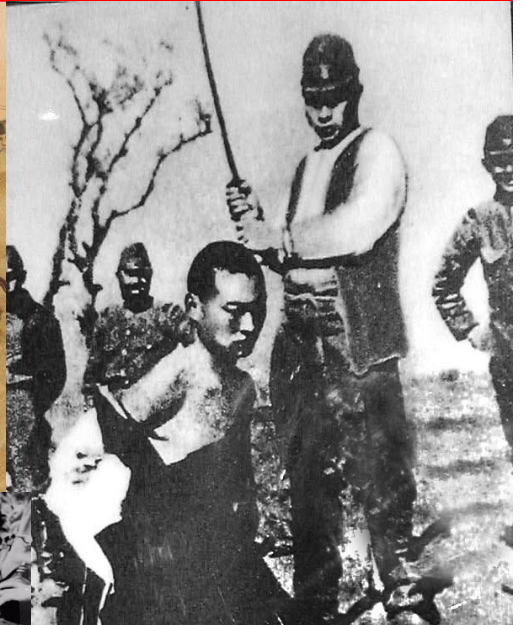




Imperialism in the Far East from the 19th Century to the present day

International Review



Imperialism in the Far East, past and present

Capitalism in the ascendant: prior to World War I

Japan: a newly emerging capitalist force

Between the middle of the 17th and the middle of the 19th century, Japan cut itself off from the rest of the world. No foreigner was allowed into the country, no Japanese was allowed to leave the country without permission, trade with other countries was limited to very few ports. Even if there was a very limited and weak dynamic of trade developing within the country, the real historical breakthrough occurred when the country after almost two centuries of self-imposed seclusion was forcefully opened up by capitalism. As Marx and Engels analysed in the Communist Manifesto in 1848: “In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.... It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production..”(first chapter of the Communist Manifesto, Bourgeois and Proletarians).

In 1853, shortly after the first opium war had ravaged China, US navy vessels first appeared in Japanese waters and enforced mainly free trade. Following continuous Japanese resistance against the penetration of foreign traders, in June 1863 US, Dutch, French and British ships bombarded the Japanese coast. After this united military aggression, which showed that at that time the foreign capitalist nations could still work together in the opening up of Japan, the Japanese ruling class renounced from any resistance against the foreign capitalists and quickly started to introduce profound political and economic changes.

In Japan the worm eaten feudal-absolutist order of the Tokugawa-Shogunate (the ruling feudal family) was replaced by a strongly united state under the government of the emperor Mikado in 1868. “Capitalism did not come because a rising bourgeoisie vanquished the feudal class in a revolutionary struggle, but because a feudal class transformed itself into a bourgeoisie.”. Although there have been “forces for change from feudal absolutism in the direction of capitalism, they were too weak for a revolution”. (Anton Pannekoek, Workers Councils, Japanese imperialism). They had to rely on the opening up of capitalism from “outside”. The midwives helping to give birth to capitalism in Japan were the foreign capitalists, who gave a big boost to the rising Japanese bourgeoisie.

The transition from feudal to bourgeois society was not accompanied by a political revolution.

Unlike most European countries, where private capital acted as the driving force in the economy and where liberalism propagated a laissez-faire policy, in Japan it was the Japanese State which was going to play a dominant role in the advancement of capitalism. In 1868 the emperor nominated the first planning commission. The Japanese ruling class started to study systematically the conditions of capitalist functioning in other countries with the aim of copying and applying them as efficiently as possible.¹

¹ There was almost no private industry during the early phase of Japanese capitalism. The first Ministry of Industry was founded in 1870. At the beginning of the 1870s paper money was introduced. In 1872 the first railway way line was opened between Tokyo and Yokohama (i.e. 40 years after the first railways were operated in GB).

Only a few ships were sufficient for the foreign capitalist nations to enforce their penetration in Japan. Unlike other countries of the far East, Japan was not occupied, no foreign armies settled on the islands.

At the same time, since Japan was a group of islands with almost no raw materials, it had to rely on the supply of raw materials from other countries. The country closest to Japan is Korea – behind which lie the Manchuria region of China and Russia. In the south there is another island Taiwan. While most of the European states quickly had to direct their zeal of conquest towards far distant areas (often in other continents as in Africa, Asia, South America) Japan found its zone of expansion in the immediate proximity. Only 10 years after being opened up by foreign capitalists, Japan fell onto Taiwan. In 1874 Japan occupied the southern tip of Formosa. But this first major attempt to expand alarmed Britain and China, which sent 11,000 troops to the southern part of Taiwan. At that time Japan did not yet have enough military power to engage in a larger combat and consequently withdrew from Taiwan.

Soon after that Japan started to turn its ambitions towards Korea. In 1885 Japan and China signed a treaty, according to which neither of the countries would send troops to Korea without the permission of the other country. Following this temporary 'stalemate', Japan decided to build a fleet which could control the Chinese Sea.

As we shall see, Japan embarked upon a first war with China in 1894 and 10 years later with Russia in 1904. Thus barely 3-4 decades after capitalism had started to establish in Japan, the country went to war with two of its rivals in the area.

Unhampered by any colonial power, Japan quickly became one itself, and even if it arrived late on the world market it quickly became the dominant force in the region, which had to expand forcefully and become the main challenger in the area.

As a consequence its military expenditure was constantly on the rise. At the end of the 19th century, Japan began to finance its army by credits which were fuelled by British and American funds. 50% of its foreign loans went into war and armaments. Government spending tripled between 1893-1903, and it doubled again during the course of the Russian-Japanese 1905 war. Its modern fleet was composed of battleships made in Great Britain, its canons were German Krupp-made guns. When Japan defeated China in the 1894 war, it allowed Japan to impose a tremendous financial burden on its neighbour, forcing it to pay 360 million yen, large parts of which only served to finance a war program of armament expansion. The national debt rose from 235 million yen in 1893 to 539 million in 1903, it then soared to 2,592 million yen in 1913 as a result of large war bond issues.²

The country roads, which were barricaded by the provincial potentates, had to open for general traffic. Road taxes were abolished. In 1869 the four classes, Samurai, peasants, traders and craftsmen were all declared equal, the difference of clothes amongst the classes were abolished, peasants were entitled to grow the crop they chose. For more information see: Anton Pannekoek: *The Workers' Councils*.

² “Mainly as a result of the Sino-Japanese war, and of growing armament and colonial enterprise which followed in its wake, the expenditures of the national government tripled from 1893-1903. Again, they more than doubled in the course of the Russo-Japanese war (...) To finance this burden taxes were progressively boosted... The indemnity of 360 million yen secured from China in 1895 was also largely used to finance an interwar program of armament expansion. These resources proved inadequate, however, and resort

Thus Japan had become the biggest imperialist shark in the region already in the ascendant phase of capitalism. The country could not have gained this dominant position without the early central role of the State and its militarist orientation.

China: a decomposing society prised open by opium and war

When being opened up by capitalism, both Japan and China were ruled by declining dynasties. As in Japan, the local mode of production in China was also unable to compete with capitalism. Neither on a commercial, nor above all on a military level was the ruling Manchu dynasty able to resist foreign capitalist penetration. As in Japan, the triumphant march of capitalism did not come through the imposition of a trading capitalist class from within the country, but capitalism was mainly imposed from outside.

Within the framework of this article we have no space to go at greater length into the reasons for this profound stagnation of Chinese society. In the 1850s, Marx and Engels started to analyse the deeper roots of this phenomena. *“China, one of those faltering Asian empires, which one after the other fell prey to the entrepreneurial spirit of the European race, was so weak, so much collapsed, that it did not even have the strength to go through the crisis of a people’s revolution, so that an acute indignation has turned into a chronic and probably incurable disease, an empire, so much decomposed, that it was almost unable to rule its own people or to offer resistance to the foreign aggressors”*.³

In his works, Marx, in order to understand the reasons why major non-European civilisations did not evolve towards capitalism, put forward the concept of an Asiatic mode of production.⁴

was had to extensive borrowing. The national debt rose from 235 million yen in 1893 to 539 million in 1903. It then soared to 2592 million yen in 1913... Nearly 50% of the government’s entire budget in 1913 was devoted to the Army and Navy, military pension and war debt service... In fact, the “extraordinary” military expenditures charged to the war with Russia were largely balanced by borrowings in London and Paris. Before the war (i.e. in 1903) the outstanding total of Japan’s national loans issued abroad amounted to only 98 million yen. By the end of 1913 it had climbed to 1525 million (...) foreign loans had an inflationary effect within the country.”

(William Lockwood, *The Economic Development of Japan*, p. 35, Princeton, 1954), see also: W.W. Lockwood, *The State and Economic Enterprise in Japan*, Princeton, 1969)

³ "The success of Russian policy in the far East", 1858, *Marx-Engels-Werke* 12, p. 622 (our translation from the German).

⁴ The analysis of pre-capitalist societies was taken up in several texts by Marx and Engels. As their investigations evolved, their concept also gradually changed. For a more detailed analysis see - Perry 2

Two opium wars played a vital role in the opening of China for capitalism.

After opium was massively imported by the British East Indian company in the early 19th century, the Chinese ruling class for fear of losing competitiveness in relation to its rivals, tried to curb the consumption of opium in the late 1830s. No less than twenty million people were addicted to the vice at the time. Many state officials were addicted to opium. The high level of consumption in itself was already an expression of a decomposing society.

The most advanced European capitalist country, Britain, (later with French participation) used the resistance of the Chinese ruling class against the massive ‘invasion’ of opium as a pretext for sending its troops. Britain, the ‘most civilised’ nation of the west became the biggest opium dealer and used the prohibition of drugs through the Chinese authorities as a means for unleashing two wars.

In two opium wars (1839-42, 1856-60) Britain, (with France at its side in the second war) imposed a crushing military defeat accompanied by a series of massacres against the Chinese troops.

As a result of the overwhelming British military victory in the first opium war, Britain was granted concessions over Hong Kong and five trade zones along the coast. But the second opium war brought already a

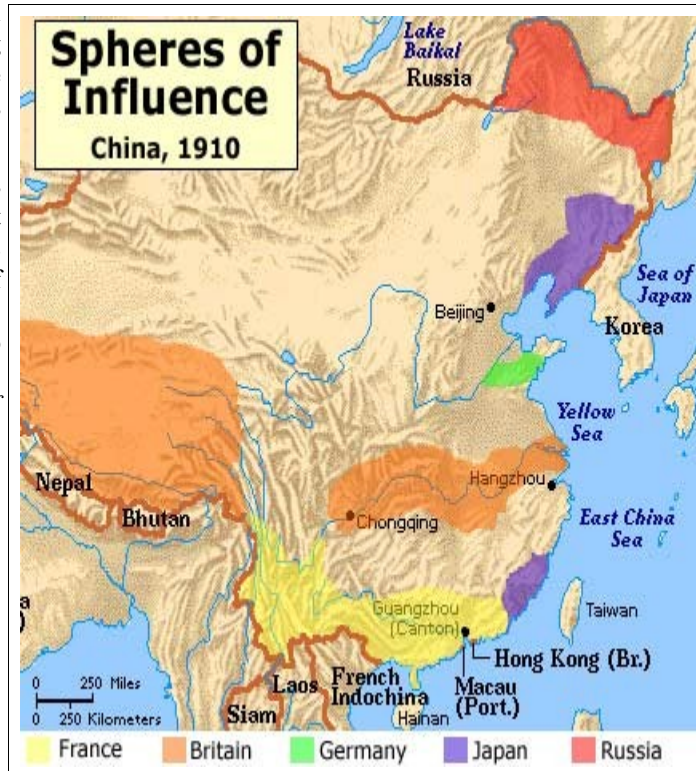
qualitative change. By then above all the European countries aimed at finding new markets for goods manufactured in Europe. Thus as a result of the second war the Europeans opened up China not only for opium, but above all for European trade products.

“Complete isolation was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China. That isolation having come to a violent end by the medium of England, dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air.” (Marx *“Revolution in China and Europe”* 14.6.1853, *New York Daily Tribune*) And Marx pointed out: *“We hear nothing of the illicit opium trade, which yearly feeds the British treasury at the expense of human life and morality.”*⁵

And as elsewhere the imposition of capitalism was accompanied by violence. *“Of the more than 40 Chinese treaty ports each one of them has been bought with rivers of blood,*

Anderson in his *“Lineages of the Absolutist State”*, London 1974. See see *International Review* n°135 for a discussion of this question.

⁵ "English cruelties in China", written 22.03.1857, published 10.04.1857



massacres and ruin" (Rosa Luxemburg, *Accumulation of Capital*, p. 342). The foreign capitalists (under the slogan of free trade and accompanied by opium and war) tore down the restrictions of Manchu ruled China to enable capitalist development. Unlike Japan, which was also opened up violently through foreign capitalist countries, but which was never occupied or pulled into a series of wars, China was to be split up into spheres of influence.

During the period of the 1860/70s, all the outlying parts of the Chinese empire were grabbed by foreign powers. And towards the end of the 19th century China had lost entire Indo-China to France, Burma to GB, Korea to Japan, all territories north of the Amur river to Russia, Turkistan and Mongolia had been practically annexed by Russia, Tibet by Britain, Manchuria was disputed by Russia and Japan, even China proper was as good as annexed.

At the end of the 19th century Britain laid a heavy hand on the entire Yangtze Valley, the centre of economic life of China, France appropriated Hunan, Germany seized Shantung and Tsingtao. The USA did not require any concession; they acted as a supporter of an "open door policy" towards China.

Inside China had grown a sort of small "imperium in imperio" in the shape of foreign settlements. Small areas of Chinese territory had assumed the character of so many outposts of imperialism.

Whereas India was under British rule alone (once the British had defeated the French in 1757) China quickly became some sort of colony of international imperialism, with different countries trying to grab pieces. But due to the presence of so many aspirants, the possibility of annexation of China by any one single power being out of the question, colonisation of China took the form of creating „spheres of influence“. The resistance to the out and out annexation of China could no longer come from China itself, formal annexation was prevented by the rivalry amongst the imperialist powers.

Still, until the early 1890s the division of Chinese territory into zones of influence could proceed without major clashes amongst the European rivals.

However, once the level of imperialist rivalries especially amongst the European countries reached new proportions and they shifted their focus from Africa to Europe and Asia, the level of rivalries in the far East took on a new qualitative form.

The consequences of the penetration of foreign capitalist countries meant that while the foreign capitalist nations had imposed capitalism, at the same time a powerful development of Chinese capital was obstructed because the foreign national capitals were mainly interested in plundering and selling their goods at the expense of Chinese competitors. They hampered the development of an autonomous Chinese industry, barring the road to a real industrialisation. Thus while no Chinese faction of the ruling class was able to spark off a capitalist development, at the end of the 19th century foreign companies controlled almost the entire Chinese economy.

The Taiping rising – the bourgeoisie unable to make its own revolution

With a background of the demoralising results of the opium war, a collapsing social order, peasant revolts against famine and an unbearable tax burden, an irreversible collapse of the

State machinery, and the penetration of foreign capitalist companies, both the peasantry as well as important factions of the property owning classes, who had no allegiance to the ruling Manchu dynasty, embarked upon a revolt in 1850 – which became known as the Taiping revolt.

Driven by a strong hatred against the exploitation by the Manchu dynasty, peasants threw themselves into revolts. Their movement merged with the aspirations of a young trading class, eager to promote trade and industry, which also wanted to get rid of the fetters of the Manchu dynasty.

Often instigated by secret societies, the revolts started off in the south of the country, spreading further north. The movement quickly received support from hundreds of thousands of peasants and opponents of the Manchu dynasty. Even a separate state was founded in 1851 - Taiping Tienkuo ("Heavenly empire of peace"), and a "heavenly Emperor" was proclaimed (Hung). The movement set up a monarchy with a strong theocratic tinge, directed against the power and privileges of the landed aristocracy. Expressing the aspirations of the peasantry to fight against its exploitation, private property was declared to be abolished, only collective financial management and grain storages were allowed, common ownership of land was proclaimed, farm land was collectivised and no longer considered as private property, taxes were lowered, equality of men and women was proclaimed, foot binding forbidden, free choice of husband/wife, the consumption of opium, tobacco and alcohol forbidden. Artisans produced articles which were distributed under the supervision of the State.

