

Behind the designation of Russia and China as “imperialist”: A case study in theoretical charlatanry

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In the statement “Socialism and the Fight Against War,” published on February 18, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) devotes considerable attention to the reason why pseudo-left organizations have rushed to define Russia and China as imperialist powers. [1]

This definition has been plucked from midair, with barely any attempt to explain the historical process through which Russia and China, within the space of just 25 years, changed from bureaucratically degenerated and deformed workers states into imperialist powers.

Were it merely a matter of expressing political opposition to the regimes in Beijing and Moscow, it would not be necessary to employ the epithet “imperialist.” The International Committee of the Fourth International calls for the overthrow of the capitalist states in Russia and China by the working class as an essential component of the world socialist revolution. ...

What political purpose, it must be asked, is served by adding the word “imperialist” to descriptions of China and Russia? In practical political terms, it serves very definite functions.

First, it relativizes, and therefore diminishes, the central and decisive global counterrevolutionary role of American, European and Japanese imperialism. This facilitates the pseudo-left’s active collaboration with the United States in regime-change operations such as in Syria, where the Assad regime has been backed by Russia. Second, and even more significantly, the designation of China and Russia as imperialist—and thus, by implication, as colonial powers suppressing ethnic, national, linguistic and religious minorities—sanctions the pseudo-left’s support for imperialist-backed “national liberation” uprisings and “color revolutions” within the boundaries of the existing states.

This assessment is confirmed by the politics of the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency (RCIT), a split-off from the League for the Fifth International (LIFI). Both the RCIT and the LIFI, which emerged from a 1970s split in the International Socialist Tendency (IST), have a long record of anti-Trotskyism. Characteristic of their petty-bourgeois representatives is radical-sounding phrase-mongering to mask their practical support for right-wing bourgeois forces.

The RCIT and its sections take this type of politics to the limit. The documents written by its international secretary and leading theoretician Michael Pröbsting—notwithstanding references to Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, buttressed by radical-sounding rhetoric—read like strategy papers

authored in the foreign and defense ministries and think tanks of the imperialist powers.

A pamphlet written by Pröbsting, “Russia as a Great Imperialist Power,” was published in Germany just weeks after the right-wing coup in Ukraine orchestrated by the United States and the European Union. In the opening lines of the document, Pröbsting declares Russia and China to be imperialist aggressors, thus implicitly making the struggle against them the central issue in international politics.

He writes:

The political crisis in the Ukraine and the civil war in Syria have recently shown once again the significance of Russia as an imperialist power. In fact, Russia’s and China’s rise as great imperialist powers has been one of the most important developments in world politics of the recent decade. It has substantially increased the inner-imperialist rivalry and hence forms the background for the intensification of various regional conflicts and civil wars. We specifically point to the Georgia war in 2008, the conflict in the East China Sea between China, Japan and the US, the Syrian civil war, and now the events in the Ukraine. [2]

Thus, according to Pröbsting, American and European imperialism are not the driving forces behind the aggression of recent years and the growing danger of a war between the major powers. Rather, the main responsibility lies with Russia and China, the “imperialist colonial powers.” Pröbsting declares:

We think that ignoring the imperialist character of Russia (and China) is a serious mistake which unavoidably leads to confusion in assessing major world political events and even taking the wrong side of the barricades in the class struggle. [3]

As we shall see, the positions advanced by Pröbsting lead him to explicitly justify alliances with forces working “on the wrong side of the barricades.”

In section III of this document, entitled “Rebuilding the Empire: Putin’s Drive to Expand the Grip of Russian Imperialism,” Pröbsting states:

Russia oppresses and exploits other nations both inside and

outside its state. Nearly one fifth of Russia's population, 19.1%, belong to ethnic and national minorities. The most important ones are the Tatars (3.9%), Ukrainians (1.2%), Bashkirs (1.1%), Chuvashes (1.1%), Chechens (1%), the Armenians (0.9%) and other, smaller peoples. All told, there are over 185 ethnic groups living in Russia. [4]

The RCIT endorses armed struggle to implement programs of national and ethnic separation from Russia. Pröbsting declares:

The RCIT's position in the Chechen wars and in all similar conflicts is to unconditionally defend the right of national self-determination for oppressed nationalities. If a national or ethnic group wishes to separate and form its own state, socialists must support this desire and defend them against any repression by the oppressor state. [5]

