – those against being the United States, Israel, Argentina, Costa Rica, Czechia, Morocco, North Macedonia, Paraguay, and Ukraine. During the debate, the US representative committed the extraordinary error of invoking Che Guevara – a rude and desperate attempt to shift the terms of the meeting and manipulate the issue. It is not a name any US official is entitled to hold as their own. The overwhelming majority of speakers spoke against the blockade and its extraterritorial impact, and against the threat and use of force as a solution to international conflict – speaking on behalf of themselves and of the Group of 77 plus China, the Non-Aligned Movement, CARICOM, the African Union, ASEAN, the Group of Friends in Defence of the UN Charter, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

The situation in Cuba today is, in my estimation, probably the worst that our people have experienced in the six decades of the Revolution. Let me speak to it concretely – because 'blockade' can sound abstract until you see what it removes from ordinary daily life.

Economically, the growth of GDP is declining faster than a decade ago. Inflation has entered double digits – it reached 15% in December, and it is higher now under the more extreme economic measures of the current period. Prices for essential goods – food, everyday necessities – rise as inflation compounds. The currency is being devalued. On the street, the rate to obtain one dollar or one euro can reach 500 or 600 pesos, while public-sector salaries – recently raised by the government – are still only around 3,000 to 4,000 pesos. You can calculate for yourself what a family can do with a monthly income of 4,000 pesos in an economy at that exchange rate.

We are deeply grateful for the donations we are receiving from many countries, and especially from many Asian ones. The Cuban people feel and highly value

the support of our brothers and sisters in the Asian countries. I will not mention specific countries for fear of forgetting one and creating a diplomatic problem, but every act of solidarity matters.

The oil blockade is doing terrible damage in the daily life of the country. The price of public transport is nominally the same because the government controls it – but there is no fuel, and without fuel there are no buses. In the private and taxi sector the fuel must be bought at greatly inflated prices, so the price a person pays for a taxi is three, four, or five times what it was last year.

For medicine, there is a shortage of both supplies and finished medications. Cuban pharmacies are no longer what any of you may remember them to be if you have visited us in the past. This is not simply because we cannot import medicine; it is also because the sanctions affect the medicines we produce. Cuba has a strong pharmaceutical and biotechnology sector with high potential. During the Covid pandemic, Cuba was one of the very few developing countries in the world able to produce its own vaccines and face the pandemic on that basis – rather than waiting for the developed countries to cover their own populations before donating a residual to us, which is what happened to many other developing countries. That capacity was built here, and it works. But to maintain and grow it we need supplies from abroad, and that is where the US Treasury Department extends its extraterritorial hand.

This is what the extraterritoriality of the Helms-Burton Act means in practice. It is not a bilateral sanction; it is a multilateral sanction. The US Treasury Department pressures banks in other countries – across Europe and everywhere else – not to intermediate transactions involving Cuba. Even a Sri Lankan bank willing, on the basis of Sri Lanka's long-standing solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, to send funds to Cuba will encounter the wall of an intermediary bank in Europe. That intermediary bank will refuse, because the destination is Cuban and because the US Treasury will fine it two, three, or five million euros for the transaction. Businesses too – even those interested in investing in Cuba or trading with us – think twice, and often decide not to bother. That is what Helms-Burton has now built.

Cuba is an island. Tourism has long been one of our most important sources of income. We have beautiful resorts across the island, particularly on the north coast. Canadian tourists are historically our largest visitor group. But now many Canadian airlines are no longer flying to Cuba because we cannot supply the fuel to refuel their tanks for the return flight. So the airlines are flying to Panama, Mexico, or other Caribbean destinations instead, and tourists who wanted to come to Cuba must plan a longer route through a third country. Even the airlines still flying, out of France or Turkey, do not always come to Cuba for the same reason. Meanwhile, the image war against Cuba tells the world that our hotels do not have food or electricity or air conditioning – this is fake news, in most respects, but a factor in the tourists' decisions.

The blackouts are, in my personal view, the worst dimension of the current crisis. My daughter Victoria is in Cuba. My family is in Cuba. I chat with them every day. Yesterday, in the neighbourhood where they live, there were only two hours of electricity in twenty-four. People sleep without electricity, wake up and go to work without electricity, get themselves to work by whatever means they can – bicycle, taxi, waiting for the always-uncertain public transportation. Some offices have arranged remote work, but at home there is also no electricity. Frozen food cannot be kept. This is now the reality of daily Cuban life.

Despite everything, Cuba will never renounce its sovereign right to build its own model of development, nor its commitment to a more just, supportive, and peaceful world. We will never accept threats, nor the false 'peace through force' the imperialist countries pretend to offer. Cuba is fully committed to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and to a truly just, democratic, and equitable international order – with international cooperation, respectful dialogue, the peaceful settlement of disputes, sovereign equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, and the prohibition of the threat or use of force.

There can be no peace without sustainable, equitable, and inclusive social and economic development. There can be no peace as long as the inequalities that produce conflict continue to deepen. There can be no peace, and no culture that fosters it, as

long as hate speech, racism, xenophobia, and ideological intolerance are promoted, and as long as human rights are politicised against developing countries.

I want to close by recalling the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, Commander-in-Chief Fidel Castro, in the year marking the centenary of his birth. On behalf of the Cuban government, our people, and myself, I am moved by the beautiful *Fidel x 100* poster exhibition dedicated to him on his hundredth birth anniversary.

Fidel remains one of the most influential figures of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a head of state and as a thinker, he was a revolutionary educator and a symbol of resistance that continues to chart a path in the movements of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. He was a symbol of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance and a champion of international solidarity. He inspired us through his example and by demonstrating every day that *yes we could, yes we can, yes we will*. These ideas continue to illuminate the path for those who fight for human dignity, the sovereignty of peoples, and social justice.

Fidel is with us today. He is here alongside us in every idea, in every phrase, in every act of solidarity, saying with us: Hands off Asia!

A luta continua, vitória é certa. Long live the human revolution. Hands off Cuba!

The Hegemon Will be Overpowered

Vasudeva Nanayakkara

Vasudeva Nanayakkara is the leader of the Democratic Left Front. He was a Sri Lankan presidential candidate in 1982 and 1999. He is the founder and leader of the Democratic Left Front. He was Sri Lanka's Minster of Water Supply in 2020.

At different times in world history, we have found certain events inspiring other events. What gave me enormous strength and inspiration in my youthful days and my long life was the Cuban Revolution, and the determined struggle of the Vietnamese people, and the struggle of all peoples across the world to liberate themselves from the yoke of dictatorship and the yoke of imperial power.

Our subject on this panel is 'defending sovereignty and multilateralism in an age of crisis'. What is the crisis? It is the crisis of imperialism. It is the crisis of American domination. It is the crisis of capitalism – capitalism's failure to provide its own citizens with their basic needs, let alone provide for the rest of the world.

We are no longer in a unipolar or bipolar world. We are now in a multipolar world. It is an incongruous proposition to say that one power can take unilateral action in a multipolar world. Unilateralism as such is condemned by history and has no future. Already it is retreating. Already it hides its face and pretends to be representative in the countries where it originates – particularly in the United States, where the popularity of, and the agreement with, Donald Trump is very rapidly decreasing and disappearing.

When Cubans resist the unilateral action of the United States, the world stands behind them to cheer. The world stands together with them, to hold their hands. Sovereignty, in this moment, is being liberated from hegemony. Hegemony is no longer valid; it may last, but very temporarily. That is the case in each country, and that is the case across the world. The multilateralism that has already become the democratic consensus of this world will therefore, in time, become the rule.

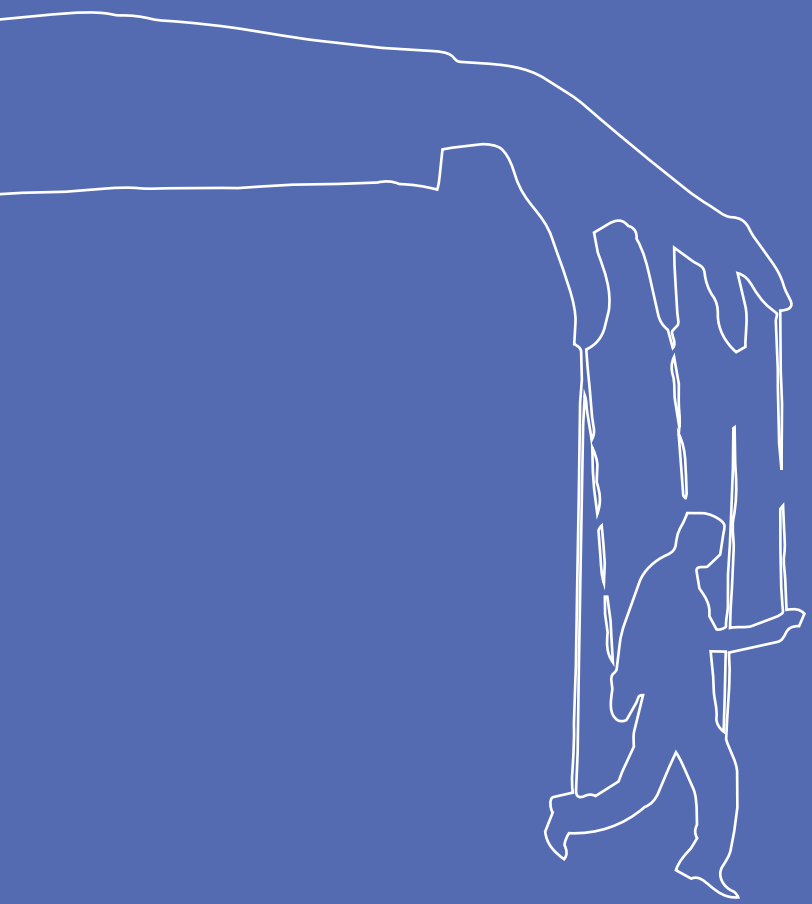
The United Nations and the other international conventions were not built for the hegemon. The hegemon will be overpowered. We are determined that it will happen.

What is the crisis of capitalism? It is the inability to make even necessities affordable to its own citizens, let alone to the world. With all the wealth and technology available in its hands – if capitalism cannot make education affordable to all, cannot make healthcare available to all – then it is time it walked off the stage.

At this age, I do not find it very easy to stand up and speak from a podium. But I am determined. From the days when we demonstrated in the streets crying 'Cuba sí, Yankees no! Mera Naam Vietnam!', to now, when I walk with a walking stick and still make the effort to come before you and repeat the same words – let those be the inspirational words that drive us forward until we see the liberation of the peoples of the world, across the oceans and the mountains.

Chapter 07

Building People's Culture and Communications in the Battle of Ideas



Beyond the Cold War Paradigm of Propaganda: Narrative Sovereignty, Artificial Intelligence, and the Global South

Lu Xinyu

Lu Xinyu is a distinguished professor in the School of Communication and dean of the International Communication Research Institute at East China Normal University. Her main research fields are the new documentary movement in China, critical communication studies, and media and society. She is the author of many books in Chinese, including Documenting China: The New Documentary Movement *(2003),* Writing and What It Obscures *(2008), and* Dislocation: The Narrative of China and Visual Politics in the Post–Cold War Era *(2018).*

My central argument today is that narrative sovereignty requires the Global South to break with the Cold War paradigm of 'propaganda'. This task has become even more urgent because the age of artificial intelligence (AI) is also the age of a new Cold War. The convergence is not accidental.

AI is emerging precisely at a moment when geopolitical rivalry is once again reorganising technology, knowledge, media, trade, education, and international communication into competing political blocs.

The New Cold War is not a simple repetition of the twentieth-century Cold War. But it inherits and transforms its basic logic: the division of the world into morally unequal political camps, the universalisation of one side's categories, and the delegitimisation of alternative paths of development. AI now gives this logic a new technological infrastructure.

The struggle over narrative sovereignty therefore concerns who defines legitimate communication, who builds the systems through which knowledge is accessed, and who determines whether a political practice is understood as information, education, persuasion, mobilisation, or propaganda.

The key question is: who controls the definition – and increasingly the computation – of reality?

