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THOMAS HUMMEL

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Building International Solidarity Against Imperial Rivalry



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Increasingly, understanding the inter-imperialist competition between the United States and China is becoming essential to understanding the dynamics of the modern capitalist system. With the goal of broadening our understanding of the dynamics at play, Ashley Smith, along with co-authors Eli Friedman, Kevin Lin, and Rosa Liu, have published China in Global Capitalism: Building International Solidarity Against Imperial Rivalry, out now from Haymarket Books. Thomas Hummel recently sat down with Ashley Smith to chat about some of the book's central themes and to explore the practical implications of the rise of China for socialists and activists fighting for a better and more just world today.

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Thomas Hummel: *First of all, congratulations on getting this book out. The book covers several key themes: the rise of capitalism in China, class struggle, China's place in the new*

world of inter-imperialist rivalry and crisis, and the possibilities for international working-class solidarity. Why do you think this book is so important at this moment in world politics?

Ashely Smith: I believe the starting point for any discussion of world politics today is the state of global capitalism, which I think is in its greatest period of crisis since the 1970s, and possibly since the 1930s. While it's not on the scale of the Great Depression, since the Great Recession, we've been in what David McNally has referred to as "a long global slump." Michael Roberts calls it a "long depression." This crisis is interwoven with other systemic crises, the most obvious being the climate crisis, the migration crisis—which stems from the Great Recession, climate change, and other large-scale issues—and the rising levels of interstate conflict, inter-imperial rivalry, and war. These factors are driving millions of people to move across the globe.

On top of this, we're seeing the return of pandemics. COVID-19 is just one of many to come, given the world's increasing integration and the zoonotic spillover of diseases from animals to humans. This is happening with growing regularity. So, we are dealing with multiple, overlapping crises of global capitalism that are creating unprecedented struggles from below in nearly every state around the world. Over the past 15 years, we've seen massive uprisings of people across the globe.

At the same time, these crises have intensified inter-imperial rivalries and interstate conflicts, leading to an increasing number of wars, both between states and within states in the form of civil wars. There are thus two axes of conflict in the world: one between capitalist states, and the other between those states and the workers, peoples, and nations they exploit and oppress. Our epoch's central inter-imperial conflict is between the United States and China. This conflict is the top priority for both the U.S. and Chinese states, and it's leading them to produce symmetrically opposed policies—economic, political, and military—as their rivalry intensifies and plays out globally.

At the same time, both the U.S. and China are experiencing growing struggles from below, as oppressed and exploited people become fed up with their own ruling classes. In this conjuncture, the Left is really being put to the test. The challenge is whether we can oppose both these powers and the inter-imperial rivalry they are locked in while also supporting and building solidarity with the struggles from below in both countries.

This book was written in that spirit: as an attempt to offer an alternative of anti-imperialist internationalism and solidarity from below against the escalating inter-imperial rivalry between the U.S. and China.

TH: *Many on the Left consider China and its so-called “socialist” system to be an alternative to the American-dominated world system. Can you speak a little bit about why you believe this is not true?*

AS: I think you have to start by understanding why people would be looking for an alternative to the U.S., because as we know, it has been the hegemonic imperialist power in the 20th and 21st centuries. It has the largest economy, the largest military force, with 800 bases around the world, the most developed set of imperial alliance structures, and it’s the main enemy of liberation struggles in almost every part of the world. So, it’s completely understandable that people repulsed by U.S. imperialism would seek some kind of alternative—some state that stands up to the U.S. and offers an alternative to its vicious capitalist and imperialist policies.

But I don’t think China or any other state offers any real alternative. The book goes into this in detail, as do many other works. First and foremost, China is a capitalist state that oversees a capitalist economy. Its state and private corporations are thoroughly integrated into the world system. It used this integration with the world system to transform itself from an isolated, marginal economy in the 1970s into the second-largest capitalist economy today. It is the world’s largest manufacturer and not just in low-end commodities. Its “China 2025” plan is designed to leap ahead in high-tech industries, challenging the U.S., Europe, and Japan in research, development, and production. China is now leading in key innovations like green technology and electric vehicles, while also becoming more self-sufficient in critical industries like microchip production.

With this massive capitalist expansion, there has been an enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of China’s ruling class. It has the second-highest number of billionaires, after the U.S., and its Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, is on par with that of the U.S. All the wealth and massive economic expansion we’ve seen in China is based on the exploitation of working-class people, especially the migrant labor force, which has been pushed out of the countryside into the vast factories of both Chinese and multinational capital. They make everything from electric vehicles for Chinese corporations to iPhones for Apple. They work in what can only be called giant sweatshops policed by the Chinese state. Exploitation is at the heart of the vast growth of the Chinese economy.

As with any capitalist power, this expansion has been accompanied with all sorts of oppression. China holds Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong under national oppression within its self-proclaimed borders. It is a regional power, threatening Taiwan with invasion. China is also very aggressive in the South China Sea, claiming large sections as its own and coming

into conflict with smaller powers in the region, like the Philippines, and, of course, with the United States.

China's development as a capitalist power has transformed it into a rising imperialist power. Economically, it's one of the largest exporters of capital globally, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative—a massive trillion-dollar investment project aimed not at helping other countries, but at securing raw materials to fuel China's economic expansion. Additionally, China is building a rival axis to the U.S.-led alliance structures, especially with Russia, with which it has a deep economic and geopolitical alliance, but also with regional powers like Iran. It participates in organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and others.

To back up this economic and geopolitical power, China has dramatically modernized its military. It now has the second-largest military budget in the world, an increasingly powerful navy and airforce, and a growing stockpile of advanced missiles, including the third-largest stash of nuclear ones after Russia and the U.S.

Thus, China is an imperialist power competing with the U.S. on multiple fronts: economic, geopolitical, and military. It along with Russia and their allies advocates for a new multipolar world order. This order would allow China to assert its economic, geopolitical, and military interests on a global scale.

Some see this development as a positive shift from the unipolarity dominated by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War towards a more multipolar world. On the surface, that might seem convincing because unipolarity under the U.S. has been horrific, with Washington's countless wars and acts of state terror against people around the world to enforce its previously unrivaled hegemony over global capitalism. But multipolarity is no solution. Remember the last great era of multipolarity, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, led to the scramble to divide the world up into colonies, two world wars, and with all that the death of hundreds of millions of people. So, while unipolarity is bad, multipolarity is not a solution and, with the real possibility of inter-imperial war, it could, in fact, be worse.

TH: *The image presented in Western media of the people of China is that they passively accept a dictatorial regime. Your book draws out the rich history of social and class struggle in China since the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Can you speak a little bit on this and its importance?*

AS: First, it is profoundly orientalist to depict Chinese people as passively accepting exploitation and oppression. In reality, just like in any capitalist country, when there's exploitation and oppression, there's always going to be resistance. With the rise of China as a

capitalist and imperialist power, we've seen a dramatic intensification of class exploitation, national oppression, and other forms of oppression related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and more. Along with that has come a rise in various forms of resistance—class and social resistance—over the last few decades.

The first wave of this resistance came in response to China's restructuring of state-owned industries. Just like the Rust Belt workers in the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s, China's old industrial working class tried to resist closures and layoffs with massive strikes in the 1990s. Although many of these were defeated, they didn't extinguish class struggle in China.

In fact, with the rise of new industries in the special economic zones and the influx of multinational capitalist investment—along with new Chinese state and private investment—a new layer of workers engaged in militant forms of class struggle, especially from the late 1990s through the 2000s. This wave of struggle was largely driven by the huge migrant labor force of about 300 million people who left the countryside to work in the new industries. These struggles were radical, happening both outside and inside the state-controlled unions, with migrant workers fighting for better wages and working conditions.

But these struggles didn't just take place in the workplaces. There was also significant resistance over land rights, as China underwent one of the most rapid rates of urbanization in world history. The state seized and sold off people's land to real estate capitalists to build vast new cities. People rose up to resist the state's land grabs, triggering ongoing conflicts over land and land rights.

There have also been other forms of resistance, including struggles against national oppression. There's been resistance in Tibet against the national oppression of Tibetans, and similar resistance by Uyghurs against the horrific cultural genocide being carried out by the Chinese state in Xinjiang. There have been massive uprisings in Hong Kong that were brutally put down by the Chinese state. Additionally, there's been feminist resistance against the increasing oppression of women in China.

Another significant development is the return of demonstrations and strikes in the last couple of years, largely triggered by China's zero-COVID policy during the pandemic. China locked down entire cities, forcing people to stay in their apartment buildings for months, sometimes for over 100 days. The state also implemented "closed-loop management," which locked workers inside factories to keep them producing commodities amidst the pandemic. The lockdown didn't eliminate COVID, especially the omicron strain which started to spread throughout the country and in workplaces. The state's policy led to tremendous struggles.

Outside the workplace, one of the key events was a horrific fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, where an entire apartment block burned down, killing many people—mainly Uyghurs—who were locked inside. This sparked nationwide protests called the White Paper Movement. At the same time, there were massive workplace struggles against the closed-loop management system, which resulted in physical confrontations between workers and company security forces and the police. One of the largest strikes happened in an Apple manufacturing hub, where workers rebelled against being locked in the factory while the virus spread inside. Ultimately, the Chinese government abandoned Zero-COVID, letting the virus rip through society to achieve herd immunity, sickening and killing unknown numbers of people.

All these struggles show that there is massive resistance against class exploitation, social inequalities, national oppression, and the brutal policies of China's capitalist state.

TH: *China's commitment to dominating emerging green sectors like renewables and electric vehicles seems to align with the government's stated goals of achieving environmental sustainability. Why shouldn't we take these commitments at face value?*

AS: First of all, we should reject the lies and hypocrisy coming from the U.S., European states, and Japan among many others that claim they're serious about mitigating climate change and transitioning away from fossil fuels. They're all lying. Adam Hanieh's new book *[Crude Capitalism](#)* explains this in great detail. Europe, the US, and Japan are the historical culprits responsible for the climate crisis. Their claims about addressing climate change have consistently been proven false.

All of these Western powers are currently engaged in massive fossil fuel expansion. In fact, the U.S. saw its largest extraction of fossil fuel in history last year. Hanieh points out that the development of green technologies has gone hand-in-hand with the expansion of fossil fuel extraction. The two are not separate; green investment isn't stopping the growth of fossil fuels—it's happening alongside it. So, while we see major investments in things like electric vehicles, the rate of fossil fuel extraction continues to rise, as do greenhouse gas emissions, which means climate change is getting worse. We're hitting critical tipping points for environmental disaster, yet the Western powers keep insisting they're leading the charge against climate change. It's all lies.

As for China, I would argue it's no different. It's not a special case; it's not uniquely bad compared to these historical polluters. It's just part of the same system—capitalism—that is the fundamental cause of climate change. China has just become the new epicenter of global capitalism's environmental destruction. This isn't a China-specific problem, but a problem of the system.

Like other states, China is lying about its commitment to the environment. At the same time that it's investing in green technologies, it's also massively expanding its fossil fuel industry. In 2023, it was reported that over the previous seven years, China built more coal plants than any other country in the world. In fact, new coal plants are being built at a rate of about two per day. China continues to invest in coal because it needs the energy to fuel its industrial growth, and so far, investments in green technologies like solar haven't been able to replace coal and other fossil fuels as China's main energy source. In fact, China is also the world's largest importer of oil and natural gas and the biggest emitter of greenhouse gasses. So, it's just as dirty a fossil capitalist as the other great powers.

So, why is China investing so heavily in green tech? The reason is simple: it's a growth sector. That's why all the great powers and capitalists are investing in it—not to replace fossil fuels, but to profit from this new sector. China has invested enormous amounts of capital into producing electric vehicles, solar panels, and batteries. It also controls a large share of the rare earth minerals that are critical to solar and battery manufacturing.

But like capitalists everywhere, China has overinvested in green industries, creating a huge glut of factories and commodities. Because of its cheap labor, China can undercut the prices of other countries' electric vehicle and solar panel manufacturers and dump their products into their markets. That has led to a classic protectionist response from the U.S., the EU, Japan, and others as they try to shield their own investments in these industries.

The bottom line is that none of these powers are genuinely "green." They're all dirty. They're all expanding their fossil fuel industries while simultaneously investing in green tech for profit, not to mitigate climate change.

TH: *In the book, you define the rivalry between the U.S. and China as essential to understanding the dynamics of the modern world system. Can you expand on the core tensions between these two states and the potential outcomes of their conflict?*

AS: First, it's important to understand the fundamentals. Capitalism produces imperialism. Inter-state and inter-imperialist rivalry is built into the DNA of capitalism. Imperialism isn't just a policy decision made by this or that government to project economic or geopolitical power. It's actually a structural result of capitalist competition. National capitals turn to their respective states to protect and project their interests globally. This competition leads states into competition, including armed conflict, over geopolitical hegemony and the division and redivision of the global market.

This imperial struggle for dominance has created unstable imperial orders that change over time. We've thus seen a sequence of imperial orders: from the multipolar rivalry of the late

19th century, which caused World Wars I and II to the Cold War's bipolar order, the unipolar moment after the fall of the Soviet bloc, and today's asymmetric multipolar world order where the central rivalry is between the U.S. and China. As I've laid out, China is attempting to assert itself as an imperial power and rival to the US for the division of the world market.

The U.S. has responded to the rise of China in ways we've seen historically from other hegemonic powers faced with new rivals. It has tried to shore up its dominance and contain and confront its challengers. Before China's rise, the U.S. had sought to avoid the emergence of a peer competitor with a strategy of superintending global capitalism. But it failed. As a result, the U.S. has adopted a new strategy of great power competition, using classic tactics seen throughout the history of imperialism: economic protectionism, rallying allies to contain its rising rivals, and bolstering its military power. Under the Trump and Biden administrations, the U.S. has mainly focussed mainly on confronting and containing China. This has involved shoring up old alliances like NATO and forming new alliances like the Quad (with Japan, India, and Australia) and the AUKUS pact (with Australia and the UK). Thus, what we're seeing is classic inter-imperial rivalry playing out across economic, geopolitical, and military dimensions.

But this doesn't mean we're inevitably headed toward another world war. There are several mitigating factors today that prevent the rivalry from escalating into a full-scale global conflict. For one, the U.S. and China are deeply economically integrated. It's hard to imagine a product like the iPhone existing without Chinese plants, for example. This integration decreases the likelihood of outright military conflict, as both economies would suffer tremendous costs. However, this interdependence is gradually being unraveled as the U.S. and its corporations seek alternative bases for manufacturing in other parts of the world.

Another mitigating factor is the fact that both powers possess nuclear weapons, which they are both expanding and modernizing to ensure greater effectiveness and lethality. So, any conflict between them risks mutually assured destruction (MAD), something that deterred the two great powers during the Cold War from engaging in direct military conflict. Of course, that didn't rule out their going to war as they nearly did during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

These factors do not entirely eliminate the risk of conflict. We didn't expect to see a large-scale war in Europe, yet Russia launched one with its imperialist invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, a potential flashpoint like Taiwan could trigger a conflict between the U.S. and China, given the high stakes economically and geopolitically. The risk is very real.

TH: *What does this rivalry and the new dynamics of global capitalism mean for U.S. allies, like the EU and the Spanish state?*

AS: I touched on this a bit in my previous answer regarding the nature of the rivalry. The key thing to understand is that with the U.S. shift towards great power competition, it's attempting to bring together all of its historic allies as vassals in its conflict with China. The U.S. is applying heavy pressure on Europe—both through economic institutions like the European Union and military institutions like NATO—to side with it against China.

One of the ways the U.S. is doing this is by turning to protectionism, especially in high-tech sectors. They describe it as a “high fence around a small yard,” but that yard keeps expanding, and more and more industries are being protected from Chinese competition—particularly those with military applications. Microchips are a prime example, as they're critical components in everything from cars to military aircraft like the F-35 fighter jet. Whoever controls the capacity to make microchips, controls large parts of military and surveillance technologies, including artificial intelligence.

So the U.S. is building a protectionist barrier around these strategic industries, and it's pushing the EU to do the same—blocking the export of technology like microchips and the lasers used to manufacture them to China. They're also trying to prevent the sale of Chinese electric vehicles under the guise of national security, claiming that China could use them to track people's behavior. Additionally, the U.S. is exerting pressure on EU states to stay out of China's Belt and Road Initiative. In short, the U.S. wants its allies to adopt the same economic protectionism that it has in place against China. This puts European capital, especially German capital, in a profound economic dilemma. It depends on exports to China, but now faces competition with it, especially in electric vehicles. But if it adopts protectionism, it risks China retaliating and closing off its vital export market.

On the military front, the U.S. is pressuring Europe to line up with its military containment of China's rise. For example, it has pressured NATO—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—to identify China as a strategic concern and start focusing on the Indo-Pacific region. Essentially, the U.S. is weaponizing NATO against China, and the U.S. will continue to pressure all its allies—including the Spanish state—to align with its strategy economically, militarily, and geopolitically.

That pressure is going to be relentless, and it will play out in various, sometimes unpredictable, ways. But Spain will be no exception to this trend.

TH: *At the moment, the events of the greatest geopolitical consequence are happening in Gaza, and there's now an increasingly likely possibility of a wider regional war. Could you speak on the consequences of the rivalry between the U.S. and China in this context?*

AS: Gaza has become the epicenter of regional and imperial conflict, but it's not the only flashpoint. Taiwan is another, as is Ukraine, and there are other hotspots like the Philippines. These are all countries where questions of national self-determination and inter-imperial conflict intersect. The key for the Left is to support all struggles for national self-determination without exception while opposing any imperial power's attempts to weaponize these struggles for their own purposes, which all powers will inevitably try to do.

That's the broader framework for understanding what's happening in Gaza. The U.S. is the main sponsor—militarily, economically, and politically—of the Israeli state, which serves as its enforcer in the Middle East. The U.S. uses Israel, along with reactionary Arab states, to ensure that no Arab country or Iran challenges U.S. control over the region's oil, which underpins the entire world economy. This means the U.S. is deeply implicated in the genocide in Gaza. It's not just a sponsor; it's a co-partner in the settler colonialism, apartheid, occupation, and now the genocide that Israel is carrying out. The U.S. has supported, funded, and armed Israel in its aggression in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Yemen.

While the U.S. is the central imperial player in the region, it's not the only one. Russia, for example, has consistently supported counterrevolution and reaction in the region. It played a key role in helping Assad crush the Syrian revolution and has maintained a close relationship with Netanyahu, with Putin and Netanyahu publicly celebrating their ties. China's role isn't clean either. China is mainly concerned with ensuring the flow of oil from the Middle East to fuel its economic expansion, so it has cultivated both economic and geopolitical relations with any state that can provide that fuel. China has an alliance with Iran, but it has also pushed for normalized relations between Israel and other states in the region—not out of principle, but simply because it wants stability and the oil flowing. China even brokered a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and it's the second-largest investor in Israel. So, if you support the BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions), you'd need to raise it as a demand against China and its corporations.

In response to the current crisis, China has largely taken a symbolic stance. While it's criticized U.S. support for the genocide to score political points, it has done nothing to aid the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Any role China has played, such as hosting talks between rival Palestinian factions, has been largely symbolic. China even supports the two-state solution, which has historically been the fake solution U.S. imperialism has proposed for Palestine.

Washington's biggest concern is that its relative loss of power in the region over the last two decades is creating openings for China and Russia to play more aggressive roles in the

Middle East. Israel's expansion of its genocidal war into the region is going to intensify this dynamic, potentially disrupting the normalization deals between Israel and other Arab states and pushing states into rival blocs. You can already see an emerging axis of Russia, Iran, and China aligning against Israel and the U.S. The question now is what the Arab regimes aligned with the U.S. will do, as it's increasingly untenable for them to openly support the U.S. amid Israel's genocide.

So, there's a potential for interstate antagonisms to split into a bloc of the U.S. and its allies on one side, and China, Iran, and Russia on the other. But at the same time, all these powers are deeply invested in maintaining the flow of oil, so they may be hesitant to risk destabilizing the region with sharp inter-state schisms. But Israel's aggression has opened a very unpredictable and volatile moment, and the dynamics at play are dangerous. We're already witnessing genocide, and the expansion of that genocide into Lebanon could lead to an all-out regional war between Israel and Iran with international repercussions.

TH: *On that note, I think this next question becomes even more important. What do you think the tasks are for the international Left, and how can we find a way out of this current state of affairs?*

AS: In some ways, we're back to the classic questions that the revolutionary Left faced at the start of the 20th century. We're now in a situation with enormous inter-imperial antagonisms and widespread revolts from below across the globe. The Left faces a strategic question: How do we oppose all the different states—not just imperial ones, but all capitalist states—from below, and build solidarity between labor movements and movements of the oppressed in every country against all imperial powers, capitalist states, and their wars?

In the U.S., the most important thing for the Left is to guard against aligning with the U.S. state and its imperial project. There's a tendency to do that, often by those with reformist politics and an allegiance to the Democratic Party, which is currently co-partner in the genocide. Our primary obligation in the U.S. is to oppose U.S. imperialism—full stop.

At the same time, we need to guard against a second temptation, which is to fall into the trap of thinking “my enemy's enemy is my friend.” That position leads some on the Left to view Washington's opponents as either lesser evils or even alternatives. But as I've discussed earlier, these so-called alternatives like China and Russia are also imperialist, capitalist states built on exploitation, oppression, and reactionary politics. Supporting another imperialist power like China betrays the class struggle and social struggles within China by siding with its state against the country's workers and oppressed peoples. It also alienates people in the U.S. who rightly view China as a dictatorial, capitalist regime that keeps workers locked in

factories amidst a pandemic. That's no kind of alternative and claiming it is one will only isolate the Left from U.S. class and social struggles, weakening them in the process.

The real alternative is to oppose all imperial powers—first and foremost the U.S., but also China—while building solidarity across borders. Today, the global system is deeply interconnected, and this presents real opportunities for such solidarity. Take the iPhone, for instance. It connects workers in Chinese factories, international shipping companies, distributors like Amazon, and retail outlets in the U.S and elsewhere. This interconnected world economy allows for the possibility of forging bonds of solidarity between workers across the globe.

Additionally, we have international educational systems with Chinese students participating in campus struggles all over the world, including in the U.S., where they're often involved in graduate student unionization and strikes. Thus, there are real opportunities within the U.S. to build solidarity with Chinese students, both in common struggles in the U.S. and with those in China. This means we must oppose any kind of U.S. nationalism and anti-Chinese racism, as such bigotry would divide graduate students and undermine union solidarity.

The objective basis for international solidarity from below is greater than ever before, and the necessity of it is obvious for anyone seriously thinking about these issues. The problem is subjective and political. We need to build a Left that is militantly committed to internationalism from below—not just as a principle, but as an organizing strategy. How we do this is complex, and every part of the international Left needs to think through how to do it. But either we find a way to build such solidarity, or we will suffer our ruler's barbarism—their domestic class wars at home and their imperialist wars abroad. So, the Left must organize a new generation of socialist militants who understand the centrality of the old socialist slogan, "Workers of the world unite; we have nothing to lose but our chains." That is not some quaint historical mantra, but our epoch's central political project. Either we succeed in this or we face the barbarism in Gaza and the ever-growing list of climate catastrophes.

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Thomas Hummel is a member of the Tempest Collective in Spain.

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