To lend weight to this program, Pröbsting's document includes maps of "Russia's Ethnic and National Minorities," "Autonomous Areas in Russia," and the "Natural Resources in Russia." Regarding the latter he writes:

As the following figures show, a substantial share of Russia's raw materials—of which oil and gas are the most prominent but are by no means the only ones—are located in regions with a significant proportion of national minorities. [6]

The perspective of carving up Russia as well as China into smaller, more easily digestible morsels, which have control over the countries' valuable natural resources, has long been discussed by leading imperialist geo-strategists.

One example can be found in the current edition of *Foreign Affairs*, where Robert D. Kaplan, one of the leading US strategists and planners behind the Iraq invasion, predicts in an article entitled "Eurasia's Coming Anarchy" that the economic crisis in Russia and China will provoke deep-going internal tensions. Consequently, demands for national autonomy from various ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities will intensify. [7]

Russia, according to Kaplan, will be plunged into "turmoil" and could "fragment yet again." He points to "the heavily Muslim North Caucasus, along with areas of Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern districts, distant from the center and burdened by bloody politics," which "may begin loosening their ties to Moscow in the event of instability inside the Kremlin itself."

With reference to China, Kaplan warns of "the growing ethnic tensions in this vast country." He adds: "To some degree, the Han-dominated state of China is a prison of various nations, including the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Uighurs, all of whom have in various degrees resisted central control." Kaplan concludes, "Today, Uighur militants represent the most immediate separatist threat."

There are indications that the determination of US imperialism and its allies to press ahead energetically with their cooperation with Islamist forces in Syria is aimed at providing military training for secessionist movements in Russia and China. In an article in the *London Review of Books* from last December, well-connected US journalist Seymour Hersh cited an official from Washington as saying that Turkey "has been bringing Uigurs to Syria by special transport, while the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been agitating in favour of their struggle in

China." The US official cited by Hersh also declared that more than 800 Uighur fighters had been brought to Syria via the so-called "rat line." [8]

The historically reactionary implications of this policy are especially pronounced in the case of China. The national movement that developed in China at the beginning of the 20th century was objectively confronted with the historically progressive task—which, however, could not be resolved under the leadership of the bourgeoisie—of uniting various linguistic and ethnic groups to overcome the feudal divisions sustained by the imperialist powers in the interests of their "Open Door" program of plunder. If Pröbsting and the RCIT encourage nationalist and ethnocentric movements to divide up Russia and China, they are not standing in the internationalist socialist tradition of Lenin and the Marxist movement, as Pröbsting falsely asserts, but rather in the tradition of imperialism.

Lenin's work on the "national question," written more than a century ago—i.e., at an incomparably lower level of global capitalist development—is occasionally invoked by petty-bourgeois pseudo-left reactionaries to legitimize their support for imperialist-backed separatist movements. They invariably ignore that Lenin's approach to the national question was always "critical." Writing in 1913, when large portions of Africa, the Middle East and Asia were only in the first stages of democratic struggle against the remnants of feudalism and imperialist-colonialist domination, Lenin acknowledged the legitimacy of the struggle against national oppression. But he placed strict limits on support for self-determination. The task of endorsing the self-determination demand

is largely a negative one. But this is the limit the proletariat can go in supporting nationalism, for beyond that begins the "positive" activity of the *bourgeoisie* striving to *fortify* nationalism... But to go *beyond* these strictly limited and definite historical limits in helping bourgeois nationalism means betraying the proletariat and siding with the bourgeoisie. There is a border-line here, which is often very slight and which the Bundists and the Ukrainian nationalist-socialists completely lose sight of. [9]

Even in 1913, Lenin rejected support for the formation of innumerable small states under the banner of national separatism. He emphasized the economic significance of centralization, arguing that "the class-conscious proletariat will always stand for the larger state." [10] This was written 103 years ago, at a far lower level of development of capitalist globalization, before the October Revolution, and before the promotion of national and ethnic separatism became the most potent weapon of the capitalist-imperialist war against the socialist and internationalist aspirations of the class conscious sections of working class.