Propaganda as a Cold War Category

The concept of propaganda has a history much older than the Cold War. But during the twentieth century, especially through the confrontation between capitalism and socialism, the term acquired an increasingly negative and restrictive meaning.

Propaganda became closely associated with manipulation, deception, psychological control, indoctrination, and the engineering of consent. This definition identified real dangers. Political communication can certainly distort, conceal, intimidate, and manipulate. No serious reconstruction of communication theory should deny this.

The problem is that manipulation came to be treated as the essential meaning of propaganda, while the category itself was applied unevenly. Commercial advertising could be called persuasion. Corporate public relations could be called strategic communication. Government messaging in liberal states could be called public information. Military communication could be called public diplomacy or psychological operations. But politically committed communication by socialist states, anti-colonial movements, revolutionary parties, and popular organizations was frequently reduced to propaganda.

This was not merely a difference in terminology. It created a hierarchy of political legitimacy. The distinction between information and propaganda was therefore never purely epistemological. It was also geopolitical and institutional. This conceptual order outlived the historical Cold War. It continued through journalism

education, communication theory, development discourse, international media institutions, and the evaluation of political legitimacy.

The twentieth-century Cold War was not simply a conflict between two superpowers. It was a global struggle of national liberation and people's liberation. It concerned who had the authority to define development, democracy, freedom, modernisation, and the future of formerly colonised societies. National liberation movements, socialist experiments, land reforms, public ownership, mass education, and alternative development paths challenged the claim that Western liberal capitalism represented the only legitimate form of modernity.

The Cold War distinction between 'free information' and 'propaganda' was absorbed into a broader claim: that one political-economic order had become universal, while alternatives belonged to the past. The new Cold War emerges from the crisis of that claim. It is driven by the fact that the unipolar organisation of the world is no longer uncontested. New centres of economic and technological power have emerged. The Global South is demanding greater sovereignty over development, resources, knowledge, and international institutions. Alternative paths to modernisation have not disappeared.

The Western monopoly over global interpretation is increasingly challenged. Under these conditions, the old geopolitical binary returns, but in a transformed form.

It operates through semiconductor supply chains, technological sanctions, digital platforms, data regimes, academic restrictions, media classifications, financial infrastructures, and competing standards of knowledge. It is not simply a contest over territory. It is a contest over the infrastructures through which reality is produced, interpreted, and governed. This is why the coincidence between AI and the New Cold War is not accidental.

The new Cold War is increasingly a struggle over who owns the machines, who supplies the data, who designs the models, who defines the standards, and who possesses the authority to classify the world. AI does not stand outside this struggle – it is one of its principal battlefields.

Xuanchuan and the Politics of Translation

The Chinese term *Xuanchuan* offers an important example of how Cold War categories continue to shape knowledge. Xuanchuan historically includes a broader range of practices: explanation, dissemination, education, persuasion, cultural work, political mobilisation, and the organisation of public understanding.

It does not refer only to the production and transmission of messages. It also concerns the creation of relationships between political organisation and society.

In the Chinese revolutionary experience, Xuanchuan was inseparable from mass work. It required political communicators to enter social life, investigate concrete conditions, understand the language of the people, connect general political principles with lived experience, and transform communication into participation and organization. Xuanchuan was therefore not conceived simply as communication directed at the people.

At least in its most important theoretical formulations, it required communication with the people and communication emerging from the people's social practice. This is why translation is a question of narrative sovereignty. One side retains the authority to name. The other appears primarily as the object being named. To retain the term Xuanchuan in international academic discussion is therefore not an appeal to Chinese exceptionalism. It is a methodological intervention.

It suspends the automatic equivalence between Xuanchuan and propaganda and allows us to ask more precise questions:

- What forms of explanation, education, cultural production, and organisation were assembled within Xuanchuan?
- What conception of the people did it presuppose?
- What relationship did it seek to establish between political organisation, knowledge, and everyday life?

These questions help us break the Cold War monopoly over the classification of political communication.

Xuanchuan as a Shared Question of the Global South

Xuanchuan should not be treated only as a specifically Chinese concept. Its wider significance lies in the questions it shares with the historical experiences of the Global South.

Across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other formerly colonized regions, movements for national liberation and social transformation confronted a common problem:

- How could people divided by colonial institutions, unequal social structures, geographical distance, racial hierarchy, and cultural domination become conscious political subjects?
- How could knowledge move between political organisation and everyday life?
- How could ideas of liberation be translated into the languages, memories, cultural forms, and practical concerns of ordinary people?
- How could communication become part of a process through which people learned not merely to receive a political programme, but to interpret and transform their conditions?

These questions appeared in anti-colonial political education, workers' education, peasant organisation, liberation pedagogy, popular theatre, community radio, literacy movements, revolutionary culture, and the popular communication traditions of the Global South.

Their vocabularies and institutions differed. Their political histories cannot be reduced to a single model. But they shared a refusal to understand communication

simply as the transmission of information to an audience. They treated communication as part of a broader process of political formation.

In many Global South traditions, communication was inseparable from education. Education was inseparable from organisation. Organisation was inseparable from culture. And culture was inseparable from restoring the dignity and historical agency of peoples subjected to colonialism and dependency.

It is in this wider field that Xuanchuan can enter into productive dialogue with popular education and people's communication. The point is not to export a Chinese concept as a universal model. The point is to allow concepts developed from different struggles to illuminate one another.

Xuanchuan can reveal dimensions of communication that the Cold War propaganda paradigm excludes: investigation, explanation, education, cultural work, participation, and organization. We need a plural field in which Xuanchuan, popular communication, liberation pedagogy, community media, political education, and other Global South traditions can enter into dialogue without first being reduced to a single Cold War category. This is what shared conceptual sovereignty might mean.

From Artificial Persuasion to Collective Intelligence

The ideological struggle is increasingly embedded in search engines, databases, language models, recommendation systems, content moderation, algorithmic ranking, and technical standards.

The old Cold War sought to control the message. The New Cold War increasingly seeks to control the infrastructure that decides which messages can be generated, retrieved, translated, circulated, and believed. During the old Cold War, concepts such as freedom, totalitarianism, democracy, development, and propaganda circulated through institutions. In the AI era, such classifications can be encoded into models and reproduced automatically across billions of interactions. Narrative sovereignty in the AI era must confront this structure.

Therefore, most important question is not simply how the Global South can use AI for more effective communication. If we ask only how AI can improve targeting, persuasion, emotional influence, or message production, we remain trapped within the old propaganda model. From the perspective of Xuanchuan and people's communication, we should ask different questions:

- Can AI contribute to collective intelligence rather than only artificial persuasion?
- Can it help people investigate their own social conditions?
- Can it connect local experience with wider historical knowledge?
- Can it support dialogue within communities rather than simply deliver centrally generated messages?
- Can it help movements preserve memory and compare experiences?
- Can it allow people to participate in producing, correcting, and evaluating public knowledge?
- Can communities shape the systems that increasingly mediate their cultural and political life?

These questions shift attention from the technological power to generate messages toward the social capacity to produce knowledge together.

Artificial persuasion treats people as data points to be classified, predicted, and influenced.

Collective intelligence treats people as participants in the production of meaning. Artificial persuasion intensifies the management of audiences. Collective intelligence may enlarge the organized capacity of a people. Artificial intelligence should therefore not replace social investigation, political education, participation, or human judgment. The question is whether people can govern the technological infrastructures through which they increasingly speak, learn, remember, and organise.

Narrative sovereignty in the AI age requires the capacity to produce concepts and embed those concepts in publicly accountable systems of knowledge. Xuanchuan can contribute to this project, not as a universal answer, but as a concept capable of questioning the assumptions of both Cold War propaganda theory and contemporary AI communication. Its emphasis on investigation, education, participation, organisation, and the relationship between political communication and social practice raises questions that dominant AI discourse often avoids.

At the same time, Xuanchuan must remain in dialogue with popular communication, liberation pedagogy, community media, and other Global South traditions. We must recover the power to define communication itself. We must transform communication from the management of audiences into the organisation of collective capacity. And we must build the intellectual, cultural, media, technological, and popular infrastructures through which the peoples of the Global South can name the world, govern the systems that represent it, and act together to change the world.

The Political–Religion Paradox in South Asia

Susanta Das

Susanta Kumar Das is a physicist, former Vice-Chancellor of Sylhet International University, and retired Professor at Shahjalal University of Science & Technology. A 1971 Freedom Fighter and a Politburo member of the Workers Party of Bangladesh since 1987, his work spans physics, political economy, labour rights, and social justice.

Over the past two days we have engaged intensively with the topic of militarisation, military bases, the attacks on Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela, and the wider political economy of the current imperial conjuncture. What I want to place before this gathering today is a more recent and, in my view, urgent phenomenon: the Political-Religion Paradox now unfolding across South Asia.

I use the word paradox deliberately. Those of you who studied physics may know it. In 1935, Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky, and Nathan Rosen wrote a paper challenging the philosophy of the newly-emerging quantum mechanics – the famous Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox. It took physicists four decades to resolve it. What we now face in Asia is a paradox of a different order, and, socially and politically, it will not resolve itself.

When we go to the people in our countries – especially in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and now in India – we return again and again to the same question: 'Why are ordinary people increasingly attracted to religious fundamentalist forces?' This is a fact we have to admit. We cannot ignore it. When we go to organise peasants, they are to some extent submerged by religious or metaphysical ideas. When we go into the workers' slums, they are similarly inundated by these backward frameworks and show very little interest in the class analysis in which they are actually enmeshed.

When many of us were young, we assumed that modernisation and modernity would decrease the hold of religion – of 'backward religion', in the terminology of our early days. History has taught us otherwise. In 1971, I was a freedom fighter in Bangladesh. We fought against the backward religious framework wielded by the Pakistani state and its imperialist backers. Our people fought against that religion-as-politics. Six decades later, in the July 2024 movement, we can see that our whole society has been reorganised by that same current in a new form. We must study why.

I want to borrow a formulation from Comrade Chen Meei-shia of Taiwan, who is my contemporary in age. It is easier, she said at this conference, to fight against military weapons. It is much harder to fight against intellectual ideas. If we want to fight against this current, we will need thousands – millions – of the young comrades I see in this room. We will need millions of comrades like Aishe Ghoshe and Fatimas Shazhad, and millions of others from Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, and from all of South Asia. We will need to collect those forces from the Global North as well.

The explanations that come easily to us are usually linear. Religious ideas come down to the people because they are backward or illiterate. But things are not that simple. The dynamic is multi-layered. We cannot separate this phenomenon from neoliberalism.

Neoliberal penetration into religious thinking is one part of the answer we must confront. We usually assume that the West is advanced in its thinking – *forward*, in the standard formulation – and that it will therefore fight backward semi-feudal ideas of religion. Interestingly, the West does not do that. Instead, the West *supports* backward thinking wherever it serves imperial interest.

We saw it in history. US imperialism and its Western allies spent billions to fight socialism *through* religion. Comrade Taimur Rahman will bear me out: this happened in West Asia, in Pakistan, in Bangladesh, in Afghanistan, in India, and across South Asia. We cannot isolate this neoliberal offensive on the intellectual

terrain from the underlying imperialist project. That offensive – hegemony over the intellect – is by design.

There is another word from physics I want to introduce: *tsunami*. From the standpoint of physics, a tsunami is a specific kind of wave – a soliton – produced when two conditions combine: *non-linearity* and, in social terms, *polarisation*. When backward thinking such as religious fundamentalism intermingles with neoliberal policy, it becomes a wave of exactly this kind: a political tsunami.

I gave a talk on this in 2014, at a seminar attended by many stalwart left leaders – from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. I said then that we were facing a serious social disaster in the form of the intermingling of imperialism and religion. Twelve years later, that reading is now evident to everyone at this conference, whether or not it has been named as such. Just look at India: the central government, ruled by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, is aligned with neoliberalism. Look at Pakistan. Look at Bangladesh. Even Sri Lanka, as our comrades from here have told us, is bound by neoliberal policies. We can see the same pattern in Nepal.