In 1852/53 the Taiping regime advanced its troops swiftly through Hunan and conquered Nanking, proclaiming the city as the capital of their state, which they maintained from 1853-1864. The Taiping rebels set up an army of more than 50,000 soldiers who controlled large areas of south and south eastern China. However, in 1864 the Taiping edifice collapsed. In a series of bloody wars, more than 20 million people got killed. British and French troops played a decisive role in the crushing of the movement by the Manchu dynasty. The Indian communist M.N.Roy rightly mentions some of the reasons for the defeat, when he wrote, "*The weakness of the capitalist mode of production, the immaturity amounting to practical absence of the proletariat, which also resulted from the inadequate development of the capitalist mode of production, and lastly foreign intervention – all these contributed to the defeat of the first great movement which objectively tended towards the creation of a modern China*".⁶ Roy however saw too much revolutionary potential in this movement. In an earlier article⁷ we dealt with the limits of the Taiping movement. For reasons of space we cannot dwell on these in more detail.

Marx made the following assessment of the movement and its limits: "*What is original about this Chinese revolution is its subject. They are not aware of any task, apart from the change of dynasty. They have no slogans. They are a still greater abomination for the popular masses than for the old rulers. Their destiny appears to be no more than to oppose conservative stagnation with a reign of destruction grotesque and loathsome in form, a destruction without any new or*

⁶ Roy, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in China*, New Delhi, 1946, p. 113

⁷ *International Review* no 81 & 84

constructive kernel whatever (...) The Taiping rising is the offspring of a fossible social life".⁸

Unable to throw off the weight of the decaying social order, unable to turn the penetration of capitalism which was being imposed by foreign countries into a powerful stimulation for a broader capitalist development, the ruling class in China could not make a bourgeois revolution, which would have paved the way for the unhampered development of capitalism. Thus China was made into a cripple in the 19th century – leaving the country with fetters that it was to carry over into the 20th century.

The 1900 Boxer rising: an excuse for foreign intervention

The crushing of the Taiping revolt led to a drastic worsening of the situation of the peasants. In the context of an increased burden of taxation, the destruction of the livelihood for millions of peasants and artisans, who went down under the weight of the import of foreign goods, forcing them to come to the cities where there was only a very weak industrial development – these economic fetters contributed to the outbreak of what was later to become known as the Boxer uprising.

In May 1900 looting masses of dispossessed and frustrated peasants, led by a secret organisation of the Boxers blocked railway lines, ransacked factories and Western diplomatic missions. In an atmosphere of pogroms against foreigners, and in the absence of social and political demands, the Manchu dynasty took sides with the rioters, because their movement was not directed against any capitalist rule, but only against Christians and foreigners, offering no perspective whatsoever to the exploited classes.

At the moment when all the foreign missions were threatened by looters, the foreign imperialists united their forces to quell the movement. At the same time, this common intervention posed the question of a pecking order amongst the imperialists, because it was clear whoever took the lead in repressing the rising could become the dominant force in Beijing. The scramble for the leadership in the repression of the movement revealed a new qualitative level of inter-imperialist rivalries.

As Rosa Luxemburg in *Reform or Revolution* had already stated in 1899: *"If presently China is becoming the stage for threatening conflicts, the struggle is not only about the conquest of China for European capitalism but fully fledged antagonisms between European countries have been "transferred" to China and they now erupt on Chinese soil..."*⁹

Britain wanted Japan to take the lead because it hoped that Japan would act as a counter-weight to Russia. Russia strongly opposed Japanese intervention. In the end, Russia accepted the German proposal for a German led intervention, as neither Great Britain nor Japan would have agreed to Russian leadership.

But before the German troops reached Beijing, Russian troops had already started (and almost completed) the massacre. Thus Russia used the Boxer rising as a lever for increasing its influence in China. In October 1900 Russia occupied the whole of Manchuria, in order to counter the extended influence of

Western European powers in China. But Russia was unable to block the penetration of European powers and Japan. In view of the danger of China being torn into pieces by the European powers, in particular vis a vis Russian attempts to grab large parts of the northern part of China, Germany and Britain in August 1900 negotiated with the goal of maintaining the territorial integrity of China and maintaining the principle of an "open door". Britain was hoping to use the Germans against Russia in Manchuria, Germany in turn aimed at pushing Britain and Japan into hostilities against Russia. Following increased Russian presence, Japan and Britain signed an alliance in January 1902, with the aim of containing a Russian threat. While all European states agreed to a US proposal of an 'open door' towards China, Russia, which had most to lose from this proposal, voted against this. Soon afterwards the USA joined the British-Japanese alliance against Russia. Hence one of the permanent characteristics since the early 20th century has been the USA opposing a strengthened position for Russia and Japan. They have always posed as a 'defender' of the weaker country (in this case China) to prevent Russia and Japan from becoming too powerful.

As for China, following the crushed Boxer rising, the foreign capitalists forced the Chinese State to pay 450 million Tael "compensation payment" to the foreign countries, after having been forced to pay already a sum of 200 million Tael to Japan following the Chinese defeat in the war against Japan in 1894.

In 1911 the Chinese emperor was deposed and the first Chinese republic proclaimed. Formally the bourgeoisie had taken over the government to run the country. But while a bourgeois republic was now proclaimed, this did not mean that the country had gone through a bourgeois revolution, leading to the formation of a nation, able to compete on the world market. In reality, no ignition for a powerful industrial development occurred. Far from being a "united" nation, centrifugal tendencies gained the upper hand, as we shall see in the second part of this article.

Although formally in power the bourgeoisie was no longer a revolutionary class. Unable to push the country towards a big industrialisation, the ruling class could only push the whole nation into war and destruction.

Conflict over Korea

At the same time when European and US capitalism started to penetrate into Japan and China, these capitalist countries also tried to open up Korea.

There were many parallels in the development of Korea with China and Japan. In Korea, much as Japan, all contact with Westerners was fraught with peril. Only relations with China were permitted in the mid 19th century. Until the mid 1850s the only foreigners present in Korea were missionaries. As the capitalist nations started to show their presence in the region, any Korean activity against foreign citizens was taken as a welcome pretext to impose their presence by force. Thus when in 1866 French missionaries were killed in Korea, France sent a few military ships to Korea, but the French troops were beaten. In 1871 the USA sent several ships up the Taedong River to Pyongyang, but the US ships were also defeated.

However, during that phase there was yet no determination amongst the European countries or the USA to occupy Korea.

⁸ Marx: 7.7.1862 in *Die Presse*, "On China"

⁹ (Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or revolution*, chapter on customs politics and militarism, *Gesammelte Werke*, first volume, p. 397).

The USA was still under the impact of the civil war (1861-1865), and the westward expansion of capitalism was still in full swing in North America; England was engaged in putting down revolts in India and focussing its forces (with France) on penetrating into China. Russia was still colonising Siberia. So while the European countries were focussing their forces on China and other areas of the world, Japan seized its chance and quickly started to push for the opening of Korea for its commodities.

Through a show of force Japan managed to secure a treaty opening three Korean ports for Japanese traders. Moreover Japan, in order to thwart off Chinese influence, "recognised" Korea as an independent country. The declining Chinese empire could do nothing but encourage Korea to look for protection from a third state in order to resist pressure from Japan. The USA was amongst the first countries to recognise Korea as an independent state in 1882. In 1887 Korean forces for the first time turned to the USA asking for "support against foreign forces", i.e. against Japan, Russia and Britain.

As Japan increased its exports, Korea became more and more dependent on trade with Japan. 90% of Korea's exports went to Japan in the mid 1890s, more than 50% of its imports came from Japan.

The flood of foreign commodities which poured into the mainly peasant dominated country contributed sharply to the ruin of many peasants. The pauperisation in the countryside was one of the factors which provoked a strong anti-foreigner resentment.

Similar to the Taiping movement in China during the 1850-60s, a popular revolt – the Tonghak ("Eastern Learning") unfolded in Korea in the 1890s (though it had seen precursors already in the 1860s), marked by a strong weight of peasant revolt directed against the penetration of foreign goods. There was as yet no working class presence in the movement, due to the very limited number of factories in the country.

Anti-feudal forces and peasants dominated the movement, which put forward a mixture of nationalist, religious and social demands.

Tens of thousands of peasants fought with primitive weapons against local rulers. The tottering ruling feudal class, feeling threatened by the Tonghak-movement and unable to suppress the movement alone, appealed to Chinese and Japanese forces to help them in repressing the movement.

The mobilisation for repressing the Tonghak movement by Chinese and Japanese forces was staged as a springboard for fighting over the control of the Korean peninsula. China and Japan clashed for the first time in modern history – not over the control of their respective territories, but over the control of Korea.

In July 1894 Japan started war with China, which lasted half a year. Most of the fighting took place in Korea, although Japan's main strategic objective was not just control over Korea but also over the strategically important Chinese Liaotung Peninsula at the Chinese Sea.

The Japanese troops drove the Chinese army out of Korea, occupied Port Arthur (a Chinese port city on the Liaotung peninsula in the Chinese Sea), then the Liaotung peninsula, Manchuria – and started heading for Beijing. In the face of the strong Japanese superiority, the Chinese government asked the

USA to broker a truce. As a result of the war, China had to concede Japan the Liaotung peninsula, Port Arthur, Dairen, Taiwan and the Pescadore Islands, accept a compensation payment of 200 million Tael (360 million yen) and open Chinese ports to Japan. The Chinese "compensation" payment was going to fuel the Japanese arms budget, because the war had been very expensive for Japan, costing about 200 million Yen, or three times the annual government budget. At the same time this "compensation" payment was draining the resources of China even more.

But already then, following the first sweeping Japanese victory, the European imperialist sharks opposed a too crushing Japanese victory. They did not want to concede Japan too many strategic advantages. In a "triple-intervention" Russia, France and Germany opposed the Japanese occupation of Port Arthur and Liaotung. In 1895 Japan renounced from Liaotung. Still without any ally at the time, Japan had to withdraw (the British-Japanese treaty was only signed in 1901). Initially Germany, France and Britain wanted to grant loans to China, but Russia did not want China to become too dependent on European rivals and offered its own loans. Until 1894 Britain had been the dominant foreign force in the region, in particular in China. Britain did not want any Japanese expansion into China and Korea, but until then Britain considered Russia the biggest danger in the region.

While the Japanese war triumph over China meant that Japan now was considered by the other imperialist rivals as an important rival in the far East, it was striking that the main battlefield of the first war between China and Japan was Korea.

The reasons are obvious: surrounded by Russia, China and Japan, Korea's geographic position makes it a springboard for an expansion from one country towards another. Korea is inextricably lodged in a nutcracker between the Japanese island empire and the two land empires of Russia and China. Control over Korea allows control over three seas – the Japanese sea, the Yellow sea and East China Sea. If under the control of one country, Korea could serve as a knife in the back of other countries. Since the 1890s, Korea has been the target of the imperialist ambitions of the major sharks in the area initially only three: Russia, Japan and China - with the respective support and resistance of European and US sharks acting in the background. Even if, in particular, the northern part of Korea has some important raw materials, it is above all its strategic position which makes the country such a vital cornerstone for imperialism in the region.

As long ago as the 19th century, for Japan as the leading imperialist power in the far East, Korea became the vital bridge towards China.

The China-Japanese war over Korea was going to deal a big blow to the Chinese ruling class, at the same time it was an important spark to Russian imperialist appetites.

However, it is impossible to limit the conflict to the two rivals alone, because in reality, this war illustrated the qualitative general sharpening of imperialist tensions.

Japan's main gains on Chinese territory – for example the Liaotung Peninsula – were immediately countered by a group of European powers. By 1899 Britain had strengthened its position in China (Hong Kong, Weihaiwei, the island guarding the sea lanes to Beijing), it held a monopoly in the Yangtze

valley, Russia had seized Port Arthur (see below) and Tailenwan (Dairen, Dalny), was encroaching upon Manchuria and Mongolia, Germany had seized the Koaohow Bay and Shantung, France was given special privileges in the Hunan Province. *“The Chinese war is the first even in the world political era in which all the cultural states are involved and this advance of the international reaction, of the Holy Alliance, should have been responded to by a protest by the united workers parties of Europe”*.¹⁰

The 1894 China-Japanese war in fact brought all the main imperialist rivals of Europe and the far East into conflict with each other – a process which was to gain more momentum, as soon as another European imperialist shark appeared in the far East.

The advance of Russian imperialism and the world wide sharpening of imperialist tensions

Russia's drive for expansion pushed it towards central Asia and the far East. In the West its rivalries with Germany, France and GB were prevailing, around the Black Sea it clashed with the Ottoman Empire (in the Crimean war 1854-56 it had already confronted Britain and France), in central Asia it clashed with Britain, (Britain waged two wars over Afghanistan (1839-42, 1878-1880, in order to fend off Russian influence in Afghanistan). In the far East it had to come into conflict mainly with Japan and especially Britain – which was the dominant European imperialist force in the far East.

But the Russian expansion in the last quarter of the 19th century crystallised only a general drive of all capitalist nations for the conquest of new territories and markets on the whole globe.

In 1884 France occupied Annam (Vietnam) and blockaded Taiwan, Britain annexed Burma in 1885, the Berlin Conference settled the carve up of Africa in 1885.

As for the far East, with the appearance of Russia in this zone of conflicts, a new qualitative level was reached. With Russia as a European country directly challenging the increasing domination of Japan, this meant that any Russian move would automatically trigger off a whole chain of realignments amongst the European rivals, according to their rivalry or possible alliance with Russia.¹¹

Following the opening of the Suez canal in 1869, and with the growing importance of the far East for the European imperialist rivals, Russia pushed ahead the construction of the Trans-Siberian railways in 1891. Unable to finance this gigantic project on its own, it had to borrow French capital. Japan, which aimed at expanding towards China and Korea, feared

¹⁰ (Rosa Luxemburg in a speech at the party conference in Mainz in Sept. 1900, in Rosa Luxemburg, Collected Works/Gesammelte Werke, vol 1/1, p. 801)

¹¹ During the first phase of Russian expansion towards the East, i.e. during the first half of the 19th century and even until the 1870's the division of new territories could still sometimes be settled by the sale and purchase of new territories. For example, Russia sold Alaska to the USA at the price of 7.2 million US dollars in 1867. And even after Russia earlier on had occupied Xinjiang, the most western Chinese province, Russia sold this large area in 1881 to China.

that any Russian advance towards the East might endanger its position.

Russia was advancing its pawns in the far East. Benefiting from Chinese weakening in its war with Japan in 1894, Russia signed a secret deal with China in 1896 claiming to act as a protecting force against Japan. In 1898 Russia conquered Port Arthur.

In order to counter the Russian advance and manoeuvres in the far East and central Asia, Britain proposed to Russia the division of China and the Ottoman Empire amongst themselves - Russia rejected this.

Since the rivalry between GB and Russia could not be settled, Russia had to try and "appease" Japan as long as it could. Following the failed arrangement between Russia and Britain, Russia tried to settle with Japan for respective zones of influence.

In 1902 negotiations started between Japan and Russia over their respective zones of influence in the far East. In essence Russia proposed to give Japan a free hand over Korea provided Japan would not use the peninsula as a staging base for military operations, Russia even proposed that territory north of the 39th parallel in Korea be declared a neutral zone which neither country would be permitted to station troops in, while Russia wanted control over Manchuria and other border zones to China (half a century later the country was divided at the same 38th parallel in the Korean war in 1953). Japan proposed to Russia that it take control over Korea and it would allow Russia to be in charge of the protection of railway lines (only!) in Manchuria, but not be given any territorial control.

But the negotiations showed that it had become impossible for Russia and Japan to try and divide their zones of interests without war.

Japan looked for allies. On January 30th 1902 Japan and Britain signed a treaty. They recognised the right of Japan and Britain to intervene in Chinese and Korean affairs, promised neutrality if one of the parties was at war over its zone of interest, and support in case of war against other countries. The treaty between Britain and Japan led Japan to believe that it could launch a war against Russia with the hope that no other country would support Russia since GB was threatening in the background. And the German government assured the Japanese government in case of a war between Russia and Japan, Germany would remain neutral. Germany was hoping if Russia started a war in the East, this would give Germany more room for manoeuvre against France – a Russian ally – and Britain.

By dealing at greater length with the complicated strategic details of these conflicts we wanted to show the development of extremely complex and strongly intertwined military rivalries, where it became clear that if one of the main antagonists moved, a whole chain reaction by other rivals was unleashed. All the countries were not only positioning themselves, but would also be involved in the unleashing of a lurking war.

The Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05: prelude to World War I

Following the Russian refusal to accept Japanese demands for control over Korea, on February 8th 1904 Japan attacked the Russian fleet in Port Arthur and Tchemulpo.