Combining historical ignorance with theoretical charlatanism, Pröbsting employs the slogan of national self-determination to divide the working class and give "unconditional" support to all national and ethnic separatist movements, even if they are built up and financed by imperialism. The RCIT explicitly calls for "Unconditional support for the liberation struggle—including in its armed form!" This applies "for example for a socialist Tamil Eelam, a united Ireland, a united Kashmir, an independent Kurdistan, Chechnya, Tibet, etc." The RCIT extends this separatist program to "the Uyghur in China, the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, the Chechens and other Caucasian peoples in Russia." [11]

Pröbsting and the RCIT toss together highly diverse issues without even trying to come to grips with the historical experiences and political lessons of the past several decades. It is not the task of this article to subject these complex processes to a detailed analysis, but the reactionary character of the RCIT's politics should at least be indicated by referring to two examples.

The more than thirty-year civil war in Sri Lanka has proven that Tamil

separatism is a dead end for the working class and that the struggle for a “socialist Tamil Eelam” can be achieved only in alliance with Sinhalese and Muslim workers in a fight for socialism throughout Sri Lanka. The same applies to Kashmir. Without a socialist perspective and a joint struggle of the masses on the entire Indian sub-continent against the 1947-imposed partition of India along religious lines, the demand for an “independent Kashmir” is deeply reactionary.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the imperialist powers have repeatedly encouraged conflicts and played national and ethnic minorities off against each other so as to pursue their own geostrategic and economic interests. A bloody example of this was the violent partition of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, with hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of refugees. Germany and the US played the leading role in inciting Serbs, Muslims and Croats to slaughter each other, only then to intervene militarily themselves. Many pseudo-left organizations cooperated closely with the imperialist powers to spread the poison of bourgeois nationalism. The RCIT continues to boast to this day that it supported the “struggle of the Bosnians in 1992-95” and that of the “Kosovo Albanians in 1999.” In the context of the imperialist powers’ current war policies, the RCIT also has blood on its hands and is playing exactly the same role described by the ICFI in its statement.

In Syria, they propagandize for the CIA-backed war for regime-change in the name of a “defense of the Syrian revolution.”

A leaflet from March 8 “on the fifth anniversary of the Syrian revolution” states, among other things, “Today, with the help of the Russian blitzkrieg and thousands of Iranian-led troops, the Assad regime threatens to liquidate Free Aleppo.” [12] In an “Open letter to All Revolutionary Organisations and Activists” from last December, they write, “In Syria the revolutionary liberation struggle is continuing but is facing huge threats. The murderous dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad—with the wholesale support of Russian imperialism as well as that of Iran—is continuing its war of destruction against its own people.” [13]

At the same time, the RCIT denounces “sectarian anti-imperialists” who oppose the carve-up and re-colonization of the Middle East by the imperialist powers.

In a programmatic article—bearing the pretentious title “Liberation Struggles and Imperialist Interference. The failure of sectarian ‘anti-imperialism’ in the West: Some general considerations from the Marxist point of view and the example of the democratic revolution in Libya in 2011”—Pröbsting attacks all of those who refused to greet the NATO war in Libya in 2011 as a revolution and a victory for the working class.

Pröbsting writes:

We, on the other hand, contend that the Libyan Revolution ended in a partial victory for the working class and the oppressed because it defeated the bourgeois-bonapartist Gaddafi regime... Another positive consequence of the Libyan revolution is the progress of the national liberation struggle of the Tuareg people in Mali who founded the Azawad Republic... Again, in our opinion, this demonstrates that the partial victory of the democratic revolution in Libya has been advantageous for oppressed people. [14]

This assessment is as cynical as it is absurd. The Gaddafi regime was not “overthrown” by an independent political movement of Libyan workers, but with NATO bombs from the air and Islamist proxy forces backed by the West on the ground. The outcome of this “partial victory” is a devastated society, tens of thousands of deaths, hundreds of thousands of refugees, and the renewed threat of an intervention by the imperialist powers.

This development was also anything but “advantageous” for Mali. It

was a catastrophe. The country, rich in natural resources, was thrown into crisis and destabilized by the Libyan war and the destruction of its neighbor. The rebellion of Tuareg fighters and Islamists in the north led not to “liberation,” but to conditions similar to civil war, a military coup in Bamako, and military intervention by the former colonial power France and its imperialist allies, including the US.