We are facing a serious intellectual battle. We can meet arms with arms and missiles with missiles. But it is very difficult to fight intellectuality with intellectuality alone. We need intellectual people, professors, engineers, professionals – young people who have studied science and culture and education – to build the counter-current the moment demands.

Consider Bangladesh. In the last two or three decades, the Muslim *madrasa* system has expanded to an extraordinary extent, exceeding the formal education system in reach. Millions of very young students now study in madrasas from earliest childhood, and their minds are shaped by that framework from the beginning. When those students come forward into society, we have to be equipped to engage them. Meanwhile, the number of intellectually advanced young people is decreasing year by year. Fatima Shahzad and Aishe Ghosh have told us the same. Comrades from Thailand and elsewhere in the region have described the same phenomenon. Nobody wants to think in a rigorous way.

This is why we have to learn together how to organise on the intellectual terrain. We can learn from the analysis of economic and political atrocities under neoliberalism. But we cannot learn to fight this intellectual hegemony without recruiting soldiers to it from among the youth of our society. We cannot fight imperialism only by weapons.

I was moved by Cuban Ambassador Patricia Pego Guerra's speech at yesterday's plenary. She showed us how the people of Cuba are fighting the monstrous US blockade – not with sufficient missiles, but with organised and disciplined people, bearing atrocity after atrocity and refusing to submit. Iran fought its vicious enemy not only by missiles but with a population willing to endure. We need to organise our own peoples on the same footing – hundreds of Vijays around the world; millions of Fatimas and Aishes across Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia. Only then will we be able to fight this landscape of hatred that the imperial project has raised on our soil.

I am 76 years old and at the end of my life. I participated in the liberation war, and in all the democratic movements of Bangladesh since. But at this stage I find a scarcity of young people equipped with the intellectual level, the scientific thinking, and the philosophical rigour to fight the fundamentalist current now intermingled with neoliberalism. That is the work now placed on your generation.

In 2000, I was in the United States and met a German professor of Marxist economics. She said to me, 'Now that the Soviet Union has been dismantled, is this not the end of Marxism? What is your opinion?'

I said to her, 'Professor, you are the specialist on Marxism, and I have nothing to say to you about it in the technical sense. But let me say one thing. When I was very young, I found so many problems within my society. I looked for ideas and theories that could confront those atrocities and exploitations. I searched many philosophies. The one I found that gave me a way to go ahead was Marxism. I tried, for decades, to uphold that. I still believe Marxism is the only alternative to your

capitalism. You can say the end of history if you like. We will say history always begins.'

Marxism is our weapon of battle – not the army. As Vijay Prashad put it earlier at this conference, the battle for socialism is not for the future; it is for the present. I want to add that it is a perpetual fight – to save humanity, to save civilisation. If we want to save human civilisation, we have to earn socialism. Without socialism, capitalism will destroy civilisation.

Publishing, Theatre, and the Battle of Ideas and Emotions in India

Sudhanva Deshpande

Sudhanva Deshpande is an actor and director with Jana Natya Manch, Delhi, and the editor of LeftWord Books. He is the author of Halla Bol: The Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi and has taught at the National Institute of Design and Jamia Millia Islamia. He has acted in films and series including Pink, Grahan, Vikram Vedha, and Jawan.

Fidel Castro's concept of the 'battle of ideas' has been expanded by Vijay Prashad and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research to include the 'battle of emotions' as well. In a sense, my remarks cover both. I will be talking about publishing, which is very much part of the battle of ideas, and about theatre, which is part of the battle of emotions – though of course there is no Great Wall of China between the two.

Like many children of my generation in India, I grew up on Soviet books. They were beautifully designed, excellently produced, inexpensive to buy, and arrived at our doorsteps in mobile bookshops. I was introduced to the ideas of rationality, scientific thinking, internationalism, respect for cultures different from my own, and the liberation of humankind – long before I could give names to any of those ideas.

Inexpensiveness is a key part of this. These books were really cheap. Large numbers of people from the lower economic strata of India would buy them because they cost less than almost anything else, including food. Books cheaper than food – this was an idea that the Soviet Union normalised for us. It never occurred to me, as a boy of eight or ten on the dusty streets of Delhi, that some boy of eight or ten far away in a frozen part of Siberia had to stand in a queue for bread so that I could buy a book. All of us who read Raduga books growing up owe a debt of gratitude to the working people of the Soviet Union. They sacrificed so we could read.

Russian writers did not seem like foreigners to me. In my head, Tolstoy and Tagore were brothers, as were Gorky and Premchand. My reading expanded outward

– Anglophone books, naturally, because we learned English, but also works translated from the Romance and Germanic languages, including from Latin America. By the time I was a teenager in the 1980s, Latin American literature had exploded onto the world scene. Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez had become household names. I have always been grateful to translators like Gregory Rabassa and Donald B. Walsh – among many others – who brought those words alive for us. It never occurred to me that I could only read what a small handful of publishing houses in the West agreed to publish.

The situation has become far worse since then. The monopolisation of the publishing industry by the Big Five – HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, Macmillan, Hachette, and Penguin Random House – has meant that today, there is more gatekeeping, not less. Some eighty percent of all trade books sold in the United States are published by these five houses. More than fifty percent of all English-language books sold globally are published by them. That is the shape of the gatekeeping we face.

At the first Tricontinental Conference of the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America held in Havana in January 1966, Amílcar Cabral quoted an African peasant. The saying goes: 'however warm the water in the well, it can't cook your rice'. This is also true of books, culture, and art. However warm the water of world literature, it cannot cook the rice of your own domestic revolution.

An important task for revolutionaries in our parts of the world is to sow the seeds of Marxism in our own soil – to produce the revolutionary theory that allows us, as Lenin used to say, to do concrete analysis of concrete situations. This is why at LeftWord we have expended considerable energy publishing the Marxist theory produced in the Global South – what one might call the Marxism of national liberation: writers such as E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Ho Chi Minh, Mahdi Amel, and others – alongside the histories of contemporary struggles, from the Indian farmers' movement to the liberation struggle in Palestine.

The far right understands this too – that a movement needs domestic theory, not only international theory. While they admire Hitler and Mussolini and borrow

elements from them, their 'theory' (to the extent that anything they produce can be called that) is also equally homegrown and equally home-published. That matters.

In India, the largest right-wing publisher is called Gita Press. *Gita* is the religious text: the sermon that Lord Krishna gave to the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*. The press is named after that sermon. It was established in 1923. Now hold your breath for the numbers. One estimate places their output at over 1,850 titles in these last 103 years, in fifteen languages, and they have sold 930 million copies. Over nine million books a year, for a century. That is the scale of the right-wing publishing operation we are up against in India.

These numbers can be hugely depressing. Why bother? We might as well pack up and go home. But there is another way of reading them. Nine million people reading these books every year – nine million lost souls looking for something to dull the pain of their daily lives. What we as revolutionaries can give them is not a painkiller to help them cope – not what Marx would have called the opium of the masses – but the medicine that can end the pain by ending the cancer of poverty, drudgery, exploitation, and humiliation. Not to manage pain forever, but to take it away.

For this we need to work together. We need to set up, or expand, publishing programmes in our own countries to produce the theory, history, reportage, analysis, fiction, and poetry our peoples need. Many publishers have come together in the International Union of Left Publishers, of which LeftWord is a part. We publish books together. At the LeftWord table you will see a book on the Paris Commune produced by publishers on every continent. Open the book, look at the list of publishers who came together to make it possible, and you will see what a solidarity-based publishing model can produce.

And every 21 February we celebrate Red Books Day – the anniversary of the first publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, which is also, as our Bangladeshi comrades know, Mother Language Day: the day to assert the beauty of our own mother tongues. That is not a coincidence. When you return to your

countries, I would encourage all of you to reach out to other movements like ours and to organise Red Books Day together – with public collective readings of the red books of your choice, in your own languages.

We have also worked on alternative ways of trading rights. The biggest book fairs in the world – Frankfurt, London – are capitalist fairs where the trade is not in books but in rights, and millions of dollars change hands every day. What we have been developing is a rights-trading model built on solidarity rather than on the profit motive – which does not mean that we do not make a profit (we do, and we should, because that profit funds more books), but which does mean sharing rights across borders in ways that support other publishers and other movements.

Let me turn to my other passion, which is theatre. I became a member of Jana Natya Manch in New Delhi in the summer of 1987. I did not join Janam because I wanted to be a revolutionary and change the world. I joined because I loved acting – I wanted to be an actor – and because I was utterly charmed by the personality of Safdar Hashmi, one of the founders of Janam, who was killed at the age of thirty four while we were performing a play for workers on 1 January 1989.

I should add that one more person was killed that day. A man named Ram Bahadur – a migrant worker from Nepal, watching the play. One man was killed for doing a play. Another was killed for watching one. Sometimes what connects the peoples of our countries is blood – blood spilt on the streets of a working-class neighbourhood on the first day of a new year.

Janam's slogan is 'People's theatre stars the people'. Who are the stars of people's theatre? The people. That slogan is borrowed from the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), formed in 1943 as part of the anti-colonial and anti-fascist struggle of that era. For a few decades afterwards, IPTA's values became the dominant values of Indian mass culture, as many IPTA artists migrated from theatre and writing into the Hindi film industry – Sahir Ludhianvi, Shailendra, Ismat Chughtai, Salil Chowdhury, and many others.

Janam was founded in 1973. For its first five years, it did large stage plays performed in front of mass audiences – five thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand people. After the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi (1975–1977), when civil liberties were curtailed, trade unionists imprisoned, and the press heavily censored, it became hard to sustain those large productions. Even after the Emergency ended, a trade union comrade said to Safdar: We need your plays, but we can no longer afford them. Erecting a stage, hiring a sound system and lighting – it was too expensive.

Now, some of us in this room have interacted with NGOs and funding agencies. We know the buzzwords: vision statement, mission statement. Janam was not funded by any NGO or funding agency, so Safdar never needed to write a vision or mission statement. When our funder base – the trade unions and farmers' organisations that used to fund the plays – said 'we need your plays, but we don't have the money', Safdar did the exact opposite of what NGOs do when faced with a funding crunch. NGOs look for alternative funders and alter their vision and mission to align with the priorities of the new funders. That is what happens all over the world.

Safdar refused. He said: If the workers cannot afford a big play, we will do small plays. Plays that cost nothing. Plays that can be done anywhere. Plays that don't require any setup. Plays that rely only on us – on our bodies, our voices – and on the most important resource we have, which people's-theatre activists sometimes forget: the intelligence and imagination of our spectators.

This is how street theatre was, in a sense, 'invented' by Janam in 1978. When I say invented in inverted commas, I do not mean that we were the first people ever to do street theatre. I mean that, for Janam, it was a genuine invention – there was no existing model. It emerged out of the very hard material conditions the movement was facing. In that sense it was invented.

The reason Janam has become, over the last fifty years, India's pre-eminent left-wing theatre group is that it has stayed committed to the struggles of the working

people throughout its history, while placing a great deal of emphasis on the artistic quality of the plays we do. In Janam, we believe that just as the people deserve the best ideas and the best politics, they deserve the best art. Too much street theatre in India talks down to its audience – it distrusts its intelligence, distrusts its imagination, distrusts its ability to understand the world. I get bored watching it. I switch off. It tells me this is right, that is wrong, we know what is best for you. That is not what people's theatre is for.

We believe the world is complex, and that people's art has to make sense of that complexity. That means taking in the complexity of reality but expressing it in a form that is simple. There is a difference between simplifying reality and expressing all the complexities of reality in a simple way. Simple expression is very hard to arrive at. Explaining the world in a complicated way is very easy. The work of the revolutionary play is not to simplify reality but to convey complex ideas simply, in a way that moves people – that touches their hearts, evokes emotion, moves them to think, question, and act. The work of the revolutionary play is not finished in the play itself. It is finished in the world outside the play.

Too much of the artistic and intellectual interaction between the nations of the Global South is mediated by gatekeepers from the Global North. This has to change. We must share, interact, collaborate, learn from each other, critique each other, and expand each other's work directly – Third World to Third World.