The Russian-Japanese war heralded some of the characteristics of the wars in decadence.¹²

The first war in the 20th century between two major powers led to an unheard of mobilisation of the two countries – involving new levels of human, economic and military resources:

- The war exhausted the finances of the victorious country, creating a pile of debts for Japan. Government expenditure more than doubled during the war, its budget had run into a gigantic deficit.
- In the defeated country, Russia, the war sparked off a proletarian rising in 1905, showing that only the proletariat can act as a spanner to the war. Rosa Luxemburg concluded at the 1907 Stuttgart congress of the 2nd International: “*But the Russian revolution [of 1905] did not only emerge from the war, but it also served to interrupt the war. Otherwise czarism would surely have continued the war*” (speech in the commission on “*Militarism and international conflicts*”: (*Collected Works*, volume 2, p. 236).
- Although Japan was able to wrist off big territorial gains from Russia the new situation reached at the turn of the century showed that no country could enrich itself at the expense of the loser without interfering in the imperialist interests of the other rivals.

10 years before World War I the Japanese triumph over Russia, which had confirmed its leading position in the far East, caused a strong counter-reaction by its imperialist rivals.

This first major war in the 20th century – unfolding in the far East between Russia and Japan – confirmed what Rosa Luxemburg predicted at the turn of the 19th century. In 1899 she wrote in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*: “*With the division and the integration of Asia, European capitalism no longer has any new areas for its conquest at its disposal, after this the world will be divided and every part of the world will be claimed by one ruler. Sooner or later the new orient question will enter the same phase in which the old one ‘fossilised’*: Step by step, the European opponents will start moving closer towards each other so that in the end they will finally stop after having reached the point where they face each other head on. And the economic and political forces which have been set free, the highly developed big industry, the gigantic militarism, will then start to be a terrible burden on the whole of society, because they will no longer find any outlet.”¹³ Only 9 years

¹² The war lasted 18 months. The main battle zones were Port Arthur, the railway line and the road leading to Mukden and Liaoyang. In the siege of Port Arthur more than 60,000 Japanese soldiers died. The biggest battle was that for Mukden, from 23rd February until the 16th March 1905 – more than 750,000 soldiers participated in the battle. More than 40,000 Japanese soldiers died. It was both a naval war and a war between territorial armies. Russia sent a large part of its fleet (40 ships) from the Baltic Sea in October 1904 along the African coast to the Chinese waters. But the Russian navy arrived only in May 1905 in far Eastern waters. In a big sea battle, the well prepared Japanese navy inflicted Russia a crushing defeat, in which most of the Russian ships were drowned by Japanese forces.

Russia had to concede southern Sakhalin, southern Manchuria and Korea to Japan, Japan received Port Arthur and Dairen. As a result, five years later, Japan could declare Korea its colony.

¹³ Rosa Luxemburg, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1/1, p. 364, 13.3.1899.

later World War I confirmed this new level of imperialist relations.

The consequences of the Russian-Japanese war went far beyond the two warring countries.

The USA, which just half a century earlier (in the mid 1850s) had spearheaded the opening of Japan for capitalism, started to confront a Japan which was colliding with the USA over the dominant position in the Pacific and the far East.

While after the 1894-95 war between China and Japan, the “triple intervention” by France, Germany and Russia prevented 'excessive' conquests by Japan, this time round it was the USA and GB which opposed a too crushing victory and too big a strengthening of the Japanese position.

While the USA and Britain supported Japan at the beginning of the war, they withdrew financial support towards the end of the war to put pressure on Japan, since the USA considered Japan more and more as their main rival in the far East. And when the USA supported the Russian-Japanese “peace deal”, which admitted Japanese hegemony in Korea, Japan had to concede to the USA their right of intervention in the Philippines. At the same time the USA considered that Japanese control over Korea was a means of preventing further Russian expansion towards the East. Still, the USA which was “trailing” behind the European countries during their 19th century imperialist conquests, because it was still busy with fostering the expansion of capitalism in its own Western part, had arrived “late” in the division of shares in the far East. The first US “gain” were the Philippines, which they grabbed from Spain in 1898 in the first war during that period waged for the re-division of existing conquests (it was the first war that the USA waged outside of their own territories). During that period the USA annexed Hawaii and gained control over Wake, Guam in the Pacific.

While the European countries and Japan appeared as the “aggressors” towards China, the USA could pretend to act as China’s “defender”.

Capitalism in decay: the Far East becomes a battlefield of world wide imperialist rivalries

Looking back at the development of Japan, China and Korea in the 19th century we can see that they were all opened up by capitalism by force. Capitalism did not emerge from within, but it was “imported” from the outside. Unlike many European countries, where a revolutionary bourgeois class was able to cast aside the fetters of feudalism, there were no such bourgeois revolutions carried out by the local bourgeoisie.

Yet while these three countries were opened by foreign capitalists during the same period in the 19th century, they followed three different paths.

Japan was the only country to become an independent capitalist power after a short period. Soon after having been opened by foreign capitalism Japan in turn started to act as a capitalist force searching for new markets and zones of control in the bordering region. Within a few decades Japan became the big regional power. Unlike China and Korea which were quickly crippled in their capitalist development, Japan embarked upon a rapid accumulation of capital. While not handicapped in its capitalist development as its neighbours were by foreign

countries, the early dominant role of militarism and of the State are a typical feature in the development of this country.

Even if Japan, much like Germany, arrived “late” on the world market, Japan, unlike Germany, which had to challenge the already “established” imperialist powers, was not a ‘have-not’. It was the first country in the area to establish its zone of influence in the “scramble for colonies” (establishing its control over Korea, parts of Manchuria and Taiwan). Japan was involved and triumphant in all the big wars in the far East – with China in 1894, with Russia in 1905 – and it was also the big regional winner of World War I even if it was not directly involved. Thus Japan could climb on “top of the regional imperialist ladder” before World War I, establishing its position at the expense of the other rivals.

In China, which was ruled by a declining dynasty until the arrival of capitalism, capitalism was also “implanted” from outside. While the Chinese ruling class was unable to induce a powerful capitalist development, the foreign capitalists – while opening up the country to capitalism – imposed strong fetters on the development of national capital. Thus already in the 19th century, the country, marked by all the features of a “handicapped” development, was torn apart by foreign imperialist powers. As we shall see later, China was to carry these characteristics all along the 20th century. While Japan was a leading expanding imperialist force, China had become the most fought over area amongst the European and Japanese imperialist sharks.

Korea in turn, also opened up by foreign capitalists, became the main target of Japanese imperialism. But being an invasion corridor for the appetites of all neighbours, it was condemned to suffer from this specific geo-strategic constellation. Ever since the imposition of capitalism in the far East, Korea has been a permanent battle field of the struggle between the regional and international rivals. Until 1905 Korea was fought over principally by China, Japan and Russia; since the onset of capitalist decadence, as we shall see when looking at the history of the 20th century, Korea has remained an important military and strategic target for all imperialist countries in the far East.

The fourth rival in the region, Russia, in its expansion towards the far East, while defending its own imperialist interests in the region, was dragging with it a whole flock of European rivals.

During an initial period of 2-3 decades in the 19th century, the opening of the far East to capitalism unfolded under conditions, where the major European powers and the USA were not yet colliding with each other, because there was still enough “room for expansion”. The situation changed, as the scramble for colonies drew to a close and as the remains could only be divided with one rival gaining something at the expense of the other. The China-Japan war in 1894 and the Russia-Japan war in 1905 showed that it had become impossible that all countries would “receive a piece of the cake”, but that the division had been completed and a new distribution was only possible through war.

Already three years before the outbreak of World War I Rosa Luxemburg noted: *“During the past 15 years there was the war between Japan and China in 1895, which was the prelude to the East-Asian period of world politics, 1898 the war between Spain and the USA, 1899-1902 the Boers War with British involvement in South Africa, 1900 the China-expedition of the European big powers, 1904 the Russian-Japanese war, 1904-*

1907 the German Herero-war in Africa, 1908 the Russian military intervention in Persia, at the present moment [1911] the French military intervention in Morocco, not to mention the incessant colonial skirmishes in Asia and Africa. The mere facts show that during the past 15 years there was almost no year without a war”.¹⁴

The level of imperialist rivalries could be kept within certain limits until the turn of the 20th century. But when antagonisms sharpened on a world scale, the world wide rivalries also manifested themselves in the far East. The 1905 war between Russia and Japan heralded World War I and the series of wars which followed in the 20th century.

At the turn of the 20th century, the far East experienced a reshuffling of the imperialist hierarchy. After 1905 Japan had risen to the top of the imperialist pecking order in the region but it was already confronted by the USA and GB as the two remaining imperialist giants in the area. The USA soon after started to “contain” Japan – initially through the policy of “making deals” (such as the one over the Philippines for recognising Japanese interests in Korean) – later, as with the 2nd world war, by going to war against each other.

The development of capitalism in the 19th century in the far East thus illustrates how much the qualitative change that occurred towards the turn of the 19-20th century expressed a new epoch in the global development of capitalism.

There was no more any bourgeois revolution on the agenda, the bourgeoisie in the far East had become as reactionary as elsewhere. And the capitalist system was going to show all its contradictions in the far East, pulling this densely populated part of the globe into a series of wars and destruction.

The road to World War II

The imperialist position of Japan

The imperialist constellation in the far East had undergone profound changes with the end of World War I.

Already after the Russian-Japanese 1905 war Japan continued to remain the dominant force in the far East, but after World War I Japan was no longer going to clash mainly with European rivals. Instead the main rivalry was going to unfold with the USA who was the big winner of World War I. Following the period after World War I the USA and Japan became the main imperialist sharks in the far East for several decades.

Japan was the main beneficiary of World War I without ever being directly involved on a large scale in the fighting. Unlike the other winner states in Europe (Britain, France), who had to pay a high price for their victory, Japan was not ruined through the war. Instead Japan managed to improve its position substantially – first it speeded up its industrialisation; secondly it improved its trade position at the expense of the European rivals and become a big arms supplier. Imports and exports tripled during World War I, steel and concrete production doubled, big progress in chemical and electro-technical equipment was achieved and Japan managed to write off its foreign debts during the war – which it had “contracted” because of its war against Russia in 1905. It became a donor nation. It also expanded its commercial navy and became a big

¹⁴ (Peace Utopia, Volume 2, p. 496, May 1911, Leipziger Volkszeitung)

ship building nation, increasing its ship building capacity by a factor of 8.

However, as soon as the war was over in 1918, the war boom collapsed and Japan found itself in a big economic crisis.

On the imperialist level, Japan strengthened its position mainly in relation to China above all at the expense not only of the loser country – Germany – but also at the expense of other European imperialist rivals, which were absorbed by the war carnage in Europe. After having occupied Korea in 1909 Japan hoped to become the uncontested ruling imperialist power in China as well.

Already in the first weeks after the outbreak of the war in 1914, Japan snatched the German settlement of Tsingtao in China and occupied German possessions in the Pacific (Marshall and Caroline Islands) which Japan saw as a counterweight to the US presence in Hawaii, the Philippines and Guam.

As Russia disappeared from the imperialist scene, Japan tried to claim the dominant position in China. As soon as the imperialist countries launched a counter-revolutionary offensive against the proletarian bastion in Russia in 1918, Japan was the **first** country to participate in the invasion and the last country to leave Siberian territory in 1922. Instead of sending 7,000 troops as demanded by the USA, Japan sent 72,000 soldiers, declaring openly its imperialist appetites towards Russia.

After Japan emerged as the big beneficiary of the war, the USA tried to contain Japanese military might.

And while the European countries disarmed partially after World War I, Japan did not really reduce its military expenditure significantly. Between 1888 and 1938 total military expenditure corresponded to 40-50% of the national budget through this period.¹⁵

Yet while Japan was a ‘winner’ of World War I it had not been able to make any major territorial gains through the war. Although not a “have-not” (as it had Korea under its control since 1909) it was under the strongest pressure to challenge the status quo in the region and try to expand towards the Asian continent.

Whereas imperialist tensions in Europe receded after World War I to a large extent because of the wave of revolutionary struggles of the working class, imperialist tensions in the far East evolved differently.

Once again, Japan was going to clash with Russia as soon as Russia reappeared as an imperialist power on stage (see further down). In 1931 Japan occupied Manchuria and proclaimed the foundation of a new state – Manchukuo. The creation of this new state, which was nothing but a vassal of the biggest imperialist shark in the region, meant that Japan had above all a springboard for the ensuing further expansion of Japan towards Southern China at its hand.

China: the descent into militarist chaos

In the previous article we saw that the Chinese bourgeoisie had been unable to pave the way for a capitalist modernisation. Although in 1911 the Chinese republic was proclaimed by ousting the old Manchu dynasty, no strong central bourgeois government had arisen. This historical weakness of the Chinese

bourgeoisie meant that China was going to go down, under a spiral of militarism, even if at the beginning foreign powers were not yet directly involved in the military escalation. But China became one of the birthplaces of a new phenomena - warlordism - which was going to put its stamp on the whole 20th century.

The emergence of warlordism

Faced with an increasingly powerless central government, certain provinces declared their independence from Beijing after 1915. In most of the provinces warlords became the dominant force.

Their sources of income were: (forced) exactions of taxes mainly from peasants; they lived on the basis of banditry and the drug trade (opium). It was no coincidence that drug trade, which more than half a century before had been curbed, then revived. Production of opium had almost been stopped by 1916, but warlords gave large areas of land to opium growth, there was even a ‘laziness tax’ on those farmers who did not plant opium. Land tax was raised 5 to 6 times by warlords and many taxes were collected in advance - in some areas collected for decades in advance. The warlords recruited a large number of soldiers from the peasantry and lumpenised elements. With the disintegration of the dynasty and the fragmentation of China at the beginning of the 20th century, an increasing number from among the floating mass of poor and landless peasants began to enrol in the professional armies of the regional ‘warlords’. Most warlord soldiers were unreliable, since most of them were jobless and hungry people who fought without a cause but only for money. As a result many of these soldiers changed sides or ran away in battle. This is why soldiers had to be constantly recruited, often forcefully. At the same time in many areas peasants were forced to join secret societies for self-protection against marauding troops.

Because there was no united nation state with a central government at its head, capable of defending national unity, each warlord could claim his territory. But at the same time these were not aiming at splitting off from the Chinese ‘empire’ and setting up a new nation. Generally they were not tied to a particular sector of society and they were not particularly involved in the defence of particular sectors of the economy. They were classical “parasites”, feeding off the population without any special ideological, ethnical or religious basis. The goals of their military operations were neither so much the largest possible extension of their area of domination nor wars of conquest to open up new markets or to plunder raw materials. In a certain sense they waged war ‘on the spot’ and pillaged the country. As a result trade became restricted. The transport system suffered heavily not only from the direct war ravages but also because of the fact that it had to carry a lot of troops and because of the payment of special taxes to the militarists.

All the resources of society were absorbed by militarism. Frequent dictatorial seizure of goods, the irresponsible handling of money by the warlords (whenever money was needed to finance their legions of soldiers and arms purchases they printed as much money as they needed) meant a terrible burden on the economy. In short they revealed a pure process of decomposition, a rotting on the feet of society. They expressed the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to unite the country. The fragmentation of the country into a number of fiefdoms

¹⁵ Lockwood, Economic Development of Japan, p. 292

(smaller units), which were under the control of marauding warlords, meant a gigantic fetter on the productive forces; it also showed that in China national liberation was no longer on the agenda, because the nation could no longer be an adequate framework for the development of the productive forces.

Even if during World War I the foreign imperialists tried to influence and win over different warlords, the wars waged by the local warlords at that time were not yet dominated by the rivalries amongst the foreign sharks.

The disastrous results of the Comintern policy

In 1915 the southern province Hunan declared its independence and between 1916-1918 a growing polarisation between Northern and Southern warlords led to a wave of military conflicts. Thus when World War I came to an end in 1918 in Europe, China had been fractured by rival military regimes to the extent that no one authority was able to subordinate all rivals and create a unified and centralized political structure. The nation state had to be abolished altogether, if society was to avoid demise into militarism and chaos. As the Communist International recognised in its Manifesto of 1919 *“The national state, which gave a mighty impulse to capitalist development, has become a fetter on further development of the productive forces.”* But while the Communist International was far sighted in its clarity of the need to abolish all states, this emphasis of its founding congress was quickly clouded afterwards. The more the revolution went into retreat and the more the Comintern became desperate in its attempts to win support for the isolated revolution in Russia, it practised an opportunistic policy. At its 4th World Congress in 1922 the Comintern propagated a united front between certain Communist Parties and what it called the "left" or "democratic" wings of the respective bourgeoisie. In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in accordance with the Comintern in 1922 declared in its “First Manifesto of the CCP on the Current Situation” (June 10, 1922) *“We welcome a war to achieve the triumph of democracy, to overthrow the military... The proletariat’s urgent task is to act jointly with the democratic party to establish a united front of democratic revolution... This struggle along a broad united front is a war to liberate the Chinese people from a dual yoke – the yoke of foreigners and the yoke of powerful militarists in our country.”*¹⁶

This orientation of launching a coalition of proletarian and bourgeois forces with the goal of fighting a war against foreign capital was strongly opposed by the emerging forces of the Communist Left.