While most pseudo-left tendencies adopting similar positions to the RCIT seek to conceal their adaptation to politically reactionary forces, the RCIT justifies collaboration with counter-revolutionary tendencies as a strategic imperative.

In its “Revolutionary Communist Manifesto,” the RCIT proclaims:

We are of course aware that such a new national party or a Fifth International, under present conditions would have a contradictory class character, since it would involve not only revolutionary, but reformist and centrist forces. This would be an International, whose leaders would fail in a series of class struggles, or even stand on the other side of the barricades against the workers. [15]

This incredible formulation is rooted in the practice of the RCIT. Wherever the RCIT has sections and is politically active, it supports bourgeois forces and in fact stands “on the other side of the barricades.” During the last national elections in Austria in 2013, RKO Liberation (RKOB) called for a vote for the Social Democrats (SPÖ), which currently forms a coalition at the federal level in Vienna with the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), and in the state of Burgenland is in a coalition with the far-right, xenophobic Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

In Africa and Asia, their supporters cooperate with extreme right-wing nationalist forces. In the previously cited “Open Letter,” the RCIT advocates “a mass united front of workers and popular organizations which should include those under the influence of the reformists and populists.”

This right-wing, bourgeois and pro-imperialist orientation has attracted support from other pseudo-left tendencies. Pröbsting is a welcome guest at many pseudo-left discussion events, having spoken, for example, at the “Third Euro-Mediterranean Conference” in July 2015 in Athens, which was organized by the Coordinating Committee for the Refoundation of the Fourth International (CRFI). The CRFI’s members include the Argentinian Workers Party (PO) and Greece’s Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK) led by Savas Michael-Matsas, who broke with the ICFI, and any socialist perspective for the international working class, in 1985. [16]

In its report on the conference, the RCIT criticized the contributions from the Russian and Ukrainian representatives because they “often expressed softness in their opposition to Russian imperialism.” There were also “important political differences” with the “comrades” of the CRFI. The RCIT wrote:

While the RCIT characterizes Russia and China as imperialist powers, these comrades do not. Furthermore, while the RCIT continues to support the Syrian Revolution despite its petty-bourgeois Islamist leadership, the RedMed comrades [the RedMed network is an online platform of the CRFI] have stopped their support and take now a defeatist position. [17]

Despite these differences, the RCIT found the conference “useful.”

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Footnotes

- [1] See <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/02/18/icfi-f18.html/>
- [2] "Russia as a Great Imperialist Power," *Revolutionary Communism*, No. 21, March 2014, p. 3. The entire statement can be accessed at <http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/imperialist-russia/>
- [3] Ibid
- [4] Ibid, p. 16
- [5] Ibid
- [6] Ibid
- [7] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-02-15/eurasias-coming-anarchy>
- [8] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n01/seymour-m-hersh/military-to-military>
- [9] "Critical Remarks on the National Question," *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 20 [Moscow, 1964], pp. 34-35
- [10] Ibid, p. 46
- [11] "The Revolutionary Communist Manifesto," *Programme of the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency (RCIT)*, pp. 48-49
- [12] <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/rcit-als-syria/>
- [13] <http://www.thecommunists.net/rcit/open-letter-revolutionary-unity/>
- [14] <http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/liberation-struggle-and-imperialism/>
- [15] <http://www.thecommunists.net/rcit-manifesto/the-leadership-we-have-and-the-leadership-we-need/>
- [16] A new political ally of Pröbsting is Alex Steiner, who quit the Fourth International nearly 40 years ago and has since then developed into a virulent anti-Trotskyist. Driven by a malignant interaction of uncontrollable political opportunism and a pathologically subjective hatred of his former comrades in the leadership of the Trotskyist movement, Steiner's principal criterion in the selection of allies is their opposition to the International Committee of the Fourth International. He attended the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in search of potential allies against the ICFI, where he met Pröbsting. Endorsing the latter's definition of Russia and China as imperialist, Steiner posts Pröbsting's documents on his own blog site *permanent-revolution.org*. A detailed review of Steiner's political history is contained in David North's *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique* [Available at <https://mehrington.com/frankfurt-school-postmodernism.html>]
- [17] <http://www.thecommunists.net/rcit/euro-mediterranean-conference-2015/>



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