There is rich experience in this room. Comrade Taimur Rahman is a musician as well as General Secretary of the Mazdoor Kissan Party. Comrade Fatima Shahzad is an artist. Comrades Vijay and I have experience with LeftWord and Vaam Prakashan. Comrade Tings Chak and her team have long experience in designing visual materials and art for the movement. We must find ways to share these experiences and to teach each other's skills. Only then can we heat the water enough in our own wells to cook our own rice – and win, together, the battle of ideas and the battle of emotions.

An Indonesian Feminist's Call for Asian Women's Solidarity

Andi Nurkhafifah

Andi Nurkhafifah is an Indonesian feminist activist and researcher based in Jakarta. She has worked with grassroots and progressive movements, including Perempuan Mahardhika, as Coordinator of Education and Feminist Knowledge. Her work focuses on labour rights, gender justice, and ecological sustainability. Through organising and feminist education, she builds solidarity among women workers and youth.

Perempuan Mahardhika (Women's Freedom), is a grassroots anti-capitalist feminist organisation made up of working women and students. Its name is deliberate. *Mahardhika* means freedom: freedom from exploitation, violence, discrimination, oppressive culture, control, and terror.

The anti-capitalist feminism we fight for is not a Western import. Indonesia's progressive women's movement has its own historical roots as resistance to both colonialism and capitalism, through the New Order period, and the moment that brought down Suharto. Throughout Indonesian history, women's movements always played an important role.

This tradition was systematically dismantled by an authoritarian regime through an ideology that killed and subordinated women. Understanding what was done to it is where any Indonesian feminism has to begin.

Gerwani (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia*, the Indonesian Women's Movement) was once one of the largest and most progressive women's organisations in Asia, with roughly 1.5 million members by the early 1960s. It was allied with the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), and fought for labour reform, childcare, women's political rights, and against child marriage.

After the killing of six army generals on 30 September 1965, the army's propaganda machine did not simply ban Gerwani. It destroyed the meaning of Gerwani. State-controlled newspapers manufactured a story in which Gerwani women had gathered at Lubang Buaya to sexually mutilate and torture the generals in an erotic dance ritual. Historians have shown that story to be fabricated. But the fabrication recast an entire generation of organised women as depraved, castrating, dangerous to the family. Under that cover, tens of thousands of Gerwani members and suspected sympathisers were killed. Thousands more were imprisoned for years without trial. Many were never rehabilitated.

This was no accident of history. It was the blueprint for arresting a mass, autonomous women's movement. The state did not just criminalise Gerwani – it sexualised Gerwani into something monstrous, so that women themselves would police one another back into an obedient silence. This was part of what came to be called the 'Jakarta Method': mass murder used to erase leftist political organisations in a country.

The gender hierarchy that subordinates women is not simply a matter of culture – it is required by capitalism. The history of capital accumulation is built on the destruction of women. There was 'witch-hunting' to destroy women who had kept the commonality of social relations. Women were burned alive so that communal spaces could be destroyed and enclosed. That destruction was itself part of primitive accumulation.

We must also know that social-reproductive labour has been placed, alongside productive labour, on women's shoulders. That reproductive labour sustains the entire workforce. Who keeps the worker capable of returning to the workplace tomorrow? The answer is direct: it is a women. This labour is deliberately erased from economic calculation, treated as women's nature rather than as work that must be recognised.

This is why the state has such a stake in controlling women's bodies. In Indonesia, the new criminal code, passed this year, criminalises abortion. The exceptions are extremely narrow – only for survivors of rape whose pregnancy is no more than 14

weeks, or in cases of medical emergency. In practice, even that narrow window is nearly impossible to access because the implementing regulations do not align. In effect, it amounts to a broad criminalisation of women's bodies. We insist on the right to abortion because it is a question of bodily autonomy – and bodily autonomy is inseparable from how capitalism operates.

This same capitalist-patriarchal logic is now ramping up femicide in Indonesia. In multiple provinces – in West Papua, and other conflict zones, and extractive industries – women are being killed. The state's security forces are either directly implicated or complicit in the killings. In Indonesia, one woman is a victim of femicide every two days. The situation grows more brutal every year.

This stems from a specific historical formation. To understand it, we use a concept developed by feminist researcher Julia Suryakusuma in her 1980 thesis, 'state Ibuism'. The term *Ibu*, means mother. Under state Ibuism, the state defines women primarily as wives and mothers, and institutionalises that definition through organisations like the family-welfare movement. Suryakusuma described it as a marriage between feudalism and capitalism: women pushed to serve husband, family, and state without pay, while that unpaid service underpins capitalist development. This framework matters because it shows that the control of women's bodies is not new. It has a long history and continues today through militarism and extractive capital.

The government of Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's flagship programme is food and energy self-sufficiency. Under this programme, the government is deploying millions of military personnel into rural areas. Militarism is a masculine hierarchy and is not just defence policy. Our new military law, passed in 2025, opened the door for active-duty soldiers to hold civilian positions. We mobilised the biggest protest we have organised in years – the alliance of Indonesian women's organisations – to oppose it. We know from our history what happens to women's autonomy every time militarism escalates. It produces the stigma of the obedient good woman against the suspect woman who resists.

Last October, the national defence regulation formally categorised LGBTQ culture as a 'non-military threat to state supremacy'. When we talk about feminism

and gender, we are not talking only about women. We are talking about people of many genders, all of whom suffer under this logic, and none of whom can be cherry-picked out of a serious analysis.

The most brutal escalation of militarism today is happening on the land of West Papua – and it is there that the femicide becomes most visible. As of the end of last year, at least 83,000 organic military and police personnel were stationed in Papua, in addition to tens of thousands of non-organic troops rotated in continuously.

The government plans to form a hundred new battalions this year, twenty-five of them specifically for Papua – including a new regional military command inaugurated by President Prabowo himself last October. In many areas in Papua, the number of security personnel now exceeds the number of civilians. Prabowo has openly invoked the national ambition of food and energy self-sufficiency as a justification for this military expansion.

Last May and June, many women were killed in the conflict areas of Papua – particularly in Intan Jaya. A pregnant woman named Meliana was reported killed in an armed exchange in that area. There are many more such names. This is why our feminist organisation actively supports West Papua's national liberation struggle – and why we understand that struggle as inseparable from the struggle against militarism, extractivism, and control of women's bodies.

A newer basis of our organising is the digital sector. Perempuan Mahardhika now has cadres among young women working on the frontlines of platform capitalism – the live-stream hosts of platforms like TikTok. These women can be 'open' for six hours nonstop, sometimes staying on until early morning. They perform to sell products under algorithmic protocols that researchers have started to call 'algorithmic imagination'.

Our members work as live-hosts themselves. From our discussions, we have built a support network so they do not face this exploitation alone. We now document the violence and femicide taking place on the digital platform itself.

The other frontline is extractivism. In the world's largest nickel industrial zones – Morowali, Central Sulawesi, and Halmahera, in North Maluku – military expansion is directly bound up with the expansion of the extractive industry. Villages and farmland have been turned into mining towns in under a decade.

Women who were previously farmers have lost access to their land and been forced into daily wage labour paid less than men, purely on the basis of gender. Air pollution from the coal-fired power plants feeding the smelters has caused acute respiratory infection cases – in one zone, is has jumped from around ten thousand to more than fifty-seven thousand in two years.

The migration of tens of thousands of male mine workers into these areas has brought new forms of sexual violence against local women. When indigenous communities – including the women within them – die defending their land from mining dispossession, that too is femicide. It is the killing of women rooted in the control of the body as much as in the control of the land.

Working conditions for the women labourers in these zones are generally poor. Menstrual leave is nearly impossible to access. Protective equipment is not made to fit women's bodies. Fatal accidents have taken place at scale.

When we trace the supply chains, some of the largest investment in these zones come from Chinese and other transnational capital. This is where we insist on being precise. Our critique is of the logic of capital accumulation itself, whatever national state it happens to come from. A genuine structural solidarity in our struggle must remain critical of any transnational capital that produces the same patterns of exploitation against labour and nature. This too has to be part of our battle of ideas – so that when we go to the grassroots in an extractive zone, the people can trust that our strategy is not for their killing but for their liberation.

Our resistance runs through three lines of work: political education, grassroots organising, and cultural-political consolidation.

We run a feminist school programme across Indonesian cities. We build new young feminist organisations at the grassroots. Our women's alliance now brings together over ninety organisations. We conduct direct campaigns against femicide, documenting cases from the grassroots and organising annual actions on International Women's Day, the day for the elimination of violence against women, and May Day.

We work in solidarity with West Papua, rejecting the government's Moroccan-style national scientific project of extraction and supporting the national liberation cause. We support those criminalised under the technology law and communities affected by military operations.

In the field, we always follow the same rhythm. We protest in the streets; we mobilise the people after organising them; and when the protest is over, we go back to organising. It is a never-ending sequence – organise, mobilise, organise, mobilise – with ideological consolidation happening in between, through political education.

The Cuban revolutionary Vilma Espín, who led Cuba's Federation of Women for over four decades, had a phrase for what I am describing. She called the women's struggle 'a revolution inside the revolution' – not a separate fight or an afterthought. A revolution must happen inside every other struggle, or that struggle is incomplete. This is exactly our position.

There can be no genuine fight against militarism in Indonesia, no genuine fight against extractive capital, no genuine fight for the sovereignty of West Papua, without the revolution inside the revolution – one that ends femicide and control over women's bodies.

Anti-militarism without feminism is unfinished. Anti-capitalism without feminism is unfinished. Building counter-culture, political education, and grassroots organisation is how we carry that revolution forward inside the revolution. It is a long-term struggle.

To the women in this room, my proposal is direct. Let us begin building an Asian women's solidarity network so we can carry the revolution inside the revolution together, and move forward to the socialist revolution of our time.

Chapter 08

People's Alternatives, Resistance, and Socialist Horizons



Reflections on Hope and Struggle from Malaysia

Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj

Dr. Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj is a physician by training and was the first socialist Member of Parliament in Malaysia. He is currently the chairperson of the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia). He has authored several books in English and Bahasa Melayu.

Let me begin with the history of the left in Malaysia, because the shape of that history conditions everything about what we are now trying to do.

The left in Malaysia begins with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), formed in 1930. For a period, it was the dominant political party in the country. It was banned by the British, but during the Second World War – when the Soviet Union was allied with Britain against the Axis powers – the CPM fought alongside the British against the Japanese in Malaya. After the war, the CPM leader was even awarded as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. But the alliance did not last. The CPM had built strong peasant support, huge trade unions, and a serious independence programme, complete with a draft constitution. The British did not want independence on those terms. The British cracked down on the party, crushed the left unions, and arrested Malay leaders and detained them under the Internal Security Act. In 1948, the party went underground and armed rebellion began.

British counter-insurgency was total. The rural Chinese population was rounded into 540 concentration camps, ringed with barbed wire, with a police depot at the front. Villagers could farm, but everything they carried out was inspected, and anyone caught with dry provisions was arrested for supplying the guerrillas. Indian workers on the plantations were forbidden to buy their own rice; the estate management cooked their meals and rationed the cooked rice by family size. Indigenous communities were grouped at the edge of the forest in their own

concentration camps. In this way, the British starved the armed movement of food. Within two years, the CPM was already prepared to negotiate. The British refused – because the mere existence of an armed movement gave them the political cover to detain trade unionists, Labour Party organisers, and members of the People's Party and the Socialist Front who were contesting elections and doing well. The British used the armed struggle to crush the constitutional left.

The CPM finally concluded peace talks in 1989 and dissolved. The Socialist Front declined to contest in 1969 and was dissolved. The People's Party continues to this day. On the left today, we have the Parti Rakyat Malasia (PRM), the Parti Socialis Malaysia (PSM), the Socialist Alternative, and Imagine Malaysia.

The PSM was formed in 1998 and registered in 2008. We now have about 2,000 members and a mass base of about 30,000. In 2020, we met in Kroh and reached an important understanding: a socialist party should not be an ornament on the electoral spectrum. Its proper task, its historical task, is to take over the country. That may look ridiculous when you are small. We are not close to it. But we said that the proper job of a socialist party is to work toward power, not to become the junior partner of a centrist party in exchange for a seat or two.