Within the framework of this article we cannot elaborate more on this aspect of developments. We have extensively dealt with this question in a series of articles in our International Review.¹⁷

The “united front” course of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was a disaster for the working class since it forced the workers to submit to the KMT (Kuomintang) and it contributed

¹⁶ (“First Manifesto of the CCP on the Current Situation”, June 10, 1922, in Conrad Brandt, Benjamin Schwarz and John K. Fairbank, A Documentary History of Chinese Communism, New York: Atheneum, 1971, pp. 61-63)

¹⁷ (see “A link in the chain of imperialist war” International Review no 81, 84, 94 series).

to the triumph of the KMT as the dominant force of the Chinese bourgeoisie.

As we have illustrated in other articles of our press, the experience of the wave of struggles in 1925-27 showed, that the Comintern imposed united front policy paved the way for an even higher degree of militarization.

While in Europe there was a time span of two decades between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II (heralded by the war in Spain in 1936), China irreversibly continued in its descent into militarism immediately after the end of World War I. From the early 1920s on a series of wars between different warlords continued to wreck the country. The number of regular troops rose from 500,000 in 1916 to two million in 1928. The number of armed people must have been much higher, each defeat of an army led to an explosion in the number of bandits.

Amongst the forces of the Chinese bourgeoisie, the KMT was the most coherent and most determined in its defence of the interests of national capital. Chiang Kai-shek’s party could only pursue the attempts of unification of the country on a militarist path. With the support of the CCP, in spring 1926 Chiang Kai-shek launched a military expedition to eradicate various feuding warlords in central and northern China. In spring 1927, at a time, when a massive wave of strikes shook the most important Chinese city, Shanghai, the KMT, the force which for years had been hailed by the Comintern as the “the democratic party” with whom the working class should struggle for a “democratic revolution” showed its real face. The KMT spearheaded the massacre of thousands of workers in Shanghai and Nanking. The first KMT led government - known as the first 'National Government' - was established in Nanking on April 18, 1927. This first government of a “unified” China could only rise to power through a massacre of the working class. But even if the Nanking government meant the highest level of centralisation of national capital since 1911, militarism did not come to a halt. Because, although China’s unity was nominally established around the Nanking government in 1928, the Central government was forced to pursue its combat against war lords without interruption – because neither in the north nor in other areas had the local warlords been eliminated, even after the establishment of the Nanking central government.

Unified China's first governmental programme: more militarization

Even if the period after 1928 was not marked by wars of the same size and intensity as in the previous years, the following years saw a number of military campaigns which bled the country. For example:

1929: Attempts to disband the swollen armies failed, the Kwangsi army’s insurrection and a revolt in Hunan were suppressed.

1930: A bloody war involving a million men erupted in North China from March to September 1930. Between 1931–1935 several campaigns against the troops of the Communist Party were launched.

Even if warlordism receded slowly in the early 1930s, a real unification of the country was never achieved, and the more force the centralised government gained, the more militarised the regime became. The weight of armed conflicts in society can be gauged by the fact that military government expenditure

in China never fell below 44% of the State budget between 1928-1934.

The civilian population – hostage of all rivals

Following the offensive of the Nanking government troops against the CCP forces, some 90,000 poorly equipped Red Army forces were chased across the country and had to embark upon the “Long March”.

After this military hunt only 7000 Red Army troops reached the remote area of Yennan in northern Shaanxi. In this war between two “unequal” forces, the CCP systematically applied a military tactic which was going to mark the military conflicts during the 20th and well into the 21st century. As a typical weapon of the “underdog”, which is unable to recruit a “standing army” with the full equipment of an army financed and run by a State and its government, the Red Army forces started to develop a guerrilla war. Although in previous wars of the 19th century there had been some limited partisan activities, this phenomenon took on a new proportion in the deluge in China.

The Red Army turned civilians into a human shield, i.e. targets to protect the movement of the regular “Red Army”. At the same time, the brutal terrorisation

of the peasants and the extraction of enormous taxes through the Nanking government forced millions of peasants either to abandon their land and flee or this drove many of them into the arms of the Red Army. They became cannon fodder between two opponents. War started to ravage almost permanently not only around the big cities but above all in the country.

The war rages

What was mystified by the Maoists as a heroic war was in reality the plague of “moving” (rolling) war with millions of refugees and a policy of scorched earth.

The more imperialist tensions sharpened internationally, the more China also became involved in these. At the time, when inside China the military expeditions against different warlords continued after 1928, the first major clash with a foreign country occurred with Russia in 1928/29. No sooner had a “central government” been set up in Nanking, then it claimed and occupied the Northern Manchurian railway, which until then had been under Russian control. In a first violent confrontation of Stalinist Russia with its imperialist rival in the far East, Russia mobilised 134,000 soldiers and succeeded in defeating the Chinese troops, which could not offer any major

resistance due to the dispersal of their forces in the combats against different warlords.

However, the main antagonism was unfolding between China and Japan. In 1931/32 Japan occupied Manchuria and proclaimed the new state Manchukuo. Early 1932 Japan attacked and bombed Shanghai. At that time – i.e. after Japan had occupied Manchuria – the KMT led government still

pursued the policy of trying to eliminate other warlords and above all the Communist Party. It was only in 1937, once Japan had started its war drive from Manchukuo into China, that the Chinese bourgeoisie united and pushed its own rivalries temporarily into the background – but this unification could only be that of a united war front against Japan.

The need to develop a “united war front” against Japan also meant that the Chinese bourgeoisie had to reposition itself in its relationship to foreign imperialists.

Until 1937 each wing of the Chinese bourgeoisie pursued a different foreign policy orientation. While the CCP was oriented towards Stalinist Russia and received support from Moscow, the KMT counted on the help of Germany and other states. Chiang Kai-shek himself,

who after 1920 had received support from the degenerating Comintern and rising Stalinism until 1927, tried to avoid a head-on confrontation with Japan. In the early 1930s he signed a factual “truce” with Japan, only to give him more leeway to attack the troops of the Communist party. But with the advance of Japanese troops from Manchukuo to Beijing and towards Shanghai in 1937, Chiang had to drop his alliance with Germany – which was establishing an alliance with Japan. Global imperialist rivalries compelled every local rival to choose his allies and the historic course on a world level towards war was also going to determine the antagonisms in the far East.¹⁸

¹⁸ Already by 1921 Germany had started delivering arms to China. Arms of all types were needed for the continuing Chinese wars. Most of the German arms reaching China in the early 1920's were clearly from the stocks that Germany had hidden from the Versailles arms inspectors. A former Chief of Staff to Ludendorff – Max Bauer – became military advisor to Chiang-Kai-shek in 1926. In 1928 while the Chinese army had some 2.25 million men under arms, the German military adviser Bauer recommended that China retain only a small core army and integrate the rest of the soldiers into militia forces. German army advisers trained a central army of 80.000 men, which soon grew to a crack force of 300.000. In the battle for Shanghai in 1937 German military advisers were dressed in Chinese uniforms and

The war between China and Japan – the second biggest theatre of war in World War II

The war between the two countries was going to be one of the bloodiest, most destructive and longest in the 20th century. Whereas World War I had spared the far East from a direct military escalation, the far East was then going to be the second major theatre of war.

In a first phase, between 1937-1941, the war was more or less “limited” to fighting between Japan and China, which was backed above all by Russia. The second phase began in 1941, when a new war front opened up between Japan and the USA. When Japan started the occupation of China the army was hoping to stage a blitzkrieg and have everything under control within a few months. The opposite was going to be the case. In August 1937 Japan entered into a massive military battle with more than half a million soldiers involved in the fight for the city of Shanghai. Other big battles followed around Wuhan and in December 1937 for Nanking. It is estimated that between August 1937 and November 1938 alone some 2 million Chinese and some 500,000 Japanese soldiers fell.

Yet, despite the heavy Chinese losses, the Japanese army was not able to force the Chinese troops onto their knees. Between October 1938 and the attack on Pearl Harbour (on the 7th December 1941) the China war “stagnated”. Japan only managed to control some enclaves which corresponded to 10% of the territory. In addition, the Japanese government lost financial control over expenditures (the share of arms in the budget rose from 31% in 1931-32 to 47% in 1936-37, at the end of the 1930s arms spending counted for 70% of the budget)..

The more desperate the Japanese military strategy became, the more terror it applied following the motto “kill, burn, loot everything you can”.

When Japanese troops entered the capital city of Nanking in 1937 they committed one of the most atrocious massacres;

directed Chinese troops right up to the Japanese front lines. German military advisers recommended Chiang to fight a war of attrition against Japan and employ guerilla tactics against the Japanese army. Only by summer 1938 were German military advisers recalled from China once the Nazi-regime chose to work towards an alliance with Japan. Just before German advisers left, Chiang had signed a treaty whereby German advisers should train the whole Chinese army until 1940. (German Military Mission to China 1927-38, Arvo L. Vecamer, see also <http://www.feldgrau.com/china.html>)

around 300,000 people were killed in a relentless carnage in Nanking alone. The Chinese troops in turn were making partisan attacks and practising a scorched earth policy.

During the war with Japan, the Chinese bourgeoisie managed to establish only a very fragile “united front”. Even if, following the Japanese attack on China in 1937, the Chinese bourgeoisie closed ranks, in January 1941 both KMT nationalist troops and the Maoist armies clashed again. As the war unfolded, Red Army forces – after many advances and retreats – became the dominant force, reversing the hierarchy which had existed at the beginning of the conflict.

The Sino-Japanese war: opportunism

“In my declaration to the bourgeois press I said it is a duty of all workers organisations in China to participate actively and to be front fighters in the war against Japan, without renouncing in any way whatsoever from their program and their autonomy. But this is ‘social patriotism’ – the Eiffelists [the Grupo de Trabajadores Marxistas/Comunismo] shout. This is capitulation before Chiang Kai-shek! This is abandoning the principle of class struggle! During imperialist war Bolshevism propagated revolutionary defeatism. In the case of the Spanish civil war and the Chinese-Japanese war we are faced with imperialist wars. (...) “On the Chinese war we take up the same position. The only salvation for the workers and peasants of China is to fight as an autonomous force against both armies, against the Chinese army as well as against the Japanese army”. Already these few lines from the documents of the Eiffelists [Grupo de Trabajadores Marxistas] of September 1, 1937 allow us to conclude: Either these are traitors or total idiots.... China is a semi-colonial country, which – in front of our eyes - is being transformed into a colonial country by Japan. In the case of Japan it is fighting an imperialist, reactionary war. In the case of China, it is fighting a progressive war of liberation... Japanese patriotism is the horrible face of international banditism. Chinese patriotism is legitimate and progressive” (letter to Diego de Rivera, in Trotsky on China, p, 547, Trotsky, Works, Hamburg, 1990)

Thus after 1941, after decades of repeated wars in China, after four years of more or less bilateral war between China and Japan, the conflict in Asia then escalated into an all-out confrontation in the whole of Asia. Between 1941 and 1945 the war engulfed all the countries in East Asia and also Australia.

Initially Japan made some quick gains – after its crushing victory at Pearl Harbour. Within a few months Japan conquered large areas of South-East Asia. Its troops occupied the British colony Hong Kong, large parts of the Philippines, landed in the Dutch Indies (later Indonesia), and penetrated into Burma. Within 100 days they reached the coast of Australia and India.¹⁹

Whereas World War I had largely spared the far East and South-East Asia from the war, these areas became now involved for the first time in such carnage.²⁰

A spiral of destruction

The USA for the first time used napalm bombs against housing districts in Japan. On March 9th 1945, the US bombing raid on Tokyo cost the lives of 130,000 people, 267,000 buildings on a surface of 41 square miles were destroyed, and more than one

¹⁹ In most countries, Japan tried to draw local supporters of “national independence” from the colonial powers Britain and Holland into its orbit. Thus in India Japan gained the support of Indian nationalists who wanted to split from their colonial power Britain. The German Nazi regime had succeeded in recruiting nationalists in the Middle East for its offensive, Japanese imperialism presented itself as a force of “liberation” from British colonialism.

²⁰ The carnage over the South East Asian Japanese war conquests left behind an extremely high blood toll. The battle over the Philippines was one of the bloodiest. For example in the fight for the island Leyte some 80,000 Japanese soldiers died, in the fight for Luzon 190,000 Japanese soldiers fell, the defence of Okinawa cost the lives of 110,000 Japanese soldiers, the US army lost some 50,000 soldiers in the conquest of Okinawa alone.

million people became homeless. The second biggest city Osaka was bombed on March 13th, some 4,000 people died, some 100,000 houses were destroyed. Altogether more than 600,000 buildings were destroyed in Japan in 4 bombing raids. In June 1945 – 2 months before the two nuclear bombs were dropped – in Tokyo and Kobe some 50% of the houses were in ruins. The same scorched earth policy was practised in Nagoya, Osaka and Kawasaki.

By the end of the war more than 2 million houses were destroyed and some 13 million people made homeless by napalm bombs alone. While the US justifications of the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki try to present this barbaric attack as an exception, saving the life of thousands of US-soldiers, in reality the nuclear bombs on these two cities were a culmination point of a whole spiral of destruction and annihilation, leading yet again in the years following World War II to a systematic build-up of a nuclear arsenal.²¹

The balance sheet of the 1937-45 war was particularly disastrous for the two major Asian powers China and Japan.

The war cost the lives of 15-20 million people in China and Japan. Japan, the country which had unleashed the war, was the big loser and became utterly exhausted and militarily crippled. It was the first time for centuries that war had raged on Japanese territory. Japan lost all its conquests (from its colonies Korea and Manchuria to its short-lived war conquests in South-East Asia). Unlike Germany, Japan was not divided into several zones of occupation; the main reason being that the conflict between the USA and the USSR had already taken much sharper proportions in East Asia than in Europe a few months before the war ceased in May 1945. Most Japanese cities were destroyed, its population was starving, and much of its navy was sunk or damaged. During the war Japan lost some 1200 commercial ships (which corresponded to 63 % of its trade tonnage). In short the country was “amputated”.

Having lost control over the war spiral, Japan had to submit to US domination and was occupied for the first time. It lost its status as the first regional imperialist shark to the USA.

Destruction in China were equally devastating. The human death toll mounted to several million people. Paradoxically Korea, the Japanese colony, was spared largely from the hostilities – only to become a new theatre of war a few years later.

World War II ends, the Cold War begins

Once the war in Europe came to an end in May 1945 and the booty in Europe was divided amongst the winners, the battle over the domination of Asia unleashed. Already when the fighting in Europe was drawing to a close, 3 zones of conflict immediately became fierce battle grounds in East Asia.

The first zone of conflict was the domination over Japan. It was obvious that the collapse of the Japanese military regime and its

²¹ *"The US flagship USS Indianapolis, which had carried the first atomic bomb across the Pacific, before it was dropped on Hiroshima, was sunk by Japanese torpedoes. While the largest part of the crew survived, some 600 marines - clinging to their rescue boats once the boat capsized - were killed by sharks. Nuclear disaster for the Hiroshima population! Death through sharks in the sea for the US-soldiers, who carried the bomb!"* (Andrew Wiest, Campaigns of World War II, The Pacific War, London, 2000)

elimination from China and Korea would leave a power vacuum, which could only increase the appetites of all imperialist gangsters.

The first country to try and occupy this “vacuum” was Russia, which barely 4 decades earlier in the 1904-1905 war had suffered a big defeat by Japan. However, in a first phase, i.e. after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 (and also later in 1944/early 1945, at the time of the Yalta conference held in February 1945) the USA still assumed since fighting with Japan was reaching unheard of intensity in the far East that it would want Russian participation in defeating Japan, which meant that they wanted above all Russian cannon fodder for the final battles with Japan. Although economically exhausted and with a death toll of more than 20 million people, the USSR had been able to strengthen itself on the imperialist chess board. At the Yalta conference the USSR laid claim on Manchuria, the Kuril archipelago, Sakhalin and Korea north of the 38th parallel; the Chinese ports of Dalian and Lüshūn (named Port Arthur when occupied by the Russians) should become a Russian navy base. Stalin’s regime targeted Japan directly. Thus Russia once again aimed at expanding its rule towards East Asia. With the war drawing to an end in Europe, Russia’s strategic interests had changed. Russia, had been benefiting from the carnage between China and Japan and later from the war between Japan and the USA. If Japan was tied down in war with China and the USA, Japan would not be able to attack Russia in Siberia, as Nazi-Germany had been trying to push Japan to do. Since Russia and Japan had the common interest to keep their back clear from any aggression, (Russia wanting to keep away Japan, the ally of its enemy Germany; and Japan wanting to keep Russia, the ally of the USA, in a neutral position) the two countries practised a “non-aggression policy” towards each other during World War II. But towards the end of 1944/45 when the end of the war in Europe was in sight, the USA pushed Russia to take part in the storm against Japan. Stalin even managed to wrist off US military and logistic support for the arming and transport of Russian troops to the east.