Malaysia's GDP has grown roughly 23-fold in real terms over the last 50 years. Wages have gone up about twice, in real terms, over the same period. But the cost of living has more than doubled, because so many things – housing, elder care, childcare – have been commodified. So, although real wages have doubled, wages cannot cover the cost of living. A lot of working people are in debt and working extra hours to service it. We are a rich country whose working people are under permanent financial pressure. There is no way to change this without renegotiating the country's position in the global economic system.

The basic Malaysian economic policy is to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). To attract FDI, we have to compete with other countries applying for FDI. That means our wages must remain competitive – in other words, low. Our taxes must remain low. There is no way to tax the wealth of the country to fund social programmes, because raising taxes may drive investment away. The very way in which

this country has succeeded in growing its GDP is what undermines any effort to share the wealth with the workers.

Our electoral results are modest – around 1.5–2% of the vote, under a first-past-the-post system. There are two persistent problems.

First, there is a strong anti-communist bias in the population. There are many negative associations with communism – and socialism, in most Malaysian ears, is close to it. There is also the received perception that we are anti-religion. The context is instructive. After the Second World War, Southeast Asia was the site of a real contest between imperialism and the left. Malaysia had its armed struggle. Thailand and the Philippines had communist parties in armed struggle too. In Indonesia, which had one of the largest communist parties in Asia, more than half a million people were killed in 1965 as part of the crushing of that party. In Indochina, the communist parties won and established communist states. The victors write history. In Malaysia, the way our history has been written is that the communists were violent, anti-religion, anti-democracy. We have a huge inherited stigma to overcome.

Second, we have strong ethnic sentiment. Malays are about 70% of the population, Chinese about 22%, and Indians about 10%. When the British crushed the left, they encouraged the elite to form ethnic-based parties and to co-govern the country between them. Ethnic-based politics has grown steadily since the 1950s, until people are deeply inculcated in racial politicking rather than in class politicking.

The third problem – which I think applies not only to Malaysia – is a lack of clarity on the left about what socialism actually offers today. What is our narrative? What is the offer we are placing before the people?

Some comrades ask, 'Why are you taking part in bourgeois elections?' 'Elections are all bourgeois, you are reformists', they say, for taking part in elections. I would ask us all to look at this more clearly. Elections are not free. But elections are also a concession that the ruling class in Europe made to the working class at the turn of the last century, when it was scared of the Social Democratic Party taking over.

Alongside universal suffrage came the eight-hour work day, overtime, some social services, and an end to child labour. These concessions delayed revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. When these things spread across the world, people appreciated them, and they became something people now defend. In 2012, when the people's uprising in Egypt toppled Mubarak, the people demanded elections. Wherever an insurrection topples a government today, elections follow. The group that carried out the insurrection is not, in fact, allowed to simply carry on and govern. Sri Lanka is a case in point. The government was brought down; a left party took the opportunity to contest and came into power. So even if you do not believe in elections, or you do not yet have enough people on the streets to run one, you have to think honestly about what happens the day after. The left needs to think about that.

The other criticism is reformism. Heck – how could I not be reformist? I am fighting for farmers in Perak to get them to court. That is still working within the landlord system and within British land law. That is reform. Sometimes you have to work within the system. What we need to be more discerning about is: does the reform *empower* people? Does it politically educate them, make them protagonists in the system, and lead toward their self-emancipation? If it does, it is a positive reform. If it is paternalistic – *I am the government, I am just giving to you* – then it is more questionable. In Malaysia we now have a minimum wage. It is still a lousy wage, and the reform is still within the system. But the minimum wage is a real victory. What we should be clear about is which reforms lead to further reforms.

We have many special-interest groups within our party – comrades concerned with patriarchy, with LGBTQ oppression, with caste discrimination, and so on. It is important for the party to hold these groups together and harmonise them. What we say is: yes, all of these are valid axes of oppression, and they will not go away on their own if we only fight capitalism and imperialism. We need to mobilise around each of them. But we also need everyone in the party to recognise that the fight against capitalism and imperialism is the primary struggle. As Comrade Aifa put it earlier at this conference, there must be the *revolution inside the revolution*. That happens *within* the primary struggle, not deferred to after it.

The last thing I want to say is about what happens when a left party actually comes to power. It will have to manage capitalism, at least for the first few years – probably for the first couple of decades. Our economies are so integrated into the international system that it is not possible to overturn them overnight without causing severe disruption. Malaysia's exports account for around 70% of GDP. There is no way we can simply order the multinationals out tomorrow.

What we need is a transitional programme: a plan for how to manage the transition, how to develop local capacity, how to work with ASEAN to build a local market, how to develop our own technology, and how to empower our workers to run their own cooperatives and take over enterprises. This is going to be a process. In that process, we will have to manage a still substantially-capitalist economy, and we will have to make sure that our own leaders are not co-opted or influenced by the companies. How do we do that? These are things a serious left has to think about.

At the ASEAN level, can we get an agreement to raise corporate taxes together? Over the last 50 years, we have been lowering taxes. Malaysia's corporate tax was 40% on profits in 1988. It is now 24%, because we lowered ours to attract FDI. Then Thailand lowered, then Vietnam, then Indonesia, and then we lowered again. Thailand is now 20%, and Singapore 17%. We should be able to say: this is ridiculous, let's all try to go back to 25%. That kind of coordination will take time.

The left movement has to be clear about what it can promise, and refrain from promises it cannot keep. It is easy to promise from opposition. But we should not over-promise, and we should be realistic. People respect that. This is the situation we are in. It is not easy. It can be done, but it will be done in stages. That is what wins people over. Not anger and rhetoric, but a narrative of hope – one that is understandable, believable, and grounded in the actual conditions of our societies.

A Communist Trade Unionist's Notes from India

Clifton D'Rozario

Clifton D'Rozario is a Central Committee member of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, an Editorial Board member of its organ Liberation, and National Vice President of All India Central Council of Trade Unions. A practicing lawyer and co-founder of All India Lawyers' Association for Justice, he has long been active in working-class struggles, defending democratic rights, opposing state repression and militarisation, and advancing the broader movement for social justice in India.

I came prepared to speak about the Indian left movement, its programme, its divisions. Two and a half days at this conference persuaded me to junk that. What I want to share instead are the thoughts that have come to me listening to comrades from across Asia over the past days – on imperialism, on hegemony, and on how they are being countered even as we speak.

From our brave friends in Iran and the counter-hegemonic strategies they have deployed; through the struggle against the military bases in Okinawa; to the liberation struggle of Timor-Leste; through the uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal – some of which, in Bangladesh and Nepal in particular, we may have to be cautious about becoming grounds for an expanding US footprint in Asia. And alongside all of this, if you look at Asia even briefly, you realise the long and rich history of resistance: of anti-colonial struggles, of national liberation struggles, and of movements of every section of society – workers, women, indigenous peoples, students, fisher folk. Many of the people in this room, and your own organisations, continue to organise and struggle despite intense repression from the state and capital. The alternatives, and the paths to socialism, are being made real on an everyday basis through these struggles.

The steadfast existence of the Palestinian people in the face of the Zionist genocide is, for me, the clearest reminder. If anyone in this room feels hopeless, look at Palestine. Hopelessness has no place in a socialist imagination.

I come from India, and I wear more than one hat – I am a Communist party leader, a trade unionist, and a lawyer. Let me speak from that ground.

Fellow panellists have already described the Indian political situation, so I will not repeat it in detail. I can put it plainly: this is a fascist assault. It has two prongs. There is the neoliberal economy. There is the brutal Hindu supremacy. These are not separate; they feed each other. Crony capitalism on one side; the subordination of non-Hindu minorities – particularly Muslims and marginalised castes – and the systematic persecution of dissent, including democratic dissent, on the other.

I should note here that in India there is the Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation of which I am a part, and also the Maoist stream. Over the last year and a half, the Indian government has essentially butchered nearly a thousand of the Maoist party's leaders and cadres. We can have ideological or political differences within the Indian communist family. But the brutality of the way this suppression has been conducted is a reflection of the fascist face of the present Indian regime.

The Modi government is, in its posture toward the United States, in effective capitulation – not merely a strategic alignment under some Indo-Pacific framework. It is a fascist ruling regime that is compliant with imperialism. And the clearest test of that alignment is Palestine. India has historically stood by Palestine. The Indian state now draws closer to Israel. The Hindutva project itself draws inspiration from Zionism. It copies the various politics of occupation: bulldozer terror, arbitrary arrest, collective punishment, systematic targeting. And here I have to add that the worst of Indian policy is always played out first in Kashmir – Kashmir functions as a laboratory – and then imported to the rest of India.

Despite this all-round assault, two exceptional struggles in India have shown what people's power can still do. The first was the unprecedented farmers' struggle. For

more than a year, hundreds of thousands of farmers sat on the borders of Delhi against three anti-farmer, pro-corporate farm laws. Summer, winter, monsoon – almost 800 farmers gave their lives on those borders. They compelled the Indian government to take back the laws. What was important was the anti-corporate thrust and the anti-imperialist thrust of the whole struggle.

The second was the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act, in which the Modi regime tried to criminalise Muslim citizenship. Muslim women, primarily, took to the streets across the country with progressive allies, and literally brought the law to a standstill.

Beyond these two, there are hundreds of ongoing struggles. Indigenous communities across the country are defending forest rights. There is a large agitation against land grabs in Delhi as we speak, where Sonam Wangchuk and five students from the All India Students Association (AISA) are on a fast. Sonam Wangchuk has just been taken away by the police – we do not know where he is – and the five students are continuing the hunger strike. Their demand is quality education and action against paper leaks. Workers are fighting back too. A few months ago, hundreds of thousands of workers streamed out of hundreds of factories across North India, unorganised, unconcerted, simply sick of oppressive conditions. The state's response was again brutal repression – activists supporting the protest were charged under the National Security Act, a draconian detention law, and remain in jail today. But the response has motivated more workers to come out.

There is something that I kept coming back to during the past two days, especially in my conversations with Nick. We are at a moment where imperialism is no longer merely exporting war. It is exporting authoritarianism.

We see a rightward shift emerging worldwide, generated by the crisis of global neoliberalism, in which capital, facing recurrent crisis, is on the offensive. The deep crisis seeks its way out through war – as we see in Iran and Venezuela – or through sanctions, as we see in Cuba, together with xenophobia, Islamophobia, right-wing consolidation, and the thorough undermining of bourgeois democracy.

Across countries, whatever the labels attached to the ruling regime – democratic or authoritarian – there is an organised assault on labour. Right now, in Germany, auto workers are on strike against job losses. In Spain and Italy, gig workers are in mass protest over exploitative conditions under the heat. The working class across the world is under assault, and fighting back.

Which is why, from a worker's point of view, whether a regime is fascist or not fascist is not a debate we need to settle definitively before acting. Workers do not recognise their governments by the labels assigned to them. They recognise them by the laws they enact, the labour rights they destroy, the unions they criminalise, the public wealth they privatise, and the democratic space they suffocate. In India, the working class has suffered an intense assault under the Modi regime: privatisation, the withdrawal of labour rights, and the criminalisation of dissent.

I want to share five lessons from my organising work, because they are the answer I have found to the question I keep asking myself: how do I translate this battle against imperialism to somebody who does not even have a stable job, who does not have a decent wage, who lives in a slum, who is facing the onslaught of the Indian state? How do I say to them that this struggle is part of their struggle? First, real alternatives require moving away from economism. The question before us is not simply how to resist this or that government or this or that oppression. The question is how to build a movement capable of confronting the political and social forms through which contemporary capitalism seeks to preserve itself. Lenin repeatedly insisted that socialism extends democracy rather than diminishing it. That means democracy not only in parliament, but in the factory, the office, the farm, the neighbourhood, the street, and every institution where social power is exercised. To escape economism, we have to understand that the class question is also a social question. Struggle cannot be only on economic terms. It must necessarily be against all economic and social oppression – class, caste, and gender in particular.

I must mention the contract-labour struggle we ran in Karnataka with sanitation workers. It was a triple oppression: class (contract labour), gender (most of them are women), and caste (almost entirely Dalit). When we started, we started only

on the question of wages. After a point, a worker told us: 'I can't even touch the gate of the house where I'm collecting the garbage, because that woman says I am an untouchable'. Our Union had to reorient the struggle. We said the struggle is for social dignity, and dignity lies at the centre of socialism. We said we would stop collecting garbage from any household that did not treat the workers with dignity.

In these communities the wealthy households used to hand out old food to the workers at 5.30 in the morning, in plastic bags, as a form of charity. One of the sanitation workers, Nanjamma, refused the bag. She asked the woman who had come out: 'who else lives in your house? The woman said, 'my husband has died; it's just me and my son. He's an IT engineer, on night shift; he'll be home in an hour'.

Nanjamma handed her back the bag: 'keep this food in the fridge for your son. When we have our struggles, come and give us support. That is the solidarity we want from you'. This story has been an inspiration to many of the poor households we work with. It is the everyday battle we have to fight if we want a real socialist revolution.

In India, caste is not an external question to class struggle. Caste has historically organised labour itself. Capital has inherited caste and modernised it. The struggle against caste is therefore an indispensable condition for building a working-class unity. Similarly, fighting communal and religious polarisation is a principal task of progressive movements. Whatever the core agenda of your organisation, at this point in time, if you are not going to talk against Islamophobia, communal polarisation and against the Hindu-nation project, you are going to have a very serious problem. I must mention the names of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam here – two of the brightest young Muslim intellectuals in our country, in jail for six years now only because they are Muslim and because they stood up against this regime.

Second, struggles need to acquire broader social support. We saw this in the farmers' struggle. We saw this in the anti-CAA struggle. When entire communities come out and workers' struggles receive broader social support, that is when the ruling dispensation backs off. Spirited resistance is possible only when it has broader social backing.

Third, anti-imperialism must unite struggles that are usually separated. When Marx writes on Ireland, he shows us that the struggle against national oppression and the struggle of the working class are inseparable. The same principle applies across Asia. The fight against military alliances, sanctions, resource extraction, debt domination, and corporate land grabs must be linked with the workers' struggles for wages, the peasants' struggles for land, and indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination. Imperialism survives by fragmenting these struggles. Resistance advances by connecting them.

Fourth, solidarity must be international and concrete. When we say 'Hands Off Asia', it is not simply to oppose Western intervention. It is to build practical solidarity between the peoples of Asia and the oppressed and struggling masses within the imperial core itself – the Black and Brown working classes, First Nations peoples, and migrants. As we speak, 15,000 workers at Airbus across Spain are on strike demanding pay and better conditions. Port workers in Italy have refused to load arms shipments bound for Israel, refusing to be complicit in the genocide of the Palestinian people. First Nations struggles in Australia and Native American and Indigenous struggles in the US and Canada must be integrated not just with our own indigenous struggles but with the struggles of all progressive movements. The same global supply chains, financial institutions, and military alliances that sustain imperialism create common sites of resistance.

Fifth, the living traditions of resistance are themselves a source of political confidence. Asia is not entering history as a passive victim of imperialism. It carries the legacies of anti-colonial revolution, workers' uprisings, peasant wars, indigenous resistance, and the movements for social justice that make victory conceivable. Each country will find its own path from its own material conditions, its own history, its own legacy of struggle – motivated by the belief that no human being should be exploited.

'Hands Off Asia' must become more than a slogan. It must become a commitment to build an Asia of workers, peasants, indigenous peoples, women, youth, and oppressed communities – an Asia that resists domination not only through protest

but through the creation of democratic, collective, and socialist alternatives already taking shape in the struggles of the peoples today.

Hands off workers. Hands off peasants. Hands off schools and colleges. Hands off students. Hands off public hospitals. Hands off public resources. Hands off a dignified world. Hands off forests. Hands off rivers. Hands off lands. Hands off Asia.

A Brazilian Perspective on Techno–Politics and South–South Cooperation

Luiz Zarref

Luiz Zarref is an activist and national coordination member of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil and of La Vía Campesina. A forest engineer with a doctorate, his work focuses on agrarian and ecological questions, agroecology, people's agrarian reform, and socialist internationalism. He coordinates the International Association for Popular Cooperation (Baobab) for Latin America, fostering ties between governments and peasant organisations.

I speak here on behalf of the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or Landless Rural Workers' Movement) and as Latin America coordinator of the International Association for Popular Cooperation (IAPC, or Baobab). IAPC is, in a sense, the youngest sister of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. Four years ago, the MST asked me to move to Beijing to help build this project. That is where I now live.

I am impressed that this is the first Asian meeting of its kind in eight years – and I am impressed because much has happened in those years, and because this is exactly the moment such a meeting needs to happen. Not simply as a conference, but a serious space in which to think together about the current conjuncture and the ways to move ahead.

Although this is a belligerent time for the empire, my generation has real hope. This is, in my view, the best time in a long while to believe in and fight for socialism. Over the past two days I have kept returning to three words: sovereignty, technology, and internationalism. Technology sits in the middle. I will explain why.

Imperialism is making many moves at once. The cycle of Asia comes together with the return of the Monroe Doctrine in the US, the NATO war against Russia, the war against Iran, the genocide in Palestine, and expanding operations across Africa. This is not the movement of a single crazed old man. This is a movement of the imperial system. We need to take seriously that although the empire is declining, it has a strategy to try to destroy the world before it truly declines.

As Dr. Setareh Sadeqi warned earlier in this conference, the Western idea of sovereignty forces our nations in the Global South to buy the structures that the West itself created. When any country tries to push forward a national project, the empire feels entitled to attack. This has to be one of the fundamental things we explain to our people. Sovereignty is not a simple word to explain to the masses.

Faced with the aggressiveness of the imperial project, our internationalist solidarity shows its limits. And here we need to be honest with each other. Our solidarity is sincere. But it too often takes the form of a letter, a protest declaration, or a social media post. How do we go past that limit?

We have already advanced. Imagine our socialist forces without the International Peoples' Assembly (IPA) – born a little more than a decade ago. Imagine the weakness of our analysis and the training of our cadres without the great help of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. Look how far we have come with our network of political schools. Many of the people in this room have been in one of the schools in the IPA network. Right now, ninety-six young cadres are at the Nkrumah School in South Africa, receiving a month of political training to strengthen the struggle in Africa. All of this is real. But I am here to think with you about the next step we need to take.

In recent years, we have made our organisations strong in ideas. There has been much talk here about the battle of ideas. Now we need to make socialism real: not a utopia, not an abstract idea, but a political force. A force that can gather material and symbolic resources to answer the real needs of the people.

We can think of this as building a great lighthouse in a time when our countries have few socialist examples to point to. Building and strengthening cooperatives is a socialist process – as Vijay Prashad said on the first day. So is agroecology, learning to master digital technology, the capacity to build houses at scale (as the Venezuelan people did), and the care networks we have built to overcome the gender oppression created by social reproduction under capitalism. Connecting all these efforts should be the basis for a new common project in our Global South.

We must bring the material side of internationalism back into the centre – alongside the symbolic side and the real connection of struggles across continents. As my comrades have said before me, internationalism was strongest when it passed on capacity and connected struggles – not only when it declared which side it was on.

Here, we see the key contradiction of our time. The empire is losing control of its own productive base. The productive forces moved to Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. Transnational capital took China to be simply a cheaper place to assemble products. But China turned that into a base for its own command and grew its technological sovereignty through the Communist Party of China's conscious strategy. This does not mean that we can simply copy the Communist Party of China. It does mean that we have an example to study how the productive forces can be put into a country's own hands. The factory of the world has also become its laboratory.

So, what is left under imperial control? It is not only military force and control of the sea lanes. A cultural hegemony remains that still makes imperial power look legitimate, even now, when that power has moved away from the productive base that once held it up. Through this cultural hegemony, the empire tells the people of our countries that they cannot do things they in fact *can* do. As Jeff Xiong explained yesterday: even now, the empire tells our people that the West has the best technology. It does not. But part of the young people in our countries believe it.

Alongside cultural hegemony, imperial control still runs from a distance through the clouds, the chips, and the standards that structure the world's computing. That

is still in Western hands – perhaps for one more year, perhaps less. Technology is one of the empire's last precious cards.

Leading in technology is no small thing. Capital's control of science was never about the full development of human beings. It was, in truth, about forcing every technical possibility into the form of exchange value. Marx already saw this in the machine – how capital's control over the machine binds it to a specific social form. Freed from that form, human capacity to produce and to know can serve human beings directly. We see the contradiction all around us: a poisoned planet and basic needs unmet, next to very modern and advanced technology produced only for luxury.

The socialist experiences answer against this logic. When they free the productive forces from bourgeois control, they put science at the service of the full development of human beings. Cuba – the small island to which we showed our solidarity yesterday – is the most stubborn example. Under blockade for decades, Cuba has still built advanced technology in health and biotechnology. Even today, it maintains extraordinary quality in artificial intelligence. Cuba is currently one of the most advanced countries in AI, without commodity-priced computers. It is unbelievable if you think about it.

Cuba and China are developing their own models. The great socialist scientific project can go further.

What the Chinese Marxists, in the words of President Xi Jinping, call the 'new quality productive forces' – forces transformed by AI, data, technology, and new energy – can only be fully freed under new, socialist relations of production. The empire cannot follow China there.

Let me make this into a concrete exercise about what we are doing at IAPC.

IAPC was created in 2019 by movements inside the IPA, inspired by Tricontinental, by our political schools, and by our media projects. It was created as an international platform to exchange science and technology and help solve specific

technical bottlenecks for grassroots movements advancing their projects. The following examples show our method.

First, the Bio-input International School (BIS). Bio-input is a term for the biological – rather than chemical – inputs used in agriculture. It is one of the most important technologies for producing healthy food. We have organised six BISs in total: in Kathmandu (Nepal), La Plata (Argentina), Prado (Brazil), Morogoro (Tanzania), Zaltla (Mexico) and Suzhou (China). The network we have built for bio-inputs brings together researchers, professors, and movements from Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil, and China. Based on a people-to-people exchanges, BIS has brought leaders from different movements together to exchange knowledge on bio-inputs and other technical bottlenecks.

Second, research networks in the Global South. The MST has elaborated a plan for eight factories in Brazil to convert organic waste into organic fertiliser at industrial scale. This is a developing industry to solve a problem in human areas and answer the needs of peasant agriculture. From this national plan, we are promoting meetings in Venezuela, Cuba, Russia, and China to bring them into a Global South network on this issue.

Third, agricultural machinery. Peasant movements face a chronic lack of agricultural machinery. Machinery penetration rates are around seventy percent in China and fourteen percent in Brazil. We are connecting universities and companies in China to MST cooperatives in Brazil – not to export Chinese machinery to Brazil, but to transfer the technology so that they can build the machines in Brazil, with their own adaptations to suite their own needs.

Fourth, digital agriculture. If you go to a meeting with European NGOs, you will be told that digital agriculture is against peasants. We do not believe that. We believe digital agriculture needs to be in our hands. To achieve that – as Jeff explained yesterday – we need to first understand what it is. We need to build the technology so we don't fetishise artificial intelligence. We are now working on a partnership with Chinese state-owned companies under an intergovernmental

agreement (not a commercial agreement) to implement this technology in peasant areas of Brazil. A settlement is now hosting the pilot project.

Fifth is IARAA, an agroecology chatbot created by the MST and the World March of Women in Brazil, which Jeff referenced yesterday. As Jeff described, it gives Brazilian peasants access to thousands of books on agroecology, from a family-farming and agroecological perspective rather than an agribusiness one. It was not built by any high-tech firm. It was built by our militants and cadres. We did not hire any engineer to do this. We have now created a hub in Ghana as well, because Ghanaian agriculture has its own ecology and cultural conditions – so a Ghanaian capacity needs to be developed on Ghanaian terms.