At Yalta, the USSR and the USA still agreed, that once the war had come to an end in Europe, the USSR would receive its share after the defeat of Japan. However, once the war was over in Europe, which saw the USSR as a big winner receiving large parts of Eastern Europe and the Eastern part of Germany, US-imperialism had already changed its strategy. The USA no longer wanted any Russian participation in the war against Japan.

Russian imperialism, however, stuck to its guns, it wanted to seize its chance and mobilised an army of 1.5 million soldiers, more than 5.000 tanks, and 3.800 planes within 100 days after the end of the war in Germany.²² Its troops marched through northern China and occupied a territory of the size of Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Poland taken together. Russia declared war on Japan on August 9th, the day when the USA threw the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and on August 10th Russian troops stormed into Japanese occupied Korea

²² *“The defeat of the Russian army in 1904 left bitter memories in the hearts of our people. It has been a stain on our nation. Our people have waited, believing that they would one day have to smash Japan and wash away this stain. Our old generation has waited 40 years for that day to come.”* (quoted by Jörg Friedrich, Yalu, An den Ufern des dritten Weltkrieges, (On the verge of the 3rd world war) Berlin, 2007).

advancing rapidly to the 38th parallel just north of Seoul. With Russian troops having become the occupying force of large parts of China and of northern Korea and mobilising for a landing in Japan, the USA saw their position threatened. The USA had to pay an exorbitant price – having to throw two nuclear bombs on Japan, but at the same time this step was above all aimed at preventing Russia from falling over Japan.

Although militarily Japan was already substantially weakened through the massive carpet bombings before August 1945 and although parts of the Japanese bourgeoisie tried to settle for a truce, the USA decided to launch the first atomic bombs against two Japanese cities because the fight for domination over East Asia saw already a new polarisation between Russia and the USA.

Thus the first major, albeit indirect, clash between Russia and the USA occurred over Japan. But a second theatre of confrontation had already cropped up – the battle over China, where the collapse of Japanese rule sparked the appetites of all the imperialist gangsters.

The People's Republic of China: another imperialist, militaristic monster

During World War II, when an alliance of the USA, the USSR and the two rivalling factions of the Chinese bourgeoisie, Kuomintang and the Maoist led Red Army were fighting against Japan, Mao had proposed his “good services” to the USA, praising his troops as a more determined and more capable ally to the USA.

As the war ceased with Japan, the conflict within the Chinese bourgeoisie burst again into the open – fuelled by the imperialist appetites of Russia and the USA. After 1945 the USA, who had backed up the Chinese United Front against Japan, mobilised all their support for the KMT. In a first step, following the Japanese surrender, the USA through its logistical facilities carried back about one million Japanese soldiers from China to Japan (about one fifth of the whole Japanese army), so that the Japanese soldiers would not fall into Russian hands.

Following this operation to rescue Japanese troops, between October and December 1945 half a million Kuomintang soldiers were also airlifted by US troops from south west to northern China and the coastal centres.

As we showed above, the “United Front” between the Stalinist Red Army and the KMT-forces was a very precarious one, interrupted by repeated conflicts and direct confrontations. Japan had fought against two rivalling wings of Chinese capital that were constantly at loggerheads. But once the “common enemy” – Japanese imperialism – had disappeared, the antagonism between the two warring Chinese factions exploded. In June 1946 war started again between Mao and Chiang. After the deluge of an 8 year long war between China and Japan, then another war ravaged the country. With some 3 million soldiers on its side at the beginning of the conflict, the KMT was initially superior in numbers to the Red Army. The KMT received massive support from the USA. In contrast Russia, which returned forcefully on the imperialist front in east Asia in August 1945, occupied Manchuria which Japan had to abandon, but in its first phase it could not offer as much material (above all military) support to the Red Army troops. On the contrary, due to lack of resources Russia dismantled local equipment and shifted it back to Russia.

With the background of an economic collapse largely due to the incessant war economy (the army used up to 80-90% of the budget), the KMT lost much of its support and many soldiers changed sides. Already between 1937-45 money supply increased 500 times. After 1945, under the impact of the war economy, hyperinflation continued with the ensuing pauperisation of the working class and peasants, who turned away massively from the KMT.

After almost 3 years of continuous fighting, the Red Army managed to impose a crushing defeat on the KMT troops. As many as two million KMT soldiers and supporters fled to Taiwan.

In October 1949 Mao's troops declared ‘mainland’ China to be an independent state. The People's Republic was proclaimed. However, this was not a “socialist revolution”; it marked the military triumph of one wing of the Chinese bourgeoisie (supported by Russia) over another wing of Chinese capital (supported by the USA). The new People's Republic arose on the ruins of a country, which had gone through a 12 year long war - preceded by 3 decades of conflicts waged by insatiable warlords. And as so many other “new” states which were founded in the 20th century, it was proclaimed through a division into two parts, Taiwan and “mainland” China, leaving behind a permanent antagonism which has lasted until today.

Ravaged by decades of war economy, supported not by a technically superior USA, but by Russia, which as in eastern Europe initially plundered raw materials and dismantled equipment in Manchuria and could not offer the same material support, the People's Republic was going to be marked by a great backwardness.

And no sooner had the China war finished in 1949 did the war between North and South Korea break out.

Korea: From its liberation as a colony to plunging into war and division

Two wars had already been fought for the control over the Korean peninsula at the turn of the 19/20th century. In the first one China and Japan clashed in 1894; and in 1904 Russia and Japan had gone to war over hegemony in Korea and Manchuria. Stalin, at the Yalta Conference in 1945, insisted on a division of Korea along the 38th parallel, i.e. a division into north and south, which Russia had already claimed in 1904 before being driven out of the area by Japanese imperialism.

Previously, in August 1945, Russia had occupied Korea down to the 38th parallel just north of Seoul. This constellation lasted from 1945 – 1950, i.e. during the period of the war in China. However, the formation of the Chinese People's Republic added a new element to the imperialist crab basket. After receiving the Russian go-ahead, Kim Il Sung, who had fought for the Russians during World War II, started an offensive beyond the 38th parallel with the hope of driving off the US forces in a blitz from Korean territory.

The war went through four phases:

- In a “blitz-offensive” North-Korean troops marched on Seoul on 25th June 1950. By September 1950 the whole of South Korea was conquered by North Korea, only the area around the city of Pusan resisted the North Korean offensive in a bloody siege and remained in South-Korean hands.

- In a second phase – following the massive mobilisation of US led troops – Seoul was recaptured on September 27th.. The US led UN troops continued their offensive towards the north, and at the end of November 1950 they occupied Pyongyang and reached the Yalu, the border between China and Korea.
- In a third phase, Chinese and North Korean soldiers started a counter attack. On 4th January 1951 Seoul was recaptured by Chinese North Korean troops (with a mobilisation of 400,000 Chinese and 100,000 North Korean soldiers).
- In yet another counter attack Seoul fell back into US hands in March 1951. Between spring 1951 and the end of the truce (July 27th, 1953) the front line hardly moved. The war quickly got “dead-locked” and no major gains were made for 2 years.

The war was a horrendous confrontation between the two superpowers and it became one of the most murderous, destructive ones in the period of the cold war.

During the war the USA tested all sorts of weapons (e.g. they used the chemical weapons Anthrax and Napalm). The intensity of the destructions was so big that almost all towns that were attacked were bombed to the ground, for example the two capitals Seoul and Pyongyang were both flattened under US bombs. The US commander said “we can no longer think of any North Korean town to be bombed, there is hardly any house left standing”. The air force had orders to “destroy every means of communication and every installation, factory, city and village”. The civilian population was taken hostage and fire bombed – in some cases cities were 95% destroyed by fire bombs. Within a year almost the whole country had been bombed to ruins. Neither side managed to impose its military goals. The war “unleashed” rapidly, but it took years to come to a truce. On a military level, the war ended where it started, the border line (as established before the unleashing of the war) did not move.

It is estimated that about two million people died in North Korea, and around one million people in the South. General Curtis LeMay, who directed the bombing of Tokyo in 1945, drew this balance sheet: “We burned down every town in North Korea anyway and some in South Korea too. Over a period of three years or so we killed off 20% of the population of Korea as direct casualties of war, or from starvation and exposure”²³

North Korea lost 11% of its population, with a very high death toll amongst the civilian population. The North Korean army lost some 500,000 soldiers (dead, wounded and missing), the Chinese army suffered some 900,000 casualties, the South Korean army some 300,000, and the USA suffered the fourth largest number of casualties in US history; 142,000 soldiers died altogether.

The war was the first massive military appearance of Chinese imperialism. China, which had been dependent on Russian arms sales, at the same time tried to compensate its limited arsenal of weapons by the almost unlimited use of human cannon-fodder. Mao did not hide the ruthless and reckless military ambitions of his regime, when he declared in 1952: “The war has been a great learning experience for us... These exercises are better

than any military academy. If we continue fighting another year then we will have rotated all our troops to become acquainted with war”.²⁴ Even when the war was drawing to a close in 1953 China was preparing its sixth offensive with the largest number of soldiers ever mobilised for an offensive against the USA. Already by October 1951 China had mobilised 1.5 million soldiers, and the country was pulverising half of its state budget for the war.

In October 1951 the USA had to quadruple their defence spending to cover the spiralling costs of the war.

Both sides were ready to throw in all their military and economic weight. Stalin, Mao, Chiang and Truman had all formed one front against the Japanese only 6 years beforehand, at the time of World War II. During the Korean war they were searching for possible ways of annihilating each other. The military authorities envisaged the nuclear bombing of 24 Chinese cities, amongst the planned targets of nuclear attacks were Shanghai, Nanking, Beijing, Mukden.

Ever since, the country has been a permanent zone of conflicts with the highest level of militarization. South Korea is supported by the USA, for whom the country is an important bridgehead. Much like Japan, South Korea was quickly reconstructed with US help.

The North which is both a vital buffer zone but also an important bridgehead for threatening Japan is a crucial key for China’s and Russia’s imperialist strategies. Reconstructed following the Stalinist model, the Northern part shows many parallels with the former Eastern European regimes. Although more developed economically than the South before 1945 and more equipped in raw materials and energy resources, the North developed a similar backwardness –typical of regimes suffocated by militarism and run by a Stalinist clique. In the same way as the Soviet Union was unable to survive through economic competitiveness on the world market but only through military means and the permanent threat of the use of its army, North Korea is unable to compete with economic means on the world market. Its major export product are weapons.

The end of World War II and of the Korean war had left the whole of mainland China, Japan and the Korean peninsula in ruins. War had ravaged large areas of Asia. Moreover, one of the consequences of the new imperialist constellation of the cold war was that two countries, China and Korea were divided into two parts, (the People’s Republic and Taiwan, North and South Korea) each side being an ally of one of the blocks. Both Japan and South Korean, which had been flattened by war, quickly received US funds to speed up their reconstruction in order to turn them into strong economic and military supporters of the USA in their confrontation with the Russian rival and its allies.

Suggestions for further reading

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- Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London, 1974,
- *International Review* n°81, 84, 94, "A Link in the Chain of Imperialist War", 1995

²³ (Jörg Friedrich, Yalu, p. 516).

²⁴ (Jörg Friedrich, Yalu, p. 425)

Imperialism in Asia in the 21st century

Introduction

During the first half of 2012 several successful or failed long-distance missile tests by Korea (North and South), China, India and Pakistan have turned a spotlight on the ambitions of all the bigger Asian countries. At the same time gigantic orders of warships have highlighted the ongoing militarisation of the blue waters²⁵ across all Asia. In fact, all the Asian countries have been forced to position themselves in relation to the newly emerging powers China and India. Their ambitions and the US strategy of creating a counter-weight to China have unleashed an arms race engulfing all Asia.

While commentary in the press has until recently concentrated mainly on their double-digit growth figures, the economic rise of the two Asian powers has inevitably been accompanied by a rise in their imperialist ambitions. To understand this situation, we first need to place it within a broader historical context.

Asia's overall weight in world production is returning to the historical norm prior to the rise of European capitalism. Between the 11-17th century China commanded the world's biggest fleet. Until the 18th century, China led Europe technically. In 1750 China's share of world manufacturing was almost one third, whereas Europe's still stood at only one quarter. But with the 19th century expansion of capitalist powers into China and India, both countries²⁶ were overshadowed and their relative share of world production declined.

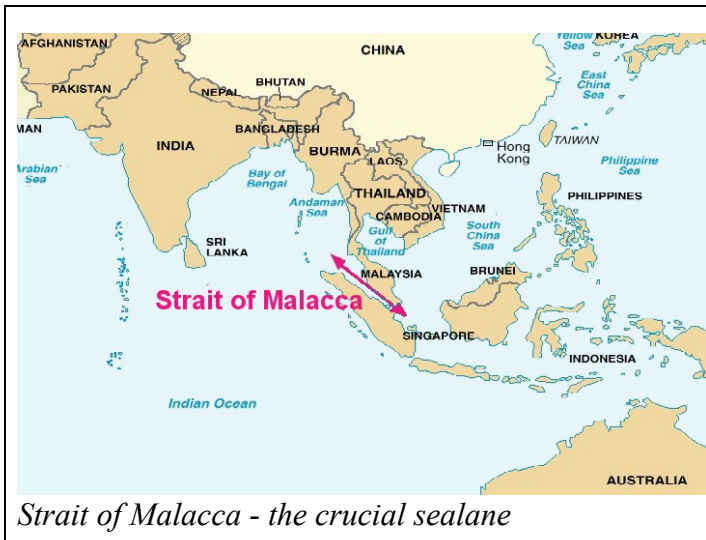
Today, China is recovering its original position as one of the world's major centres of production and power. But can its return to centre-stage be "peaceful" and "harmonious" as its leadership claims?

All the Far Eastern countries²⁷ rely heavily on sea lanes which run through three bottle-necks: the South China Sea (SCS), the Strait of Malacca (between Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia) and the Strait of Hormus (between Iran and Dubai). *“More than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage passes through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, (Indonesia) with the majority continuing on into the South China Sea. Tanker traffic through the Strait of Malacca leading into the South China Sea is more than three times*

greater than Suez Canal traffic, and well over five times more than the Panama Canal. Virtually all shipping that passes through the Malacca and Sunda Straits must pass near the Spratly Islands”.²⁸

90% of Japan's imported oil passes through the South China Sea. Almost 80% of China's oil passes through the Strait of Malacca. At the moment the largely USA dominates these bottlenecks. As an emerging power China finds this situation unbearable – because their control by a single power like the USA could strangle China.

Although the 20th century's first major imperialist conflict took place between two Asian powers (the Russo-Japanese war of 1905), the main battles of World War I took place in Europe and the battle fields in Asia remained marginal, World War II, however, involved Asia far more deeply in the general destruction. Some of the fiercest and bloodiest battles took place in Asia. After World War II, while the European continent was divided by the “Iron Curtain”, stretching across Central Europe through divided Germany, four Asian countries were divided in two: Korea, China, Vietnam (since reunited) and India. Whereas in Europe the Iron Curtain



Strait of Malacca - the crucial sealane

came down in 1989, the divisions in Asia continue to exist, each of them creating permanent conflicts and some of the world's most militarised border zones (North / South Korea, Peoples' Republic of China / Taiwan, Pakistan / India). But now it is not only the conflicts between the divided countries which continue to fuel imperialist tensions, it is above all the rise of a new challenger, China, and the reactions by the neighbouring countries and the challenged super-power, the USA, which aggravate the tensions.

Asia 1945-1989

While the confrontation between the Russian bloc countries and the US bloc was at the centre of the Cold War after 1945, China has the specificity of having clashed simultaneously with the two bloc leaders of the time, the USA and Russia. Thus the imperialist rivalries in the East have never been limited to conflicts between the two blocs: ever since its liberation from Japanese colonialism China has shown a tendency to try to “go it alone”. When the East-West confrontation ended in 1989, the seeds of a new confrontation between China and the USA, which had been retarded by the situation of the Cold War between 1972-1989, were to germinate. In the context of a general disorder on the imperialist stage, China's economic emergence necessarily set the clock ticking for new military confrontations with the USA.

²⁵ This refers to the notion of a "blue-water navy", a rather imprecise term which generally indicates a navy capable of projecting power in international waters outside its own coastal waters.

²⁶ India of course was not a country in the 19th century. Indeed India as a single political unit cannot be said to have existed until the British Raj.

²⁷ The term "Far East" is of course entirely Euro-centric. For the USA, the region is the "Far West", while for Asian countries themselves the region is obviously central. We therefore use the term purely as a matter of convention and literary convenience.

²⁸ cf. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/spratly-ship.htm> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shipping_routes_red_black.png

The imperialist development in Asia has been marked by the specificity of India and China.

China entered the post-war period devastated by militarism: repeated intervention by Western imperialism during the 19th century, the collapse of central state power and the rise of warlordism, Japanese invasion and more than ten years of bitter and barbaric warfare, then civil war between the Kuomintang and the Red Army, until the Communist Party of China (CPC) seized power in 1949. All this left the country in a state of extreme economic backwardness (made even more catastrophic by the attempt to catch up with the developed world during the "Great Leap Forward") and militarily weak, dependent on the sheer weight of numbers of a poorly armed peasant army. In the case of India, whose economy was equally backward in relation to foreign competitors due to the long weight of colonialism, the new ruling faction which took over power after independence in 1947 aggravated this condition with its semi-isolationist policy. Both India and China cut themselves off in different degrees from the world market. Thus Stalinism in the specific form of Maoism in China, semi-isolation in the specific form of Ghandism in India were historic chains which meant the two rivals started their emergence from a low initial level of development. The determination of the Chinese ruling class to adapt its forces substantially and with a long-term view to challenging the USA is thus all the more striking.

Since 1989 a change has been unfolding in Asia's imperialist hierarchy: overall, China and India have been on the rise, Japan has been on a relative decline, while Russia, after almost disappearing from the world scene after the implosion of the USSR, is making something of a comeback. The position of the only remaining superpower, the USA, has been weakened – not only in Asia but throughout the world. The USA is now struggling to maintain its superiority in Asia.

The situation in Asia is dominated by a complex web of shifting alliances and counter-alliances. Each state is trying to fend off the ambitions of its rivals, while all of them want to restrain China's dominance without becoming mere puppets of the only power able to confront China: the USA. This web of alliances can be seen all along the different zones of conflict from North Korea via Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.

China's imperialist ambitions in continuity with decades of militarism

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded on the basis of the partition between the PRC and Taiwan – each with their supporting bloc (the USA and Russia). The history of the PRC since its foundation has been marked by a series of military conflicts with its neighbours:

- 1952: China was heavily involved in the Korean War. This was the first big clash between the USA and the Soviet Union and China on the Korean peninsula.
- 1950-1951 Chinese troops occupied Tibet. Between 1956-59 there was prolonged fighting between the Chinese army and Tibetan guerrillas.
- 1958: China bombarded Taiwan's Quemoy and Matsu islands.

- 1962: China was involved in a border dispute with India in the Himalayas. Since then China has been a staunch defender of Pakistan in its stand-off with India.
- 1963-64: After having been allies for more than a dozen years China and the Soviet Union split. While the Soviet Union was engaged in an arms race with the US bloc, an additional confrontation arose between China and the Soviet Union. In March 1969 a serious clash occurred at the Ussuri River with dozens of Russian soldiers killed or wounded. By 1972, 44 Soviet divisions were stationed along the 7000km border with China (Russia had "only" 31 stationed in Europe). One quarter of Soviet aviation was transferred to its eastern border. In 1964 the USA envisaged the possibility of a nuclear attack - together with Russia - against China. And in 1969 the Russians still had plans to launch nuclear missiles against China.²⁹ The conflict between the USA and China ebbed in the early 1970s. After a long and bloody war trying to prevent South Vietnam from falling into Russian hands, in 1972 the USA succeeded in "neutralising" China, while the confrontation between China and Russia continued and took the form of proxy wars. Thus between 1975-1979, soon after the end of war in Vietnam, a first proxy war broke out between Vietnam (supported by Russia) and Cambodia (supported by China); others followed, particularly in Africa.
- 1979: China fared disastrously in a 16-day war with Vietnam, where both sides mobilized between them more than one million soldiers and left tens of thousands of victims behind. The Chinese army's weaknesses were made glaringly obvious. In 1993 it abandoned the "people's war" or "war of attrition" tactics, based on the sacrifice of an unlimited number of soldiers. The adaptation to war under high-tech conditions was initiated after this experience.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 the PRC entered a tri-partite alliance with the U.S. and Pakistan, to sponsor Islamist Afghan armed resistance to the Soviet Occupation (1979–89). China acquired military equipment from America to defend itself from Soviet attack. The Chinese People's Liberation Army trained and supported the Afghan Mujahidin during the Soviet o³⁰.

Thus during the first four decades of its existence, the People's Republic of China was involved in armed conflict with almost all of its neighbors: the Soviet Union, Korea and the USA, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, India. And for many years during the Cold War, China clashed with both bloc leaders simultaneously. Of the fourteen separate nation states that border China, ten still have outstanding frontier disputes with it. Thus the present sharpening of tensions in particular with the USA is not new, it is in continuity with decades of conflict. That said, in recent years a new polarisation around China has emerged.

While for decades the PRC had its troops massed at the Russian border, concentrated its forces for protecting its coast line and maintained readiness to wage war with Taiwan, in the early 1990s the PRC systematically started to adapt to the new world situation created by the collapse of the USSR.

²⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-Soviet_border_conflict

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-Soviet_split

China takes to the seas

Beijing policy during the past 20 years has aimed at:

1) Developing a long-term strategy to operate in blue-water seas, combined with efforts to acquire or develop its weapons for cyberspace and space, and to enhance its aviation's range and striking power. The long-term aim is to prevent the USA from being the dominant force in the Pacific - the military call this "anti-access/area denial" capabilities. The idea is to use pinpoint ground attack and anti-ship missiles, a growing fleet of modern submarines, cyber and anti-satellite weapons to destroy or disable another nation's military assets from afar. This marks a shift away from devoting the bulk of the PLA's modernisation drive to the goal of capturing Taiwan. Whereas historically the goal of recapturing Taiwan and acting as a coastal force defending its coast line with a certain "continental" outlook was the main strategic orientation, China now aims to advance into blue-water. This more assertive posture was influenced by the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis that saw two US carriers humiliate Beijing in its home waters. China is investing heavily in "asymmetric capabilities" designed to blunt America's once-overwhelming capacity to project power in the region. Thus China aims to be able to launch disabling attacks on American bases in the western Pacific and push America's carrier groups beyond what it calls the "first island chain", sealing off the Yellow Sea, South China Sea and East China Sea inside an arc running from the Aleutians in the north to Borneo in the south. In the western Pacific, that would mean targeting or putting in jeopardy America's aircraft-carrier groups and its air-force bases in Okinawa, South Korea and even Guam. Since World War II, America's allies in the Asia-Pacific region have counted on the U.S. to provide a security umbrella. But now "*The assumption that U.S. and allied naval surface vessels can operate with high security in all parts of the Western Pacific is no longer valid*" a US report has said. U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups, it said, are becoming "increasingly vulnerable" to Chinese surveillance and weaponry up to 1,200 nautical miles from China's coast³¹.

2) At the same time China wants to have a presence at various maritime bottle-necks, which means expanding into the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Unable to snatch territories from its neighbours in the north, east and west, it must focus its forces on imposing its presence in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean (far sea defence) and towards the Middle East. This means above all it must undermine the still dominant US position in the blue waters. While claiming a dominant position in the South China Sea, it has started to set up a "string of pearls" around India and is stretching out its fingers towards the Middle East.

A deadly "string of pearls"

In addition to the long-standing close links with the regimes in Pakistan and Burma, China has been following a "string of pearls" strategy of setting up bases and building diplomatic ties. Some examples:

- Signature of a military agreement with Cambodia.
- Funding the construction of a canal across the Kra Isthmus in Thailand. The canal is planned to be 102 kilometres long and 500 metres wide and is to link the Indian Ocean to China's Pacific coast – a project on the scale of the

³¹ (http://www.fpiif.org/articles/asias_mad_arms_race)

Panama Canal. It could tip Asia's balance of power in China's favour by giving China's fleet and merchant navy easy access to a vast oceanic continuum stretching all the way from East Africa to Japan and the Korean Peninsula. This proposed canal would challenge Singapore's position as the main regional port and help Chinese vessels to avoid the straits of Malacca. This has great strategic significance for the naval balance of power, and challenges India's present dominant position in the Bay of Bengal³².

- Construction of strategic infrastructure in Tibet and Myanmar.
- Developing a port facility in Sittwe, Myanmar.
- Electronic intelligence gathering facilities on islands in the Bay of Bengal.
- Assistance to Bangladesh in developing its deep-sea port in Chittagong, sales of missile boats to Bangladesh.
- Extensive military aid to Sri Lanka. China helped Sri Lanka to win the war against the Tamil Tigers in 2009, it also invested in the development of ports in Hambantota.
- Building a naval base at Marao in the Maldives.
- Setting up its first military base abroad in Seychelles.
- Developing the Gwadar port on the south-west coast of Pakistan. China's involvement in the construction of the deep-sea port of Gwadar has attracted much attention given its strategic location, about 70 kilometres from the Iranian border and 400 kilometres east of the Strait of Hormuz - the world's major oil supply route. It has been suggested that it will provide China with a "listening post" from where it can monitor US naval activity in the Persian Gulf and Indian activity in the Arabian Sea.
- An anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden.

The construction of such a "string of pearls" would allow China to threaten shipping at the three crucial bottlenecks in the Indian Ocean – Bab el Mandeb (connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden), the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca. Chinese naval officers speak of developing in the long-term three ocean-going fleets to patrol the seas around Japan and Korea, the Western Pacific, the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean.

As an emerging power, China claims more weight and influence, but this can only be at the expense of other countries, in particular at the expense of the USA. This polarises the whole regional situation. Countries are drawn towards China, or into the arms of the USA, whether they like it or not.

The Chinese ruling class want to make us believe that Beijing's rise is meant to be a peaceful one, and that China has no expansionist intentions, that it will be a different kind of great power. The reality of the past 20 years shows that China's rise is inseparable from increased imperial and military ambitions. While it is unthinkable that China could today defeat the USA or set up a new Chinese-led bloc, the main impact of China's rise has been to undermine US superiority: its ambitions have triggered a new arms race. In addition, its increased weight world wide has encouraged the weakened former bloc leader,

³² (http://www.chinasecurity.us/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=179)

Russia, to act side-by-side with China in many conflicts with the USA (e.g. Syria, Iran) and to support (overtly or covertly) all those regimes which are denounced by the USA as “rogue states” (North Korea, Iran) or which are “failed states” such as Pakistan. Although Russia is also not interested in seeing China becoming too strong, and while Moscow has no intention of becoming a servant of China, Russia has realised that acting together with China against the USA offers it greater new room for manoeuvre. This explains Russia's naval exercises with China in the Yellow Sea.

The arms race between China and its rivals

Since 1989, the Chinese military budget has risen by an average of 12.9 percent per year: according to GlobalSecurity.org, it is now the second-largest on the planet. The overall US budget for national security – not counting the various wars Washington is embroiled in – is running at over \$800 billion, although some estimates place it above \$1 trillion. Global research group IHS has forecast Beijing's military outlay to double from its 2011 US\$119.8 billion, to US\$238.2 billion by 2015. That exceeds the amount spent by the region's 12 key defense markets, including Japan and India. In 2011 Chinese military spending was 80% higher than that of Japan, and 200% higher than those of India. China's military budget in 2011 was 2.5 times bigger than the 2001 figure and has doubled every five years. China's military budget takes up 30% of the Asian total, although according to Western defense officials those totals do not include arms imports.

Thus in reality the overall military budget is much higher. If the forecast is accurate, China's military spending will overtake the combined military spending of NATO's top eight members, bar the US. And while in the year 2000 the US military budget was still 20 times higher than the Chinese, in 2011/2012 the relation is 7:1.³³

China's modernisation efforts have been directed mainly at developing longer range missiles and increasing its cyber-war capabilities. Its navy is now believed to be the third largest in the world behind only the US and Russia. The PLA's infantry contingent has been reduced, while the navy, air force and the Second Artillery Corps – responsible for China's nuclear missiles – have all been increased.

While Chinese growth rates have often reached double figures, its military budget has grown even faster. To be sure, the Chinese army started from a weak position of, since the majority of its forces were land forces, poorly equipped and

mainly seen as cannon fodder for big land battles. The Chinese military has little fighting experience. Their troops have not seen action since 1979 when they were given a drubbing by Vietnam. In contrast US troops have been fighting, modernising, and adapting their weaponry and tactics constantly, developing anti-satellite weapons, anti-ship missiles, cruise missiles, and cyber-warfare capabilities. The PLA's ability to undertake complex joint operations in a hostile environment is untested. China's missile and submarine forces could pose a threat to American carrier groups near its coast, but it will be some time until they can do so further afield. Learning to use all these newly acquired weapons in battle is likely to take years. Nevertheless, these ambitious armaments projects and China's expansionist strategy mean that the USA now perceives it among “major and emerging powers” as the country with “*greatest potential to compete militarily*” with the United States. Although even according to the Pentagon the Chinese military is “*still decades away from possessing a comprehensive capability to engage and defeat a modern adversary beyond China's boundaries*”, leaders in the USA warn that “*China's military is growing and modernizing.*” “*We must be vigilant. We must be strong. We must be prepared to confront any challenge. But the key to that region is going to be to develop a new era of defense cooperation between our countries, one in which our military shares security burdens in order to advance peace.*” (the 2012 US defence secretary Panetta³⁴).



Source: http://japanfocus.org/-Harsh_V_-Pant/3353

Oil lanes and a deadly string of pearls

As a consequence of the construction of the “string of pearls” and the growing Chinese presence in the Pacific, its neighbours have been compelled to adapt their military planning. Some examples:

Japan has switched from having its weapons targeted principally at the Soviet Union to focus more on China. Despite the effects of the economic crisis Japan plans to spend \$284 billion between 2011 and 2015 – including the deployment of more US Patriot missiles; the navy is to receive more blue-water ships. Japan and China are currently engaged in a dispute over a group of rocky islets lying on the edge of the continental

³³ Sources:
<http://defensetech.org/2011/05/19/pla-chinese-military-doesnt-compare-to-u-s-military/>
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/budget.htm>
 Shen Dingli in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2012

³⁴ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/243756.html>

shelf about 100 miles north-east of Taiwan (in Japanese Senkaku-island, Diaoyu Islands in Chinese).³⁵

In 2006, **South Korea** launched a 15-year military-modernization program projected to cost some \$550 billion, with about one-third slated for arms purchases. In 2012 it tested cruise missiles with a range of 930 miles, able to reach any location in North Korea. In view of the latest clashes with North Korea more money is to be made available for additional weapons.³⁶

Australia is increasing its armaments budget, and has agreed to the deployment of an additional 2500 US soldiers and the construction of a new US base in the country.

South China Sea: first link in a chain of conflicts

"It not only contains oil and gas resources strategically located near large energy-consuming countries but also is the world's second busiest international sea lane that links North-East Asia and the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East, traversing the South China Sea. More than half of the world's shipping tonnage sails through the South China Sea each year. Over 80% of the oil for Japan, South Korea and Taiwan flows through the area.

Jose Almonte, former national security adviser to the Philippine government, is blunt about the strategic importance of the area: The great power that controls the South China Sea will dominate both archipelagic and peninsular Southeast Asia and play a decisive role in the future of the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean – together with their strategic sea lanes to and from the oil fields of the Middle East."³⁷

The South China Sea is not only a vital shipping lane, it is also estimated to be rich in oil, natural gas, precious raw materials and fisheries whose rights of exploitation have not been agreed. These military-strategic, economic factors create an explosive mixture.

The conflicts between the littoral states over the domination in this zone is not new. In 1978 Vietnam and China clashed over the control of the Spratly islands (Vietnam, which was supported by Moscow at the time, claimed the Spratly islands for itself, the Chinese leader Deng Tsiao Ping warned Moscow that China was prepared for a full-scale war against the USSR). China's more aggressive stand took another turn after 1991 when China took the first steps to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of US forces from the Philippines in 1991. China revived its "historical" claims to all the islets, including the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, and 80% of the 3.5 million km² body of water along a nine-dotted U-shaped line,

notwithstanding a complete absence of international legal justification. Despite negotiations no resolution has been forthcoming over the two large island groups—the Paracels (or Xisha and Zhongsha), over which China clashed again with Vietnam in 1988 and 1992. The islets can be used as air and sea bases for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities, and as base points for claiming the deeper part of the South China Sea for Chinese missile submarines and other vessels. China is reported to be building an land-sea missile base in southern China's Guangdong Province, with missiles capable of reaching the Philippines and Vietnam. The base is regarded as an effort to enforce China's territorial claims to vast areas of the South China Sea claimed by neighbouring countries, and to confront American aircraft carriers that now patrol the area unmolested. China has even declared the zone as "a core interest" - raising it to the same level of significance as Tibet and Taiwan.

The SCS is the most fragile, the most unstable zone because China does not compete with just one big rival. It faces a number of smaller and weaker countries – Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia – all of which are too small to defend themselves alone. As a result all the neighbouring countries have to look for help from a bigger ally. This means first and foremost the USA, but also Japan and India which have offered these states their "protection". The latter two countries have participated in a number of manoeuvres in the area, for example with Vietnam and Singapore.

A main focus of the arms race which has been triggered in Asia can be seen in the SCS countries. Although Vietnam does not have the military and financial means to go toe-to-toe with China, it has been purchasing weapons from European and Russian companies – including submarines. Arms imports are on the rise in Malaysia. Between 2005 and 2009 the country increased its arms imports sevenfold in comparison to the

preceding five year period. The tiny city-state of Singapore, which plans to acquire two submarines, is now among the world's top 10 arms importers. Australia plans to spend as much as \$279 billion over the next 20 years on new subs, destroyers and fighter planes. Indonesia wants to acquire long-range missiles and purchase 100 German tanks. The Philippines are spending almost \$1 billion on new aircraft and radar. China has about 62 submarines now and is expected to add 15 in coming years. India, South Korea and Vietnam are expected to get six more submarines apiece by 2020. Australia plans to add 12 over the next 20 years. Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia are each adding two. Together, the moves constitute one of the largest build-ups of submarines since the early years of the Cold War. Asian nations are expected to buy as many as 111 submarines over the next 20 years.³⁸



Source: globalsecurity.org

China's territorial claims

³⁵ (<http://factsanddetails.com/japan.php?itemid=819&catid=22&subcatid=148>)

³⁶ (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/rok/budget.htm>)

³⁷ <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Suisheng-Zhao/2978>

³⁸ (www.wsj.com - February 12,2011)

Another hotspot: the Indian Ocean...

The Pacific and the SCS are not the only theatre of imperialist rivalries: the Indian Ocean is becoming another area of confrontation.

The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are considered among the most strategically important in the world—according to the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, more than 80% of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean bottlenecks, with 40% passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35% through the Strait of Malacca and 8% through the Bab el-Mandab Strait. Half the world's containerized cargo sails through this vital waterway. It is not just a question of sea lanes and trade, however. More than half the world's armed conflicts are presently located in the Indian Ocean region. In addition to being the theatre of the imperialist ambitions of China and India, there is the permanent threat of a potential nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, permanent conflict around Iran, Islamist terrorism, increasing piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, and conflicts over diminishing fishery resources.

In fact the Indian Ocean is a crucial “interface” between the zone of imperialist tensions in the Middle East and rising tensions in the Far East, the South China Sea, and the broader Pacific. Although it has been speculated that the Indian Ocean might contain 40% of the world's oil reserves, and there is fresh exploration for oil in the seas of India, Sri Lanka and Burma, the Ocean's importance has increased since the relative decline of US power in the region has left a void that is increasingly being filled by China and India.

China is not the only country enhancing its presence in the Indian Ocean. Japan is eager to participate in the efforts to contain China and has promised Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia \$7.18 billion in development aid over the next three years to help build up infrastructure, including high-speed rail, port and water supply projects. But it is above all India, the biggest country on the littoral which has traditionally had a land-oriented strategic outlook, that has been obliged to counter China's penetration into the Indian Ocean. Much is at stake for India: India imports some 70% of its oil and gas, and some two-thirds of this travels through the Indian Ocean. India is the fourth-largest consumer of oil in the world, and it relies on crude shipments from Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia and Iran. It also imports large amounts of coal from Indonesia and Australia. These dependencies and the crucial role of the sea lanes along its shores have made India very vulnerable from the sea. And of course, India's emergence as a new regional player has increased its imperialist appetite.

India – firmly in the grip of militarist cancer

Historically, India was considered the crown jewel of the British empire. When after World War II the British colonial rulers could no longer control India, they divided it. Almost at the same time as Korea and China, the old Raj was divided in two – into a Muslim dominated Pakistan and a multi-religious India with a Hindu majority.³⁹ The two countries have been engaged in a permanent cold war, and four hot wars, ever since.

³⁹ The partition was one of history's biggest operations of ethnic cleansing, displacing up to 10 million people and leaving up to a million dead.

No sooner was independence declared in 1947 than a military conflict with the rival Pakistan erupted for control of the strategically vital and disputed territory of Kashmir. Pakistan occupied one third of Kashmir while India occupied three fifths (a part of Kashmir is still occupied by China). In the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 India attacked Pakistan on all fronts after attempts by Pakistani troops to infiltrate into Indian-controlled Kashmir. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 was fought over the issue of self rule in East Pakistan; Pakistan was decisively defeated, resulting in the creation of Bangladesh.⁴⁰

In 1999 Pakistan and India fought an 11-week-long border skirmish in the disputed northern Kashmir province. And during the past years repeated terrorist attacks – supported by Pakistan – have contributed to maintain the hostility between the two nuclear powers.

At the time of India's independence, the Indian ruling class was still able to keep clear of the emerging confrontation between the US-led Western and Russian led Eastern bloc. India took part in setting up the “non-aligned movement”, basically because the main line of confrontation between the two blocs was in Europe and in the Far East (e.g. the Korean war). Since membership of the non-aligned nations⁴¹ cut India off from US military support, it was forced to turn to Russia for military equipment and supplies, and even for some industrial investment, though the country was never part of the Russian bloc. However, India's attempt to keep out of the East-West confrontation could not prevent a clash with China, and in 1962 the two countries were engaged in the brief Sino-Indian War over the border in the Himalayas. The war convinced the Indian military to refocus on rearmament and an improvement in relations with the United States.

Thus India faces two arch enemies, Pakistan and China, with China heavily supporting Pakistan. Despite various diplomatic efforts the border disputes between India and China have not disappeared. India claims that China occupies more than 14,000 square miles of Indian territory in the Aksai Chin along its northern border in Kashmir (commonly referred to as the western sector), while China lays claim to more than 34,000 square miles of India's north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh (commonly referred to as the eastern sector). India also is a long-term host to the Dalai Lama and about 100,000 Tibetan refugees who fled China's annexation of Tibet in 1950. In recent years China has also intensified its military build up along the Indian border, in particular in Tibet. For example the PLA Air Force has established at least four airbases in Tibet and three in southern China capable of mounting operations against India.⁴²

With the exception of the British, India's rulers have historically had a land-based outlook. Since India's independence, all the major conflicts in which it has been involved, or which have broken out in the region (Afghanistan,

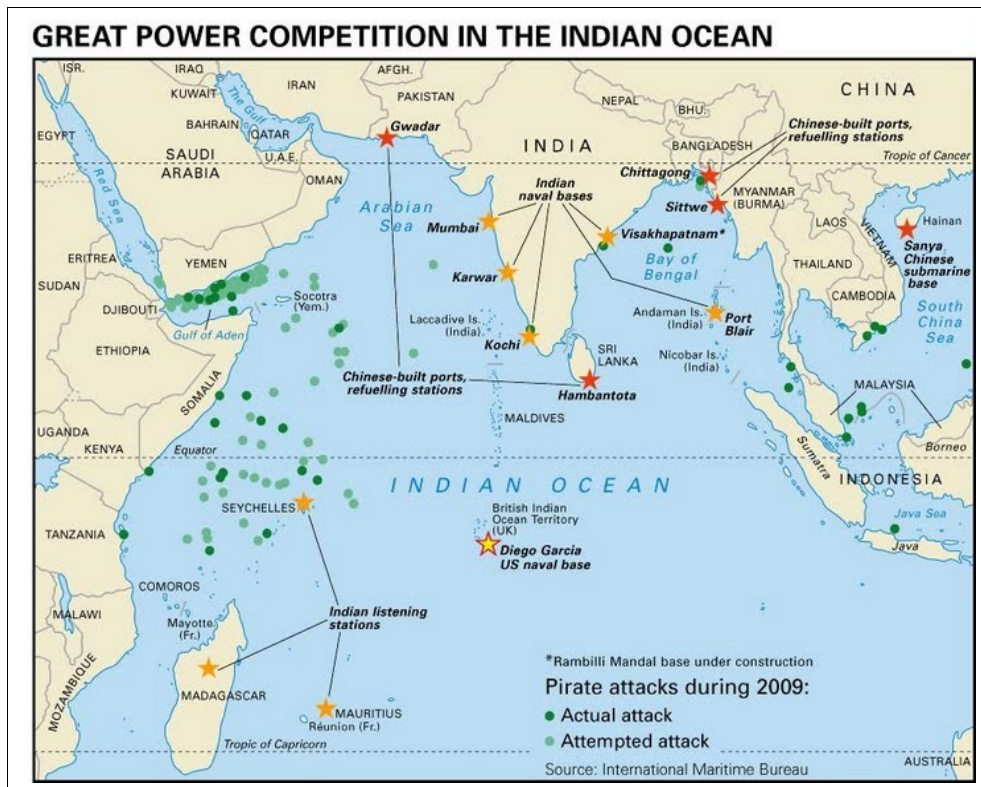
⁴⁰ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Pakistani_wars_and_conflicts

⁴¹ The Non-Aligned Movement was founded in 1961 in Belgrade by the leaders of Yugoslavia, Egypt, India, and Indonesia. It attempted to create a space between the two blocs by playing off one against the other. Its room for manoeuvre can be judged by the fact that Castro's Cuba – at the time totally dependent on Russia aid for its survival – was also a member.

⁴² <http://blogs.reuters.com/india-expertzone/2011/07/19/the-china-challenge-a-strategic-vision-for-u-s-india-relations/?print=1&r=>

Iraq, Iran) have taken place on land, without any major sea battles. The rapid development of Indian naval power is thus a recent phenomenon and can only be explained by the global confrontation unfolding in Asia. Having focused mostly on the threat from Pakistan and China on its north-eastern flank, India is now faced with an additional challenge – defending its position in the Indian Ocean.⁴³

It is therefore no surprise that India has ordered 350 T-90S tanks (from Russia) as well as some 250-300 fighter planes, and that it has decided to produce some 1000 tanks in India itself.⁴⁴



To counter China's "string of pearls" strategy the Indian Navy is growing longer sea legs by acquiring aircraft carriers, tankers and troop ships. Over the next decade, India plans to introduce 100 new warships to its naval forces. India now has the world's fifth-largest navy. Whereas India continues to modernise its territorial forces and needs to keep thousands of troops mobilised at its border with Pakistan, the Chinese military has put even more emphasis on its blue water navies and increasing its out-of-area ballistic capabilities.

Being inferior to China on a military and economic level, Chinese expansion into the Indian Ocean has compelled India to look for an ally whose interests are also opposed to those of China; hence the convergence of interests between the USA and India. It is revealing that India, which in the 1950s could stay out of the major East-West conflict is now being pulled into a power struggle with China and forced to side with the USA. India already holds more joint military exercises annually with the US than any other nation. Despite strong hesitations

⁴³ <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/04/indian-navys-nuclear-submarine-adventure-begins-afresh/>

⁴⁴ Sources: <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/indian-army-wants-to-add-another-1000-t90s-tanks-by-2020-updated-02697/>
<http://www.asian-defence.net/2011/10/india-clears-275-mn-order-for-t-72-tank.html>

amongst certain parts of the Indian ruling class, which are suspicious of the USA after so many years of close ties with the Soviet Union, India and the USA are condemned to "partnership". The USA have no choice but to foster the modernisation and arming of India. In this context they have tacitly or directly supported steps towards developing the Indian nuclear industry – which can only be seen by both Pakistan and China as a direct threat.

*"Firstly, the geo-strategic rationale for an alliance between the US and India is the encirclement or containment of the People's Republic of China, India can be the only counterweight to China in the region. The other rationale or intentions of such cooperation are the neutralization of Russia as a player in Central Asia and the securing of energy resources for both the US and India. The US also has used India in its objective of trying to isolate Iran."*⁴⁵

Much like China and the South-East Asian countries, India has intensified its arms build-up. India's defence budget, which was roughly \$32 billion in 2011, has increased 151% in the last decade. India's defence spending will rise by 17% in the financial year 2012-13, and the government expects military spending to grow at about 8.33% annually in coming years. India's import of major weapons increased by 38% between 2002-2006 and 2007-2011. India purchased some \$12.7 billion in arms, 80 percent of that from Russia, during 2007-2011, according to the SIPRI.⁴⁶

India has established listening posts in northern Madagascar, the Seychelles, and Mauritius; in late 2009, it successfully co-opted the Maldives as part of its southern naval command. India has established its first military base on foreign soil at Ayni in Tajikistan. In this context the latest tests of long-range missiles are part of this global strategy of Indian imperialism.

India has started to develop closer economic and above all military ties with other countries that feel threatened by China, notably Japan and Vietnam. India has prioritised strengthening relations with Japan through increasing military contacts, maritime cooperation, and trade and investment ties. Tokyo in turn has pledged \$4.5 billion in soft loans for the Delhi-Mumbai railway freight corridor. A joint security declaration with Japan was signed in 2008, calling their partnership "an essential pillar for the future architecture of the region."⁴⁷ Japan participated repeatedly in the Malabar naval exercises in

⁴⁵ See www.globalresearch.org, October 17, 2009, Geo-strategic Chessboard: War Between India and China? By Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya.

⁴⁶ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute <http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/rise-in-international-arms-transfers-is-driven-by-asian-demand-says-sipri>

⁴⁷ <http://www.firstpost.com/world/china-india-tensions-now-spill-over-into-high-seas-74278.html>

the Indian Ocean. India feels particularly threatened not only by the Pakistan-China connection, but it is also alarmed by China's major financial and military support to the strategically important Sri Lanka. The attitude of the Myanmar regime, which for years had privileged links with China, is another factor of uncertainty. Thus India is faced on its western, northern, southern and eastern side and all along its shores by increased pressure from China. As we mentioned above, the Indian army is locked down in a permanent defence of its land borders. China makes periodic incursions into the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which borders Tibet and is claimed by Beijing. China has countered US support for Indian nuclear power by the sale of two new nuclear reactors to Pakistan. Furthermore, the PLA has a presence in the Pakistan-administered Kashmir areas of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. With China already controlling one fifth of Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian army is facing the reality of a Chinese presence on both the eastern and western flanks of the volatile Kashmir region.

As we shall see below, the contradicting interests in the Indian Ocean and the strategy of arming and looking for allies contains many unpredictable elements. For example early 2008 India launched an Israeli spy satellite (TechSAR/Polaris) into space. The Israeli satellite seems to be mainly aimed against Iran. Israel is supplying India with the latest electronic technology and there are indications which point to a closer cooperation between the USA-India-Israel.⁴⁸ In this context of growing tensions in Asia India is an important player in a major naval build-up running from the coastline of East Africa and the Arabian Sea to Oceania. Apart from major presence the fleets of the US and its NATO allies in the Indian Ocean, the naval fleets of Iran, India, China, Japan, and Australia have been expanding, using the real problem of piracy in the region to justify their increased presence.⁴⁹ An international overview shows that while the old industrial countries, suffocating under the crushing weight of the economic crisis, have been forced to reduce or freeze their armaments expenditure, all the emerging Asian countries are relentlessly increasing their arms spending. According to the latest figures released by the SIPRI, the world's five largest arms importers in 2007-2011 were all Asian states. India was the world's single largest recipient of arms, accounting for 10% of global arms imports, followed by South Korea (6%), Pakistan (5%), China (5%) and Singapore (4%). These five countries accounted for 30% of the volume of international arms imports, according to the SIPRI. This simultaneous build-up of advanced weaponry in the Asia-Pacific and South-East-Asia region is on a scale and at a speed not seen since the Cold War arms race between the USA and the Soviet Union.

While tensions rise in East-Asia and South-East Asia, the recent sharpening of tensions in the Middle East makes it very likely that any escalation of conflicts in the Middle East and its surrounding zone will have strong repercussions on the imperialist constellation in Asia.

⁴⁸ (<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=7453>)

⁴⁹ (<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=7453>)

The oldest hotspot and the danger of contagion towards the East

During the past 60 years the Middle East has been the theatre of unending conflicts and wars (Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and now Syria). Until recently East Asia and South-East Asia were never heavily involved in these conflicts. But more and more the rivalries between the biggest Asian powers and the antagonism between the USA and China can also be felt in the different conflicts in the Middle East.

Pakistan is courted by both the USA and China. The USA needs Pakistan to counter the different brands of terrorism which operate in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. Yet, not all factions of the ruling cliques in Pakistan want to submit to the USA. Pakistan's involvement in America's wars is destabilising the country still further (for example the recent air strikes in Pakistan reveal the new strategy to "hit and kill", targeting "terrorists" but spread the flames to even larger areas within Pakistan), but this works in many ways against China, which wants a strong Pakistan against India.

Concerning **Afghanistan**, India has been participating at the side of American-led forces in the construction of the "security apparatus" in Afghanistan, while China eyes this with great suspicion. Beijing too has signed major economic contracts with Kabul.

The sharpening of the conflict around **Iran** has major ramifications for the rivalries in Asia. While Iran until 1978/79 was an important outpost for the US-led bloc against Russia, once the Shah's regime imploded and the Mullahs took over, a strong anti-Americanism developed. The more US hegemony weakened, the more Iran could claim regional power. The Iranian challenge to the USA inevitably had to receive Chinese backing. On an economic level, China has benefited from the space left vacant by sanctions imposed against Iran; China is now Iran's largest trading partner. While Beijing's economic engagement with Iran is growing, India's presence is shrinking. Since 12% of India's oil is imported from Iran (its second largest supplier after Saudi Arabia), India fears being marginalised in Iran and losing out to China.

Despite Shiite Iran and Sunni **Saudi-Arabia** being fierce enemies, and despite China's support for the Tehran regime, China has signed a civilian nuclear energy cooperation pact with Saudi Arabia, a country which provides China with almost one fifth of its oil. China must avoid antagonising important oil suppliers. This reflects the versatile Chinese diplomatic practice in the region, having an egg in every basket, no matter how much the different sides may oppose each other. And China's approach to maintain a balance in its ties with Iran and the Arab Gulf States, reduces India's economic and military options, because the Saudis have also developed special links with Pakistan, whose nuclear programme they funded and fostered for years. It is plausible that Pakistan might covertly transfer nuclear technology to Saudi-Arabia – which must be seen as a big threat to Iran and India. However, other additional factors make the constellation more complicated and more contradictory.⁵⁰

Iran faces many enemies in the region. For example heavily armed Saudi-Arabia (which is planning to buy 600-800 German built tanks and which recently signed a gigantic contract for

⁵⁰ <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/article3308145.ece>

another 130 modern fighter planes with the USA),⁵¹ and Iraq, with whom it waged an 8 year war in the 1980s. Israel feels vulnerable to an Iranian (nuclear?) missile attack and has been pressing the USA hard to strike militarily against alleged Iranian nuclear sites. Thus any escalation around Iran is likely to create great upheavals amongst Iran's rivals and their respective defenders.

Last but not least any conflict in the Middle East draws the former bloc leader Russia onto the stage. Ganging up with China Russia fiercely opposes any military intervention against Iran and does everything it can to undermine US strategy. Both China and Russia must protect Iran against US pressure, because if the regime in Tehran fell, this would strengthen the US position in the Middle East and not only threaten Chinese oil supplies but weaken the Russian and Chinese strategic standing in the region altogether.

The stalemate of the imperialist situation in **Syria** during the summer of 2012 cannot be understood without the covert and overt weight of China, Russia and Iran in the conflict. Without the support of these three powers, the Western countries – despite their differences and other factors making them hesitate – might be tempted to intervene militarily much faster.

The chaotic and contradictory nexus of imperialist rivalries in the Middle East, where conflicts between the regional power Iran (backed by China and Russia) and the USA (backed by Israel, India, Saudi-Arabia) and increased tensions between local rivals would have unpredictable consequences not only for the rivalries between India and China, but for the whole planet.

While the tensions in the Middle East have been centre-stage in imperialist rivalries for several decades, the tensions in the Far East and in South Asia are rapidly gaining momentum. Although an immediate escalation of the rivalries into an open war in the Far East may not be likely now, because we are only at the beginning of this race, the permanent, irreversible military build-up already forebodes a new level of destruction .

The consequences of militarism

In Asia we are not witnessing the clash between secondary powers but between the world's two most populous countries: China and India. At the same time, the world's two biggest economies, the USA and China, who are more dependent on each other on an economic and financial level than ever, are engaged in an arms race. The zone of conflict involves some of the most important sea lanes of the world and contains the long-term risk of spreading a ring of fire from the Far East to the Middle East, with unpredictable repercussions for the entire world economy. Whereas in World War I the main battles took place in Europe and only very marginally in Asia, now one century later, the whole of Asia with its two oceans and its crucial sea-lanes is becoming engulfed in the deadly spiral. The build-up of destructive capacity dwarfs the power of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More than 60 years later, in addition to the USA, half a dozen countries in the region have nuclear weapons or aim at having them: China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, Iran, Russia.⁵²

The USA, the world's only remaining super-power, feels most threatened by the emergence of China. This has compelled it to reorient its military strategy. While so far 40% of the US navy has been operating in the Atlantic Ocean, Washington plans to deploy 60% of the US navy in Asia. President Obama's recent decision to "pivot" US power towards the East has led to a redeployment of 60% of US naval forces to the Pacific. The US must necessarily do everything in its power to contain China, and so must adapt militarily. In a certain sense for the USA this confrontation is a battle for life or death.⁵³

In March 1946, Winston Churchill delivered his famous "Iron Curtain" speech, describing Soviet domination of Eastern Europe: the expression entered common parlance for the next 43 years, until the collapse in 1989 of the bloc built around the USSR. Only a month previously (February 1946) George Kennan (based in America's Moscow embassy) set out his proposals for the "containment" of the USSR – proposals that were to lay the foundation of US policy towards Russian imperialism. These two key moments illustrate an important feature of imperialism in capitalism's decadent epoch: the formation of fixed imperialist blocs is to a great extent dependent, not so much on common interests as on a common fear of a threatening rival. The "Allied" bloc that confronted the Germany-Italy-Japan "Axis" only really came into being in 1941 – the year that Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease agreement that guaranteed US arms shipments to Britain, and that Russia entered the war following its invasion by Germany (Operation Barbarossa), and the opening of the war in the Pacific following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

The "Allied" bloc lasted only five years, and ceased to exist with the annihilation of Nazi Germany and the "Axis", to be replaced by a new confrontation between a Russian bloc based on the military occupation of its neighbours (enforced by invasion where necessary: Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968), and a US bloc based essentially on a common fear of the USSR. When the disintegration of the USSR ended the Cold War with a clear American victory, the glue that had held the US bloc together lost its former holding power, and the US bloc in turn broke apart.

The US remains the world's overwhelmingly dominant power, with a total military budget great than that of the ten next-largest powers combined (45.7% of total world military spending). Nonetheless, China's regional rise poses a real potential threat to its neighbours: the "common fear" factor is overcoming old enmities and pushing towards a series of alliances and rapprochements aimed at containing Chinese power.⁵⁴ Clearly, there are two powerful poles in the region – China and the United States – and other countries tend to gravitate around them.

⁵³ (see *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2012, Michael Klare).

⁵⁴ The case of Vietnam illustrates the tendency. Vietnam, which was colonised by France and suffered from carpet bombings of all kinds by the USA for more than a decade, in the face of the new giant China has started to look for support from the USA and has, for instance, opened its harbour at Cam Ranh Bay to foreign navies, pulling in other countries (in particular the USA, India, Japan) to develop more muscle against China. The Myanmar ruling junta's sudden love affair with "democracy" after years under China's wing, could also be seen as an attempt to win US and Western support against an over-might neighbour.

⁵¹ <http://www.onenewspage.com/n/Middle+East/74rahdt8e/Saudi-Arabia-places-tank-order-from-Germany-Bild.htm>

⁵² http://www.fpif.org/articles/asias_mad_arms_race

Some of these alliances are apparently stable: China's alliance with Pakistan and North Korea, and the India-Japan-USA-Australia grouping. Outside these, however, there is a shifting landscape of regional rivalries: Vietnam and the Philippines fear China, but have their own territorial disputes in the SCS; Cambodia has a troubled history of conflict with Vietnam; Indonesia fears Australia's interference since the independence of East Timor; Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have reason to fear an over-mighty India, and so on. Russia's recent alliance with China in its disputes with the US over Syria and Iran, and North Korea, is essentially opportunistic.⁵⁵

What we have today, therefore, is not the imminent formation of a new system of imperialist blocs, but rather the emergence of some of the same strategic and political tendencies that have led to the formation of the previous military blocs. There is however one major difference.

The previous bloc systems were mostly autarchic in relation to each other (trade between COMECON and the OECD countries, or between China under Mao and the outside world, was insignificant). China and the US, and indeed all the countries of SE Asia, are on the contrary bound together by powerful commercial and financial ties and interests.

And of all these dependencies, those between China and the USA are the strongest. China holds more US-bonds than any other country (\$1.15 trillion), thanks to which US capital has been able to finance its astronomic deficit budget, helping to stave off the effects of the crisis and of course financing its military machine. At the same time, China needs the USA as an export market for its commodities. And yet the two countries consider each other as their main global rivals, against whom they have to mobilise. The South China Sea littoral countries all depend on China as a market for their products and on Chinese investments in their economy, and China needs these countries as well, as suppliers of raw materials and as markets.

Surely it is absurd to imagine countries so dependent on each other engaging in military confrontation, "cutting off their nose to spite their face" so to speak?

Such ideas are not new, indeed they date back to the beginning of the 20th century when the danger of imperialist confrontation was an immediate and burning issue. In his 1902 study of

⁵⁵ The different regroupments around China and the US, unlike the old bloc system, remain for the moment a largely regional affair despite China's interests in African and the Middle East, and the European powers' nervousness confronted with the Russian bear.

imperialism, the British economist John Hobson denounced imperialism as the fruit of the economic domination of finance capital, and thought that the development of a true, vigorous democracy could act as an antidote to its dangers. In 1909, the future Nobel Peace prize winner Norman Angell, another British economist, published *Europe's optical illusion*, in which he demonstrated that the economic interdependence of the European powers made imperialist war a mutually ruinous, indeed an irrational undertaking.

Hobson and Angell in effect posed the possibility of a "peaceful" imperialism, or a capitalism stripped of its imperialist defects. Similar notions found their way into the workers' movement prior to 1914: Kautsky imagined the emergence of a "super-imperialist" general alliance of the great powers, whose premises, he thought, could be seen in the cooperation between the European powers (with Japan and the USA) to put down the Boxer rebellion in China.

Lenin gave short shrift to Kautsky and Hobson in his *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*: "in the realities of the capitalist system (...) 'inter-imperialist' or 'ultra-imperialist' alliances, no matter what form they may assume, whether of one imperialist coalition against another, or of a general alliance embracing all the imperialist powers, are inevitably nothing more than a 'truce' in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars; the one conditions the other, producing alternating forms of peaceful and non-peaceful struggle on one and the same basis of imperialist connections and relations within world economics and world politics". Yet in a sense, both Lenin and Angell were correct: Angell showed that war within an advanced capitalist economy could only lead to catastrophe, while Lenin demonstrated (as Luxemburg had before him) that imperialist conflict was notwithstanding inherent to

capitalism "in its death throes" (to use Lenin's expression).

The situation in South-East Asia offers a striking illustration of this dual reality. The smaller countries of the region are all dependent on each other and on China economically and yet all perceive their big neighbour China as a major threat and spend prodigious sums of money arming against China! Why does China antagonise all these countries although it is so dependent on them economically and financially? Why do so many national bourgeoisies turn towards the USA for "help", knowing that they run the risk of being blackmailed by the USA? This brings up the deeper question of why there is a permanent drive towards militarism? The military question is



Source: <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>

Illustration 1: China's line of defence

“imposing” itself – seemingly even against the will of some factions in the ruling classes of these countries.

The root of the problem is that the economic emergence of a country must necessarily be accompanied by military power. A mere stronger economic competitiveness in the long-term is not sufficient. Every country has to have sufficient access to raw materials, energy, has to benefit from the best flow of commodities, i.e. keep its sea lanes and other transport routes free. No country, whether on the decline or “emerging”, whether a former “loser” or “winner” can escape from this inherent tendency of capitalism.

When capitalism was still in its ascendant phase, expanding across the globe, this situation could lead to tension, even conflict (between Britain and France during the American War of Independence or in India, for example), but not to the all-out destruction of 20th century warfare.⁵⁶ Today the situation is very different: the entire planet is parcelled out among the various imperialist powers, great and small, and the rise of one power can only be at the expense of another – there are no “win-win” situations.

This is not only true on the level of economic wealth and military hardware. Human action is also determined by more intangible factors – which are none the less material for all that. And in international affairs, national prestige is as important as the possession of military power itself, since a nation's prestige makes its threat of force convincing, giving it the power (to use a favourite expression of British diplomacy) to “punch above its weight”. The Byzantine Empire survived long after the decline of its military power, in part thanks to the prestige of its wealth and the name of Rome. Nearer to our own time, first the Bolsheviks and then – after the defeat of the Russian revolution – the Stalinist rulers of the USSR, consistently overestimated the power of a British Empire critically weakened by World War I. Even at the end of World War II, the United States thought for a while that they could leave British armies to hold the line against the USSR in Europe, such was the lasting power of the British imperial myth.⁵⁷

The capacity for vast and extravagant display is crucial to prestige – hence the colossal expenditure of at least \$16 billion on the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.⁵⁸ More important though is the ability to exercise military dominance, especially of one's own immediate area.

Hence, at the beginning of the imperialist age, it was the rising power Germany which set out to challenge the dominant British imperialism by embarking (in 1898) on an ambitious plan of naval expansion aimed explicitly at challenging the power of the Royal Navy. This was, and could only be perceived by

⁵⁶ The Napoleonic Wars which lasted for 20 years, might be thought to contradict this. However, these are probably better seen as a continuation of the French revolution and of the revolutionary overthrow of feudalism in Europe, rather than as a war between capitalist powers, though inevitably they also contained aspects of the latter.

⁵⁷ We have already raised this point in an article on the Apollo space programme, (<http://en.internationalism.org/icconline/2009/10/apollo-11-lunar-landing>)

⁵⁸ This is not new: one could take a “history of prestige” at least as far back as the potlatch ceremonies of North American Indian tribes, if not further.

Britain as a mortal threat to its own sea lanes and trade, on which the country was and is wholly dependent.

The parallel with today's situation is striking, even down to the imperialist powers' protestations of their peaceful intentions. Here is the German Chancellor von Bülow speaking in 1900: “*I explained (...) that I understand by a world policy merely the support and advancement of the tasks that have grown out of the expansion of our industry, our trade, the labour power, activity and intelligence of our people. We had no intentions of conducting an aggressive policy of expansion. We wanted only to protect the vital interests that we had acquired, in the natural course of events, throughout the world.*”⁵⁹ And here is Hu Jintao in 2007: “*the Chinese government and people will always hold high the banner of peace, development and cooperation, pursue an independent foreign policy of peace, safeguard China's interests in terms of sovereignty, security and development, and uphold its foreign policy purposes of maintaining world peace and promoting common development (...) China opposes terrorism, hegemonism and power politics in any form and does not engage in arms race or pose a military threat to any other country, and will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion.*”⁶⁰

As we have demonstrated in this article, China has embarked on a vast programme of rearmament and naval expansion with the aim of dominating its own “inner island chain”. All the protestations of China's leadership notwithstanding, this inevitably threatens the whole US position in the Pacific and puts at risk not just its shipping and trade, but its prestige and credibility as an ally, amongst the South-East Asian countries which also feel menaced by China's rise, in particular Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines. That America is aware of this threat is clearly demonstrated by Obama's “pivot” of US military power towards the Pacific. Almost 100 years since World War I, capitalism has not changed its nature: capitalist competition in its decadent phase poses more than ever a mortal threat to humanity's survival. The responsibility of the world working class, the only power capable of stopping imperialist war, has never been greater.⁶¹

Dv/Jens, November 2012

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⁵⁹ Quoted in EJ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, Cardinal Editions p302.

⁶⁰ Cited by Xinhua, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/15/content_6884160.htm

⁶¹ An analysis of the class struggle in China is beyond the scope of this article, but we can say that the Chinese capitalist ruling class is aware of the threat from below: China's internal security budget recently overtook its military spending for the first time as Beijing intensified surveillance and repression. In 2012 China will spend \$111.4 billion dollars on public security, which includes police and state security forces – an amount that officially exceeds even the defense budget. See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/05/us-china-parliament-security-idUSTRE82403J20120305>