I would like to conclude by saying that we really believe science and technology should be one of the pillars of our internationalism. This is how we generate the sense that we are not only fighting capitalism, but we know the truth of it and have the capacity to create solutions for the peoples.

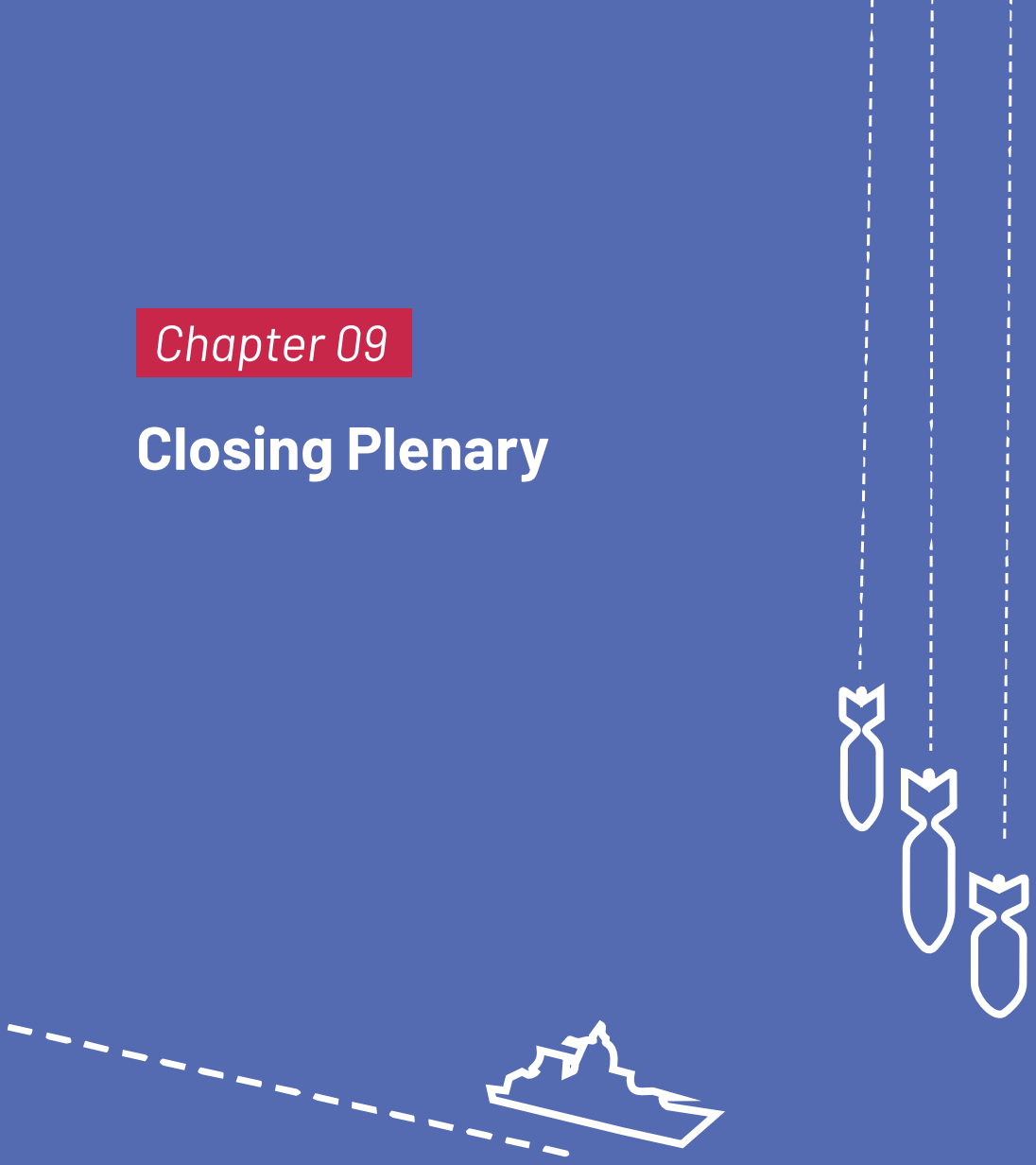
This work cannot be abstract. The correlation of forces changes, and sometimes we cannot schedule outcomes to the day. But no one can steal from us the truth that we know how to manage nature and use science and technology to answer the needs of our people. We have to think in terms of techno-politics – not splitting the technical from the political.

In 1992, during the 'Special Period' for Cuba, Fidel Castro told the Cuban Academy of Sciences that science is the most important thing the revolution can count on in a difficult time. That is what we should learn to take seriously now.

As comrade Susanta Das suggested in the break earlier today, we should have a proper session on science at a future gathering like this one. Science and technology deserve their own space in our conversation. We need to take into our hands not only the 'Hands Off' campaigns, but the 'Hands On' campaigns: hands on the technologies, hands on the movements. Imperialist hands off Asia and everywhere else!

Chapter 09

Closing Plenary



Sri Lanka's Struggle and the Pressure of Geography

G. Weerasinghe

Dr. G. Weerasinghe is the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL). Elected to lead the Central Committee in 2020, his work centres on critical political economy, anti-imperialist sovereignty, and the social fallout of structural adjustment programmes in South Asia. He is a frequent contributor to international fora on global development paradigms, concentrating on the emergence of multilateral financial architectures and independent policy frameworks within the Global South.

The theme assigned to this closing panel names the 'geography of pressure'. In Sri Lanka's case, the more accurate phrase is the 'pressure of geography'.

Sri Lanka lies in the middle of the Indian Ocean, very close to India, and directly astride the sea routes that connect Europe and West Asia with China and the rest of the Asian continent. At least 60,000 ships pass through the sea lanes around us each year. The pressure of that geography is what has kept Sri Lanka in the spotlight of US strategy from the beginning – and it is what shapes almost every conversation we now need to have about our country.

Consider only the recent past. US imperialism has attempted to drag Sri Lanka into three interlinked agreements: the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact. The three are structured in relation to one another – one signature preparing the ground for the next. Sri Lanka signed the first, ACSA. The other two could not be signed because of the strength of popular protest in the country.

Before her posting, US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Julie Chung told the US Senate that she hoped to make Sri Lanka an active participant in the US Indo-Pacific

Strategy during her tenure. Since her arrival, many agreements have been signed between the United States and Sri Lanka. They have not been disclosed to the country.

India is our closest neighbour. Recently, many agreements have been signed between Sri Lanka and India. These, too, have not been disclosed to the country. The Communist Party of Sri Lanka takes the position that in developing relations with India, we must proceed from our historical and cultural closeness. But that development must proceed openly, in full view of our people.

The Non-Aligned Movement's first formal conference was held in Belgrade in 1961. Its foundations were prepared earlier, most decisively at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Bandung's central agreement was that our nations should not join the military blocs of the great powers; that we should work against colonialism, against imperialism, and for the right of self-determination of the national liberation movement. A ten-point statement was agreed upon, including the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* presented by the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. It was on that statement's basis that the Non-Aligned Movement was born.

The Sri Lankan left of the 1950s and 1960s was actively engaged in the parallel work of pushing the governments of the day to establish diplomatic relations with the socialist states then emerging in the world. When the first Non-Aligned conference met in 1961, Sri Lanka was one of its founding members.

The relevance of non-alignment to our present is direct. We meet in a country in the Indian Ocean at a time when the Indian Ocean is being rapidly militarised, despite the world having once agreed to designate it a 'Zone of Peace'. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy runs alongside two principal military instruments: the Quad, formed by the United States, Australia, India, and Japan; and AUKUS, formed by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Countries like Sri Lanka are being pulled into that strategy. The United States donates various pieces of military equipment – helicopters, naval vessels – which are then deployed in various parts of the Indian Ocean, and it is clear that the Sri Lankan armed forces operate them. Sri Lanka has not openly declared its role, but Sri Lanka is

at present an unspoken member of this US strategy in our ocean. Whatever the strategy is currently called, it is against us. This is exactly the context in which the concept of non-alignment must be presented more forcefully to our own country and to the world.

In 2022, an economic crisis erupted in Sri Lanka. On one side there was a dollar scarcity – our foreign exchange reserves fell below $100 million. On the other, a rupee scarcity. At the centre was the debt. The country declared bankruptcy because we could not service the debts. At the moment of crisis, state revenue was around 6% of GDP.

The reasons that produced this debt are structural, not accidental. Sri Lanka has been following neoliberal policies since 1978. Under those policies, we have run a persistent trade deficit for more than forty years – import expenditure is roughly twice as high as export income. That is because our country has been undergoing deindustrialisation and declining production, becoming ever more heavily an economy dependent on services and on imports. Alongside deindustrialisation came a collapse in state revenue, driven by two decisions. First, the shrinking and privatisation of the public sector, which reduced revenue from state enterprises. Second, a drastic change in the tax policy, which replaced direct taxes on the rich with indirect taxes on the whole population, granted tax concessions and amnesties to big capitalists, and eliminated or reduced tax categories.

To finance imports, development activity, and other spending under these constraints, the government borrowed – increasingly, from around 2007, on the international financial markets in the form of sovereign bonds, under the guidance of the IMF and the World Bank. Those were short-term, high-interest loans. The debt piled up. By 2022, Sri Lanka's external debt exceeded $50 billion, compared to only around $740 million in 1977.

The four-year IMF programme entered in March 2023 – our seventeenth IMF programme – concludes in March 2027. It has imposed harsh tax measures on ordinary people, driven hundreds of thousands of young people and professionals to leave the country, and reduced the living standards of the majority to a very

low level. Our external debt is now above $54 billion. Over the four years of the programme, we have received $2.9 billion in disbursements. A recent World Bank report finds 20% of the population in poverty – a clear increase over the pre-crisis level – and, on World Bank data, 33% of Sri Lankan families are malnourished. That is roughly 1.9 million families and around 10 million people. Foreign exchange reserves stand at around $6.4 billion – a figure which itself includes a currency swap of some $1.5 billion dollars from China. The IMF's target requires that reserves reach $8.6 billion by the end of 2026 and $10 billion by end of 2027. In the current conditions, it is unlikely that this target will be reached. Major debt repayments are scheduled to resume in 2028. It is already clear that repaying the debt as planned will not be easy.

What we need to understand is that the debt problem is not Sri Lanka's alone. It is a problem for many countries in the world. The genuine question is not simply whether *can* we pay this debt, but whether we s*hould* pay it. It is now clear that the IMF, the World Bank, and other financial institutions are working to use the debt to keep Sri Lanka – and many other countries – as slave nations that the imperialists can manipulate as they wish.

Sri Lanka's crisis remains unresolved. It is a product of the economic strategy pursued continuously since the late 1970s. Every time we went to an IMF programme, we went to another crisis, and went back for a new programme – and the results are before us.

The economic system implemented in Sri Lanka since the late 1970s is nothing but the imperialism of our present era. After the concepts had received political blessing from Washington and London, the policies of the IMF, the World Bank, and the US Treasury – known as the ten-point Washington Consensus – was imposed on the countries of the world. Under the Washington Consensus, Sri Lanka has deindustrialised. Agriculture has fallen from around 31% of the economy to around 6%. When the crisis broke out, about 60% of the Sri Lankan economy was service-based. Neoliberal globalisation turned Sri Lanka – and many other Global South countries – into a market for the products of the Global North. This is the imperialism of our time.

To develop, we must get rid of the neoliberal economic programme that has generated this crisis, dragged us into debt bondage, deindustrialised us, and destroyed our production economy. We must break away from the imperialist economic, financial, and political system. In an alternative programme, the welfare state must be maintained. The state sector must be excluded from retrenchment. The cooperative sector must be strengthened. Vijay Prashad said on the opening day of this conference that cooperatives can build people's confidence even without state power. I fully agree. In Sri Lanka, we have started – at a very early stage – a similar initiative to promote collective production, which we call the *Way Forward Movement of Collective Production*. Sri Lanka must also gradually develop its ocean economy to full capacity. We must reposition our external economic, trade, and financial relations to integrate ourselves with the Global South.

The 23rd National Congress of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, held in February this year, presented this concept – *economic sovereignty* – to the country as the basis of the way forward. Entering the socialist path is possible, but it will not happen without effort. It is not only possible to build socialism – the conducive environment for it has arrived.

Let me add one point outside the framing you provided me. We all agree that imperialism is decaying and collapsing. As I have argued, this is producing the conditions for a favourable turning point in economic and social development. But we should not ignore that a danger is also growing. The imperial centres of the world – the United States and Europe – will not easily withdraw from the fight and accept their own decline. Their reactions may be very severe. When we look at their actions in Iran, at their policies toward Cuba, at their conduct of the war in Ukraine, we can see that they may resort even to very dangerous actions.

Recognising the danger of imperialist reactions and understanding that we need to defeat those reactions, the task of rallying all possible forces becomes urgent. We must mobilise within our own countries, regionally, and internationally. The Communist Party of Sri Lanka is very keen on regional cooperation. In the first week of this month, Comrade D. Raja, General Secretary of the Communist Party of India, was in Sri Lanka for several days. We met yesterday with Comrade Prachanda of

the Nepali Communist Party, who is here for this conference. We think we should actively intervene in our region, in the Indian Ocean, in the wider Indian region – building cooperation between the regional communist and left parties, and being very careful about the reactions of the imperialists both within our countries and in the wider theatres of Eastern Europe, South Asia, and East Asia.

Comrades, long live anti-imperialist solidarity! Hands off Asia! May the struggle for world peace and social development be victorious! May the struggle for socialism be victorious!

Hands Off Asia: Five Points on the Legacy and the Task

Vijay Prashad

Vijay Prashad (born 1967 in Calcutta, India) is a historian and journalist who is the director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, an inter-movement research institute of the Global South associated with the International Peoples Assembly. His weekly newsletter from the institute reaches almost two million people. He is the author of over forty books, most recently (with Grieve Chelwa) How the International Monetary Fund Suffocates Africa *(2026) and the two award winning histories* The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World *(2007) and* The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South *(2013). Prashad has twice been awarded the Muzaffar Ahmed Prize.* This essay is adapted from his synthesis remarks at the closing plenary of the Hands Off Asia conference, Colombo, 18 July 2026.

'Hands Off Asia' is a good slogan. It is worth beginning by remembering that it has a very specific history.

'Hands Off' is not a generic phrase. It comes from the period immediately after the Russian Revolution, when the young Soviet republic was formed. The moment the Bolsheviks seized power and created a workers' state, the imperialist powers that had been at war with each other suddenly stopped fighting one another and jointly invaded the young republic. From 1919 to 1921, an international campaign known as 'Hands Off Russia' mobilised to protect the workers' state from that imperialist invasion.

A few years later, the so-called Western countries – I say so-called because they use West as a synonym for civilised – decided to arm the Japanese, a point they do not much like to remember. Western companies made a lot of money arming Japan through the 1920s and beyond. When Japan then invaded China with the help of Western rearmament, an international campaign called Hands Off China ran

from 1924 to 1927. Hands Off China did not mean, obviously, hands off a workers' state; it meant hands off the process of national liberation that had opened in 1911 with the revolution against the imperial state and was then developing through the national struggle and the emergence of the Communist Party.

Hands Off Russia, Hands Off China, and now Hands Off Asia. It is a good legacy. When we say Hands Off China today, when we say Hands Off Sri Lanka, when we say Hands Off any one of us, we are standing on the shoulders of those who defended the young Soviet republic against imperialist invasion and of those who worked to end the century of humiliation against the Chinese people – the century of humiliation that began with the First Opium War in 1839 and closed with the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

I want to spend the remainder of this closing on five points about the Hands Off Asia campaign that is germinating in these days we have been together. The seed has been planted. What we do with it now is up to us – because it is our mass organisations, our political parties, and our movements that will have to take it back home and see if they can plant it in a little pot of earth right outside the bases in South Korea.

We do not want to join a camp against imperialism as such. We are against the imperialist imposition of a camp mentality on us. They ask our countries to sign up to their side against their enemies. We are not saying to any country or to anybody that we want to form a counter-bloc that will engage in some kind of military struggle against the United States. We are not insane. We salute the Iranians for defending themselves, but let us be clear. Iran did not impose a war on the United States. The United States imposed conflict. We are coming back to the table saying: we don't want your war. It is not that we are going to meet war with war unless you come to attack us.

We are not interested in the mentality of camps. We are interested in the mentality of humanity. They want to divide humanity. We want to unite humanity. Asia belongs to its peoples, and its peoples are part of humanity. We are not different from the people of the United States or the people of Europe. We are all part of

one humanity, we have common challenges, and we want to deal with those challenges in common ways.

I looked at the numbers yesterday. The United Nations estimates it would cost approximately $318 billion to end absolute poverty across the whole world. In Asia alone – the largest continent by population, with the largest absolute number of poor people – it would cost around $100 billion. Only two places in Asia have already eradicated absolute poverty: China, and the state of Kerala in India. The combined military budget of Asia is $600 billion. Six hundred billion wasted on warfare when one hundred billion would end the absolute poverty of the continent.

When we were children, we used to be taught the crude economic parable of guns and butter. Civilisation, in this current moment, has said: let's choose guns over butter. It is ludicrous. Peace is an indispensable condition of development. You cannot build for war and achieve development goals at the same time.

Why do we still have young Indian and Pakistani soldiers freezing to death every year on the Siachen Glacier? Why do we need so many warships in the Indian Ocean, which was disarmed until the Portuguese arrived with their galleons – Vasco da Gama taking pot-shots at fishing boats that had for centuries connected Sri Lanka to Africa – and which has been militarised ever since?

Our fight is political, but the political and intellectual fights are inseparable. Because to win over our people politically, our enemies have made confrontation normal. They treat confrontation as a natural condition of humanity, of societies, of the world.

We on the left understand confrontation. We are not naive. We know class struggle is a permanent feature of capitalism. We understand it exists, and that it is imposed on working people. What we do not do is take that class struggle and describe it as a normal condition of humanity itself. We describe it as a normal condition under capitalism, which we intend to overcome. Our opponents, by contrast, try to make conflict itself into something eternal – the animal spirits of humanity, and so on. We have to agitate against that intellectual project.

I want to leave a specific task for the room. Everyone here has to write at least ten social media posts about what we have learned together in these three days. Everyone here has to write at least one longer article. Some have already begun; Benyasiri Eimviriyapong and Fatima Shazhad are writing a piece together. Harleen Kaur had one, Balram Banskota had one, and others have appeared over the course of this week. We need much more agitation. We have to break the habit of coming to a meeting, learning something, and then going home passively. We need to see each other in public, talking about what we learned here. Take the speeches from this conference and publish them.

Comrade Taimur Rahman told us at the opening that one of his party leaders, Sarwar Amjadi, had just been arrested. I gather he is now out on bail. But Rashed Khan Menon, Hasanul Haq Inu, and others of our comrades in Bangladesh are still sitting in jail. Umar Khalid has been in jail in India for years. His PhD dissertation has been published as a book while he sits in prison. What is he in jail for? Even he does not know. There are many people in India in jail today who cannot honestly answer the question of why. It is a political attack on their being. There is no real reason.

Our comrade Prabir Purkayastha, who was one of the co-organisers of the last International People's Assembly Asia meeting in Dhaka in 2018, was also jailed. The Delhi High Court eventually ruled that the grounds for his imprisonment were invalid. The state, of course, never apologises. It appeals the decision instead. We know why our comrades are in jail. They know we know. There is no legal or juridical reason for their imprisonment. It is a political attack.

Our solidarity is paramount. We cannot have a Hands Off Asia if we allow our comrades to be picked off, one by one. That is precisely what our enemies are doing. They sense that the left is weak, and they are picking us up one by one. We cannot defend ourselves within our own countries alone. We need a much more robust all-Asia network for the solidarity and defence of our comrades and our movements.

As we leave here, we need to be motivated much more by confidence and much less by fear.

I know I am going to embarrass her, but I want to name her: on the last Gaza flotilla, one Sri Lankan participated – and she is in this room. Sameera Mahboobdeen, if you would stand up. There she is. The only Sri Lankan on the Gaza flotilla. We have to lift up people like Sameera – people who do not have fear, who act with confidence. Our movement is built by confident cadres, confident people.

I just gave Comrade Hilmar Farid a copy of a Ho Chi Minh book. Ho Chi Minh's key concept was emulation. People join our movement not because we are angry at the world. I do not like angriness at the world; I am not angry at the world. I hate capitalism because I love the world and I love human beings. We invite people into a movement built out of love for humanity.

When we say Hands Off Asia, we also mean give us a hug. Ours is not an aggressive movement. It is not a movement built out of fear and anger. It is a movement built out of love for humanity. We have to convey that. We have to celebrate our comrades when they do brave things.

When I was young in 1971, my sister was getting married. General Jagjit Singh Aurora, a friend of my father's, came to our house to bless my sister before going off to defeat General Niazi in East Pakistan. I was a young child. We were terrified in the flat, because we had been told that the US Seventh Fleet had just passed the Andaman Islands and was heading into the Bay of Bengal – and that, to stop Jagjit Singh Aurora from crossing the border into East Pakistan, the fleet was going to bomb selected sites in Calcutta. So, we had to put black chart paper over our windows. That is a terrifying childhood memory. That is what we want to avoid.

We do not want to scare our children. We want our children to grow up in an environment of love and positivity, where they can have a future beyond precarity – a future in which they can lead fulfilling lives and not merely worry about a meaningless career so that they can eventually move out of their parents' home. That is not the world we want to create. We want to create a world of possibility, not of constraint.

Comrades, Hands Off Asia is not a negative slogan. It is a positive slogan. It means stand together. It means rise together. It means build something together.

The Colombo Declaration

IPA Asia Conference, 18 July 2026 | Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Gathered in Colombo for *Hands Off Asia: A People's Call for Sovereignty and Solidarity*, a conference organised by the International Peoples' Assembly (Asia) and supported by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, we – representing movements, political parties, trade unions, and people's organisations from 15 countries across Asia – commit ourselves to a single call that echoes across our continent:

Hands Off Asia, which means:

Militarily

Hands off our seas. Hands off our lands. Hands off our skies.

No US or allied military bases on our sovereign territory. No AUKUS. No Quad. No war on Iran. No genocide in Palestine.

An end to the encirclement of Asia.

Economically

Hands off our economies. Hands off our resources. Hands off our livelihoods.

No sovereign debt bondage. No IMF conditionalities. No tariff coercion. No technology blockades.

The right of Asian peoples to build economies of our own choosing.

Politically

Hands off our politics. Hands off our elections. Hands off our movements.

No regime change or far-right proxies.

The right of Asia's peoples to determine our own political future.

Ideologically and culturally

Hands off our histories. Hands off our media. Hands off our imagination.

No colonisation of the ways we know ourselves and each other.

The right of Asia's peoples to tell our own story and build our own peoples' culture.

The enemy is one and indivisible. So must our answer be. We commit to peoples' solidarity across the continent – toward the sovereignty, peace, and socialist horizon our peoples have always fought for.

The future of Asia will be decided by its peoples. Hands off Asia!





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HANDS OFF ASIA

A People's Call for Sovereignty and Solidarity

This book brings together the proceedings of *Hands Off Asia: A People's Call for Sovereignty and Solidarity*, a conference held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, organised by the International Peoples' Assembly (Asia) with the support of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.

Representatives of people's organisations from fifteen countries across Asia gathered at a moment when the continent has become a central theatre in the United States' intensifying efforts to preserve its global hegemony. What the peoples of Asia face are not isolated crises unfolding country by country, but an interconnected system of domination that deploys military, economic, political, and ideological power in concert.

Hands Off Asia is an international campaign against US militarism and the New Cold War in Asia and the Pacific. Led by the International Peoples' Assembly alongside partner organisations across the region, the campaign calls on movements, trade unions, political parties, and all people of conscience to stand against the machinery of war and to defend the peace, sovereignty, and dignity of all Asian peoples.

Join the campaign and follow Tricontinental Asia: