

The International Situation: Capitalism in a State of Emergency

This text was written as background information for a broad discussion about the current situation, not as a programmatic document of Speak Out Now.

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The COVID crisis of 2020 has drawn into focus many of the interconnected crises of global capitalism, laying bare a system in a state of emergency that has pushed humanity to the precipice. A small taste of the misery and instability that has plagued much of the periphery of this global system for decades has now too been dumped onto the shores of the epicenters of capitalism like a tsunami, with many more emerging on the horizon. In a matter of months, one little virus – itself a byproduct of the short-sighted, destructive and ever-expansive global animal and agriculture industries – has wiped out over two million people, brought economies to a standstill, disrupted supply chains, food systems, healthcare, education, further concentrated larger firms, and overflowed morgues with corpses. Already existing crises have spiraled into calamities of finance and famine, poverty, displacement, immiseration and death.

This ongoing COVID crisis is neither a one-off nor an anomaly – but a crystal-clear reflection of the so-called "normal" this system has in store for us, a system in an advanced stage of rot, when rather than parasites, the international bourgeoisie resembles maggots feeding off their own decay. This is not merely another crisis of capitalism. Capitalism is not simply in a state of decay – that has been true for decades. This is capitalism in a state of emergency, bringing all of humanity to the brink.

The humanity-destroying potential of capitalism has been true for a long time. Even as far back as 1848, in the opening of the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels made sure to emphasize that the struggle against capitalism would end "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." Likewise, Rosa Luxemburg simplified this idea in 1915, writing: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism." Today this dichotomy could use a minor update; the crossroads is now: Socialism or Extinction. There is still a window of opportunity for the revolutionary power of the proletariat to intervene and carve out a path towards socialism. But that window is closing; time is not on our side.

COVID Exposure

Similar to one's true character revealed in an emergency or a relationship tested by tragedy – there's nothing like a crisis to expose the capitalist system in all its imminent fragility.

COVID-19 is neither capitalism's first pandemic nor will it be its last. When a catastrophe is caused by the capitalist system itself, then the system can't eradicate it – the problem is intrinsic, and the best this self-preserving system can do is try to mitigate the effects before the next episode arrives. Releasing viruses with pandemic potential is now endemic to capitalism at this stage of global development.

This logic is already most familiar with regards to the ongoing climate disruption stemming from the foundations of the capitalist system. Despite decades of warnings from the world's leading scientists and unending environmental catastrophes, next to nothing has been done to address this problem because capital

accumulation itself is the problem. Instead, climate crises keep coming and all capitalism seems able to do is rummage through the wreckage.

This story has turned out to be the same with pandemics. That the threat of pandemics has been intensifying for decades is no longer controversial in epidemiology – it is just a basic part of the science. The drivers of pandemics are not simply random mutations and dumb luck. The main drivers of pandemics include, among others, deforestation, habitat destruction, animal displacement, increasingly frequent contact between human and virus-carrying wild animals, industrial livestock farming, and the wild animal food industry.

Much of this is inextricably linked to climate destruction. The reason the threat level of pandemics is increasing is that the main triggers of pandemics are also some of the main lifelines of capitalism.

Of course, the arrival of this particular strand of coronavirus, at a particular time, in a particular country could not have been predicted, any more than the exact date, time and location of the next heatwave or mass fire can be predicted. But epidemiologists have been issuing warning after warning that another pandemic-level virus would soon appear, and next to nothing has been done to prepare.

What we've seen from the overall response to this pandemic has been varying degrees of mitigation, but with an overall inability to contain the virus from circling the globe, overwhelming the health systems of even the most advanced capitalist nations, and upending the global economic system.

China carried out an unprecedented lockdown in Wuhan – going as far as welding shut doors to housing compounds – which did ultimately

keep their infection rate and their death toll relatively low. And it has remained low even after another outbreak in early 2021, after another 20-million-person lockdown.

But even with its experience of SARS (2002 to 2004), the Chinese government waited to carry out its first lockdown. Once it was clear there was a new virulent virus spreading throughout Wuhan, the government still waited over five weeks before imposing any kind of quarantine and admitting to the world there was widespread human-to-human transmission. When some medical workers warned in December 2019 that a new SARS-like virus was spreading within the city of Wuhan, the government arrested them, and forced them to sign statements admitting to "rumor mongering," and saying that they were a threat to the country while the government publicly denied having any evidence of human-to-human transmission.¹

China did not impose any real quarantine until Jan. 23, 2020, but it still allowed travel around the Lunar New Year, which is the largest annual human migration on the planet, and so the virus easily spread to several other countries, and onto the rest of the world.²

Why the hesitation? Was it perhaps because the Chinese government knew the enormous economic impact if they overreacted unnecessarily? Did they have to see an outbreak before they could become fully conscious of it? Is capitalism incapable of preemptive strikes against pandemics because their cures are worse than the disease?

Taiwan and some other countries, (most notably, Vietnam, South Korea, Norway, and Hong Kong) seemed to have reacted in time. Why was the situation there so different?

Taiwan likely had no option but to respond quickly. The government, whose vice president is an epidemiologist, calculated that the tiny island's economy would be quickly overwhelmed by a mass outbreak. It had many systems already in place due to its experience with previous outbreaks. Taiwan's government did not trust the initial downplaying of the virus in China. At the first hint of a possible outbreak in China, Taiwan started screening all flights from China, and isolating those with fevers and a severe cough. Taiwan blocked flights even when the WHO advised against it. And as soon as it could, the government organized rapid testing and tracing. This never stopped, keeping its cases under 100 and deaths under 10 even into January 2021 – with a population of nearly 24 million people.³

The story is similar for some of the other countries that reacted aggressively and early. There were definitely more intense and better organized mitigation efforts available to some countries that would have limited spread and restricted the death tolls, and possibly even reduced the economic impact of the virus in those countries. But, as is clear, this was the exception, not the rule.

Compare this to the response everywhere else. The general rule was to wait even longer. Most governments, most notably in Europe and the United States, could not make a decision regarding whether to contain the virus and further disrupt the economy or to all but abandon the containment, minimize the economic restrictions, and just see what happened. In the end, their containment efforts were so minimal that the virus continued to spread, and the decision was made for them. All they could do was alternate between fewer restrictions with more spread, and new restrictions when the surges showed up again. By this point, in reality, mitigation was all but

negligible and all hopes were pinned on the arrival of a vaccine.

But here, too, the general rule has been slow roll-outs of vaccination and small percentages of the population vaccinated, with high percentages of the population refusing the vaccine. As of now, generally the vaccination rates are far too low to significantly reduce the risk of further outbreaks. In many poorer countries, mitigation efforts were extremely limited by resources, and they have often been the last to receive the vaccine.

But the gold medal of failure belongs to the citadel of capitalism, the United States, which has among the worst infection rates and death rates, along with an abysmal vaccination program, where it looks like at least 40%–50% of the population will opt out of the vaccine even if it is available.

The common thread running through the various calculations of national responses around the world was economic mitigation, which sometimes included preservation of human life, but most of the time, of course, did not. Three months into the pandemic, there were over 50,000 deaths, at six months 513,000 deaths, and three weeks into January 2021, there were 2.06 million deaths and counting. Over two million deaths is the best this system had to offer.

According to a November 2020 report by the U.N. World Food Program, an additional 130 million people faced acute food insecurity by the end of 2020, an 82% increase compared to the pre-COVID estimate.⁴ Before the pandemic, an estimated 70 million people were displaced every year, mainly due to climate disruption and military conflicts. But the pandemic has displaced additional tens of millions of people as it pushed them to the

brink – in India alone, over ten million people have been newly displaced by the pandemic.⁵

But in the end, all the efforts at mitigation couldn't save the global economy from sparking another enormous economic recession. According to Fitch ratings, world GDP is estimated to have fallen by 4.6% in 2020, a recession unequalled since the 1930s. This would be twice as severe as the 2009 recession.

And yet, despite all of the unprecedented destruction from this pandemic, capitalism has not altered its pandemic-producing pursuits one iota – deforestation rates in 2020 were still the highest ever recorded.

Ecological Catastrophe

2020 ended with the largest decrease in greenhouse gas emissions ever recorded in a single year, a 7% decline according to Global Carbon Project.

But emissions plummeted in direct proportion to the degree the economy plummeted – the pandemic halted an enormous amount of global economic activity. The last year that there was a significant reduction of global carbon emissions (about -1%) was in 2009, the peak of the last economic crisis.

For well over a decade, scientists have been insisting on a minimum of a 7.6% reduction in emissions per year for the next 30 years to stave off complete planetary collapse.⁶ Each year that humanity delays, the greater the amount of reduction in emissions necessary per year. The consensus has been that the longer net-negative carbon emissions is delayed, the greater the chances of a human extinction-level collapse, with untold catastrophes already on their way.

But the clear causal link between economic crises and emissions reduction exposes the main reason emission-reduction targets have been incessantly ignored: to achieve them would require a pandemic-level of economic contraction every year for decades. That's not going to happen. 2020 just confirmed what was already known: only enormous economic crises of capitalism can significantly reduce emissions under this system.

Meanwhile, economists estimate that emissions in 2021 will return to normal levels, assuming an economic rebound occurs. Instead of carbon output reduction, the continued increases in global fossil fuel investments will maintain the average annual *increase* of carbon emissions by about 1.2% per year – only accelerating capitalism's journey to the precipice.⁷

Rather than entering a carbon-emission drawdown, capitalism is in a race for what's left. By 2024, oil and gas companies have already set aside an additional \$1.4 trillion in new oil and gas extraction projects.⁸ China has become the largest energy consumer and producer in the world, and is ramping up its domestic energy exploration and refining capacity, and is on pace to become the largest oil refiner in the world, likely overtaking the U.S. in 2021.⁹

With accelerating levels of Arctic ice melt – the region is estimated to be ice-free by 2050 – the U.S., China, and Russia have entered a frantic sprint to extract the estimated 1,699 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, equal to the entirety of Russia's oil reserves and three times that of the U.S. And remember, natural gas extraction and distribution still releases carbon in the form of methane, which is a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.¹⁰

Meanwhile, despite the temporary decline in emissions, the pandemic did not reduce in the slightest any of the effects of incessant climate disruption.

2020 tied with 2016 for the hottest years on record, now making the last six years the hottest years ever recorded.

2020 was another leading year for wildfire-caused destruction.

2020 had the most hurricanes ever in a single year.¹¹

2020 again confirmed the United Nations' warning that there are only 60 years of farming left due to chemical-heavy farming techniques, deforestation and warming temperatures.¹²

A 2020 U.N. report warns that nearly 3.2 billion people will be living in areas of water scarcity in the next few years.¹³

2020 was another year of record glacier melt and sea level rise. But now we see that the water isn't the only thing rising from all of this melt: so are the centuries old bodies of animals trapped in the ice, with scientists scurrying to investigate whether zombie-viruses too could have survived and be released as the ice melts.¹⁴ This would only further supplant the inseparable link between climate destruction and pandemic production.

Climate disruption has already led to an estimated 21.5 million newly displaced people every year for the past decade.¹⁵ Thanks to the pandemic, that number for 2020 is likely to have broken records.

Mass extinction continues to accelerate, with dozens of species going extinct per day, and as many as 50% of all species by mid-century.¹⁶

While record levels of species are disappearing, some species are thriving like never before. Tick populations are growing, doubling rates of Lyme disease.¹⁷ Warming temperatures and extremes of drought and intense rainfall have led to record-breaking, destructive locust swarms, with 2020 seeing some of the largest ever recorded.¹⁸ Explosions of fungi are increasingly threatening many food crops including soybeans, wheat, rice, bananas, cassava, and even coffee.¹⁹

Like its pandemic twin, ecological destruction has no real limits under capitalism and only promises greater instability. This fact has not been lost on the militaries of many leading capitalist powers. As far back as the 1990's, the U.S. military acknowledged climate change as a threat to national security. And since 2013, every single "threat assessment" report from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency has listed climate change among the leading threats to national security.

In 2015, it warned:

"Climate change is an urgent and growing threat to our national security, contributing to increased natural disasters, refugee flows, and conflicts over basic resources like food and water."

But here, too, the solution isn't to reduce emissions but to further militarize and expand border security, re-fortify military bases, and prepare for greater competition for resources, mass displacement of people, the destabilization of entire regions of the planet, and war.

The U.S. has carried out regular war-game scenarios in order to prepare for future conflicts brought on by climate change. The most recent was in February 2020 in Norway's

Arctic Circle, where the U.S. military sent 7,500 combat troops to join one thousand NATO troops for what was called "Cold Response 2020," war games against Russia for "climate change induced resource extraction."²⁰ Part of the impulse for this is the above-mentioned race for Arctic natural gas made readily available as glacial melt accelerates.

Since at least 2017, the Chinese government has incorporated climate change into its defense analyses, identifying it as the main cause of global instability, threatening China's access to vital resources, most especially water.²¹

The same goes for Russia, where nearly 65% of the country is covered in melting permafrost, threatening to undermine the foundations of entire cities. Already in May 2020, permafrost melt caused an entire oil tank to collapse near the city of Norilsk, spilling over 21,000 tons of oil.²²

At the end of 2019, the Russian government released a report on what it deemed their plan for "adaptation to climate change."²³ In addition to the usual warnings of "ecological imbalance, the spread of infectious diseases, more frequent droughts, precipitation, floods, fires, and the degradation of permafrost in the North," the report highlights some potential benefits for Russia. It cites a reduction in energy consumption due to diminished heating needs, and new opportunities for farming and livestock production on the grasslands replacing the thawing permafrost. In other words, as thawing permafrost releases record levels of methane, accelerating global warming, Russia looks forward to investing in the livestock industry, so the livestock – which currently contribute about 40% of annual global methane levels – can raise those levels even higher.

What these national security strategies all have in common is the recognition of a future of growing destabilization and conflict coupled with naive plans for adaptation to a collapsing environment. As expected, the managers of the affairs of the modern bourgeoisie can only see the invincibility of their system, even amidst its scorched-earth campaign of capital accumulation.

Capitalism and Instability

The pandemic cannot take all the credit for the massive economic downturn that it sparked. Before the pandemic, in 2019, global GDP growth slipped to 2.3% – the lowest rate since the 2008 financial crisis.²⁴ By the end of 2019, the economic forecasts for 2020 from international bourgeois institutions (the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, United Nations (UN), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) were all similarly tentative, predicting modest growth (especially since 2019 was so bad) while stressing increasing tensions and potential instability. In its January 2020 Global Economic Prospects Report, the World Bank wrote:

"Following a year during which weak trade and investment dragged the world economy to its feeblest performance since the global financial crisis, economic growth is poised for a modest rebound this year. However, for even that modest uptick to occur, many things have to go right."

And then the rest of the report proceeded to explain the many factors working against things going right:

"Even this tepid global rally could be disrupted by any number of threats. Trade tensions could re-escalate. A sharper-than-expected growth slowdown in major economies would

reverberate widely. A resurgence of financial stress in large emerging markets, an escalation of geopolitical tensions, or a series of extreme weather events could all have adverse effects on economic activity... [in addition to] the largest, fastest, and most broad-based wave of debt accumulation in advanced economies as well as in emerging and developing economies in the last 50 years."

And, just as 2020 was beginning to test the predictions of economists, the worst pandemic in over one century hit, bringing economies down faster and deeper than anything since the Great Depression.

Much of the 2008-2009 financial crisis came about due to the enormous returns available in the speculative financial markets. As early as 2006, New York University professor, Nouriel Roubini, in an address to the International Monetary Fund, warned of the looming credit and housing bubble in the U.S. and the risk of a deep recession that could spread around the world. At the time, he said that the slowdown in the U.S. housing market indicated that the speculative bubble there was getting ready to burst and that "when the United States sneezes, the rest of the world gets a cold."

For the most part, the more recent warnings of bourgeois economists share a similar analysis. Much of the recovery from the 2008 crisis was driven by debt. In 2018, writing their ten-year balance sheets on the crisis, many analysts expressed their weariness at the mountains of debt, far above the debt levels existing before the 2008 crash.

One 2018 IMF report put it like this:

"Ten years later, the sequence of aftershocks and policy responses ... has led to a world economy in which the median general government debt-GDP ratio stands at 51%, up

from 36% before the crisis; central bank balance sheets...are several multiples of the size they were before the crisis..."²⁵

But government debt and central bank debt alone wasn't the whole story – after all, it was among the primary mechanisms used to enable the engines of capitalism to resume after the 2008 crash, the elementary logic of which was to give the capitalists money to recover from their losses and resume investments. That debt was expected to be quite large. But by the end of 2019, corporate sector debt had also hit record levels. At the time, the OECD issued a report warning that the volume of corporate debt hit an all-time high of \$13.5 trillion, and the overall quality of bonds fell below levels seen before the 2008 financial crisis.²⁶ Essentially, these ratings assess the ability for the loans to be repaid – and over half received the lowest rating available. According to the report, at the end of 2019, non-financial companies globally were locked in to repay or refinance an unprecedented \$4.4 trillion in corporate bond debt within just three years, representing a record 32.4% of the total outstanding corporate bonds. In other words, most large firms are substantially more in debt than they were in 2008.

For the most part, the bail-out driven recovery generated more debt than growth. Why is that? Investments move towards the highest return. And corporations earned higher returns by taking out low-interest loans and investing them in financial markets (currency, stocks, bonds) rather than in expanding production.

Obviously, there are real limits to investing in increased production. Without corresponding markets to absorb the higher output, increased production is useless and wasted investment. The hope during the recovery period was that emerging markets (notably in China, Brazil,

India, Indonesia, Mexico, Morocco, South Africa, Turkey, Vietnam, and others) could absorb new investments in production fueled by these large low-interest bailouts. To some extent, they did: before the 2008 crisis, emerging markets accounted for 44% of global GDP; by the end of 2019 they accounted for 60%.²⁷

That is an enormous shift in ten years, but even this high-paced growth has not been enough to bring down the debt. Capital needs even more markets in order for economic growth to escape this seemingly runaway debt problem. Capital would need to bring in enough profit to both pay off the debt and cover increased investment for the next cycle. For the most part, that is not happening, which is why the debt has continued to grow.

Part of the problem stems from what some U.S. strategists have come to refer to as the "great-power competition" of a newly "multi-polar" world.²⁸ At the end of 2019, China's Premier Li Keqiang put it more subtly: it is "very difficult" for the country's economy to achieve the goals for growth due to a "complicated international backdrop."

The problem is multi-faceted, but also rather simple: Earth is a finite planet with finite resources and limited markets. There is increasing necessity for growth (especially in the advanced capitalist world) to overcome debt and stave off another international downturn. But this need is shared among several (multi-polar) large economies. There is room for growth for some, but not growth for all. And even the growth for some often must come at the expense of growth for others.

Long ago, Lenin defined imperialism as follows:

"Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed."

At that point, new growth often implies the "division and the *re*division of the world, the transition from peaceful division to non-peaceful division." Or, in the words of U.S. national security strategists: a "great-power competition."

But today this current "great-power competition" comes with unanticipated planetary costs. The destructive capacity of the world's leading powers is capable of extinguishing life on Earth some 149 times. And achieving this necessary new growth means new energy demands, new resource extraction, increased levels of consumption and so on. In short, it simply means stepping on the accelerator toward the ecological precipice – and at the same time unleashing more triggers of pandemics.

One major "re-divider" of the world is China. Already mentioned was the "great-power competition" in the Arctic – but that is just the tip of the iceberg. For several years, China has been unfurling the most ambitious international infrastructure project in modern world history: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which spans three continents and could cover almost 60% of the world's population. It is China's attempt to redivide the world, and already over 60 countries have signed on, representing trillions of dollars in loans from China.²⁹

In short, this project sets the goal of directly linking the Chinese economy throughout the world through a series of new sea ports, roads, bridges, resource extraction points and more.

One example is what China refers to as its "flagship project" in Pakistan. In 2001, China offered to build a brand-new port in the small fishing town of Gwadar, Pakistan. By 2018, the \$62 billion dollar project connected the port to highway and railway networks, and Pakistan saw its highest GDP in decades along with a much tighter economic relationship with a burgeoning superpower.³⁰ China, for its part, carved out a new route for goods, most importantly oil and gas from the Caspian Sea. Also, through this and similar BRI projects, Chinese construction companies, hitting some limits within China, were able to take off outside of China to the point that Chinese firms now make up roughly eight out of the top twelve largest construction firms in the world.³¹

Some other similar projects are underway or near completion in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Belarus, Sudan, Djibouti, and throughout Latin America.³²

In addition to economic ambitions, the U.S. sees Chinese military ambitions in these various port deals, which have been dubbed the "string of pearls" theory by U.S. analysts.³³ The U.S. deems this sinister when in fact it is par for the capitalist development course: ports often require military support. In 2018, Vice President Mike Pence referred to China's acquisition of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port as "debt-trap diplomacy." Once it was clear the Sri Lankan government could not pay back a \$1.5 billion dollar development loan to China, the Sri Lankan government instead gave China a 99-year lease to control the port. Offering enormous loans to poor countries that can

never pay them back in exchange for seizing parts of their economy is a practice very familiar to the U.S. In reality, the only problem the U.S. sees in China's "debt-trap diplomacy" is that China is the one doing it.

In China's string of ports and naval bases, India sees Chinese encirclement: first, in its interlocked economic relationship with Pakistan, with whom India has had increasing tensions at their shared border in Kashmir; and in China's control of ports that encircle India from Pakistan, to Sri Lanka, to their latest acquisition in Myanmar (the deal was signed in January 2020), surrounding India by sea (India was able to convince Bangladesh to back out of a major port deal with China at the last minute); and in China and India's disputed Himalayan border, where over 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a clash with Chinese forces in June 2020, the first deadly clash in the border area in at least 45 years.³⁴

For India, every expansion of China in and around the Indian Ocean is a loss of economic relationships in its own territory, as well as an increase in China's military capabilities in the region. And like China, India is dependent on foreign oil, much of which arrives by sea, so the protection of the Indian Ocean is necessary to maintain access to energy. The site of China's port in Myanmar is close to an Indian-controlled port in Sittwe, Myanmar as well as near India's Eastern Naval Command submarine base. In response to China, in 2020 India made a deal with Myanmar to provide it with submarines, as well as a deal with France to grant mutual access to each other's naval bases, with each country opening its naval bases to warships from the other.^{35 36}

In response, the U.S. has doubled its efforts to strengthen its military and economic relations with India, pushing hard to bring India into NATO – so far to no avail. But in February 2020

the U.S. and India did sign a \$3 billion dollar arms deal, which included 24 armed maritime helicopters for the Indian navy, air-defense radars and missiles, rifles and other equipment.³⁷ And then in November 2020 another India-U.S. deal, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA), will bring the countries even closer together militarily. The agreement lays the basis for a much firmer military alliance between the two countries, furthering the sale of advanced military platforms, and sharing military facilities, high-tech communications and intelligence. One senior U.S. military analyst described it as such: "The BECA deal is a game-changer...and one that India had long resisted signing."³⁸

Additionally, in November 2020, China and 14 nations, including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea (but not the U.S. or India) signed one of the world's largest free-trade pacts, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – a sort of emboldened Trans-Pacific Partnership without the U.S. RCEP is the largest trade agreement ever signed, facilitating trade among countries representing 2.2 billion people.³⁹ The U.S. hopes to reduce its actual implementation, at least in Australia and Japan. The U.S. has been trying to bolster the explicit military alliances among what they call the Quad – the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia (named after the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue started in 2018) – pushing for a NATO-like military alliance as well as a further economic alliance to counter China in the region.⁴⁰ But the signing of the RCEP just further shows how nothing is certain in this multi-polar world.

And despite the fury of both the outgoing Trump administration and the incoming Biden administration, the E.U. also signed a seven-years-in-the-making enormous trade deal with China. The deal allows for easier access to each

other's markets – with a major focus on European banks and auto companies operating in China. It flows from years of increasing trade between the European Union (E.U.) and China – this year, China surpassed the U.S. as the E.U.'s largest trading partner. This deal can't help but be seen by the U.S. ruling class as a weakening of their alliance with Europe.⁴¹

Along with Europe and Japan, another territory increasingly coming under the shadow of China's expansion is the U.S.'s backyard of Latin America. China has signed 40 commercial port deals in U.S. spheres of influence in Latin America, and is vying for deep-water ports in Mexico, The Bahamas, El Salvador, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Panama, and Guyana. In the words of U.S. General Faller (head of U.S. Southern Command) on China's encroachment in Latin America:⁴²

"We were concerned as we watched China working port deals on either side of the [Panama] canal. I think what they're doing [in the region] matches what they're doing globally. It's a full court press to have China become the world's dominant power...China is working for their version of the world order globally...What does it look like if China has a strategic control of the Strait of Magellan, or the Panama Canal, the approaches to the Gulf of Mexico through a Caribbean port? What does that look like in a global conflict?... The Panama Canal is a significant global choke point. Certainly in a global Chinese fight, that would be one of the key considerations: how do we defend that canal?"

The general isn't an alarmist. Even Chinese defense strategy documents in 2008, 2015, and 2016 all include military and other security activities as key goals of relations in Latin America, and part of China's overall engagement with the region. And for years,

China has conducted military training exchanges with nearly every country in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴³

None of this points to imminent war. But it certainly highlights the decline in U.S. global hegemony – even in its own backyard. The gradual rise of China and the potential threat it poses to U.S. interests is not new. It was in Obama's second term that his administration developed its "Pivot to East Asia," which was an effort to pursue more aggressively both economic and military relationships in close proximity to China. But it is safe to say that the threat China poses to the U.S. has matured. The Trump administration tried to draw attention to the decline of the U.S. and the rise of China, making the China trade war and so-called "America First" policies some of their cornerstones. But after four years of shouting matches between Trump and Xi, not much has changed in this relationship. On their second day in office, the Biden administration's National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said to Reuters: "President Biden looks forward to working with leaders in both parties to position America to out-compete China."

The U.S.-China relationship is complex because the economies are heavily intertwined – neither country can afford to lose these partnerships. But one outcome of Trump's trade war with China, along with the "New NAFTA" that was signed, was relocating some manufacturing parts suppliers out of China and into Mexico, primarily for military-strategic reasons – the U.S. did not want to depend on China as a vital parts supplier for military production. The U.S. government also prohibited U.S. telecom companies from purchasing equipment from the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE because it claimed China could potentially intercept communications and disrupt critical infrastructure.⁴⁴

At the same time, China has longstanding ambitions of IT-independence from the U.S. for similar reasons. Initially this required violating software-use and chip production patents with the U.S. (Needless to say, patent violation is par for the capitalist course as well: what would have become of U.S. industrialization if it had never violated textile manufacturing restrictions imposed by Britain?) But more recently, this pursuit has meant that the Chinese government is pressuring Chinese firms to rely on domestic production for key IT components, including chips and controlling systems, with an established goal of making 75% of those in China by 2025 – currently the number is around only 25%.⁴⁵ Inasmuch as this push is to achieve independence from the U.S., it is also aimed at appeasing the U.S. by reducing the number of patent violations – another part of the recent trade negotiations with the U.S. Another sign that China is complying is that in 2019, Chinese authorities prosecuted around 11,000 people for violating trademarks, patents, copyright and business secrets, a rise of 32.2% from 2018.⁴⁶

Part of this "great-power competition" of the multipolar world helps to explain other sources of potential military conflict.

For example, the U.S. push to oust Maduro in Venezuela has been made all the more important as China has continued to support the Maduro regime. China has become the main source of Venezuela's foreign financing, investing about \$67 billion from 2007 to 2017, representing roughly 40% of all of China's investment in Latin America at that time.⁴⁷ China hoped Venezuela could become a major strategic oil partner. But the U.S. was able to sour that deal by imposing severe trade restrictions on Venezuela, helping to hamstring the economy – one consequence being its inability to repay Chinese loans. And up until now, a second round of sanctions on

companies doing business with Venezuela's state-owned oil company have led Chinese oil companies to cease direct purchases of Venezuelan oil.

At the same time, as tensions continue to escalate between the U.S. and Iran, China and Iran have moved closer together. In July 2020, Iran and China drafted an extensive deal, further aligning their countries economically and militarily. The deal promises billions of dollars of Chinese investments in energy and other sectors, including banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects. And in exchange, China would receive a regular and discounted supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years. This is in spite of and in direct defiance of U.S. trade sanctions imposed on purchases of Iranian oil.⁴⁸ In other words, part of the increased military escalation with Iran, those war ships in the Persian Gulf and the B-52 bombers flying over the area, is just as much a warning to China as it is to Iran.⁴⁹ The Trump administration had openly considered what they called surgical strikes on key nuclear facilities.⁵⁰ Perhaps these surgical strikes would be just enough to further destabilize Iranian energy projects and just short of igniting a war – the fantasy of that would probably be too extreme for even the next Mission Impossible plot. It remains to be seen how this new China-Iran trade deal will play out in relation to the Biden administration.

Taiwan must be included on the list of countries affected in the tug of war between China and the U.S. China considers Taiwan a sort of runaway province that will one day be reintegrated into the mainland. For years, this has meant that the U.S. has followed many restrictions in its diplomacy and trade relations with Taiwan in order to appease China. At the core of this is that the U.S. doesn't formally recognize Taiwan as a fully independent

country, but over the years this is becoming less true. The Trump administration took several steps to undermine this, dealing with Taiwan more directly, and, of course, upsetting China. Both countries, the U.S. and China, have more frequently sent warships through the Taiwan Strait since December 2020.⁵¹

Obviously not every conflict in the world can be reduced to one connected to the U.S. and China. And it is very possible that the biggest threat to China lies within its borders: the ticking time bomb of discontentment in the largest and most concentrated working class in the world.

Russia is considered by the U.S. to be the third pole in the multi-polar world. Although, economically far less significant than China, Russia still is an enormous military power, a nuclear superpower, and has been increasing and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. It has increased its military sales to China, amounting to several billions of dollars per year.⁵² In addition to competing with the U.S. for resources in the Arctic, Russia for several years has been trying to chip away at U.S. dominance in the Middle-East – especially after the U.S. wars on Iraq and Afghanistan left those countries in total disarray. They rushed in to back Assad in Syria, have supported Iran militarily, and have even carried out joint military operations with China and Iran in the Persian Gulf in response to the U.S. build-up there. In eastern Syria, they are deploying forces closer to U.S. troop positions.⁵³ In Afghanistan, Russia has been accused of weapons sales to Taliban forces and offering bounties for U.S. soldiers killed there.⁵⁴ In Iraq, the government announced plans to deepen military ties with Russia as the U.S. continues to pull back. In Libya, Russia has helped rebels combat the U.N.-backed government.⁵⁵

In the past few years U.S. investments in oil and natural gas have catapulted the U.S. to energy independence and allowed it to impose new restrictions on other countries' sale of natural gas and oil (chiefly Venezuela, Iran, and Russia) without significantly reducing the global supply. The U.S. surpassed Russia in 2011 as the world's largest natural gas producer, with one quarter of global production and the fourth largest gas reserves.⁵⁶ The U.S. has been a net gas exporter since 2017, competing with Russia on global markets.⁵⁷ The U.S. has also used this opportunity to sign new energy deals with competitors of Russia, most notably in Europe, and has been trying to get countries to switch their agreements from Russia to the U.S.

How Russia positions itself in relation to China, the Middle East and Europe is still unfolding. But what seems clear is that Russia's thinking on these questions is aimed at pursuing interests that are directly opposed to those of the U.S.

As Iran has increased its dealings with China and Russia, and further interfered with U.S. dominance in the region (in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and more), the U.S. has further enhanced its relations with Israel. In 2016, the Trump administration signed a \$38 billion military deal with Israel.⁵⁸ And Israel rapidly expanded settlements in the Occupied Territories during the Trump administration, with about a 25% increase over the Obama years. Under Trump, the U.S. Embassy moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – part of an overall pressure campaign for Arab states to officially recognize the State of Israel. It's also difficult not to see Israel's rapid vaccination program (the fastest per capita anywhere in the world) as a direct attack on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories – where Israel has provided almost no vaccines. And recently the Iranian government announced on Jan. 4, 2021 that it had resumed enriching uranium to 20%

at its underground nuclear facility at Fordow – significantly shortening Iran's "break-out time" to develop a nuclear weapon.⁵⁹ Could this mean that Israel, instead of the U.S., may carry out attacks against Iran? It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Needless to say, the world is increasingly unstable, with tensions and conflicts growing in nearly every single region of the planet. It is possible that at some point this "redivision of the world" could move from (relatively) "peaceful division to non-peaceful division."

Social Instability

An increasing consequence of this overall economic and military instability is increasing social instability marked by unprecedented social inequality and ongoing austerity.

The 2020 U.N. World Social Report (entitled "Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World") details the continued growth of global inequality in each country. The report studied 92 countries and in all of them, unsurprisingly, the bottom 40% earned less than 25% of the income in each country, with many countries showing even more extreme inequality. Of course, given the above-mentioned significant investment in emerging economies, some of that wealth was recorded as new wealth among sections of the working class and poor. But here, too, the majority of the economic gains were recorded by the top income earners. The pandemic has only made this inequality worse – as it has hit the poorest in each country the hardest.

In North America and Europe, after the recovery from the 2008 recession, most of the wage gains were weaker than they were before the recession.⁶⁰ Also, many of the gains in employment were in the service sector, which tended to pay lower wages and offer more

precarious employment. Much of the advanced capitalist world has seen pension reforms, usually marked by a raise in the retirement age and a decrease of the pay-out burdens of the bourgeoisie. In poorer countries, the trend is often more severe. There has been a general rise in the cost of living coupled with crippling austerity policies in the past decade, often joined by high levels of inflation. The general trend has been towards increased economic uncertainty, if not outright immiseration.⁶¹ Absent arenas of new investment and growth, coupled with incessant debt accumulation, capitalists have increased rates of exploitation.

Capital has been aided in this effort by the continued growth in the surplus population. Often foreign investment leads to increasing rates of proletarianization – most numerous among small farmers who lose their land and find no economic alternative. But often it is proletarianization not into new jobs but into the reserve army of the unemployed, into slums.

In *Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels described this phenomenon of capitalism as such: "This reserve army ... is the 'surplus population'... which keeps body and soul together by begging, stealing, street-sweeping, collecting manure, pushing hand-carts, driving donkeys, peddling, or performing occasional small jobs."

A 2016 U.N. report estimated that the surplus population had reached record levels, with one in four urban dwellers living in urban slums – that is over one billion people and continuously growing ever since. And this estimate excluded rural slums and those increasingly displaced by conflicts, climate destruction and now pandemics. In India, in its two most populous cities, Delhi and Mumbai, an estimated 50% live in slums. And India is not

the worst. It is rivaled by areas of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Nairobi and more.⁶²

For Marx the relationship between an increasing surplus population and an increase in the rate of exploitation is rather straightforward:

"The main purpose of the bourgeois in relation to the worker is, of course, to have the commodity labour as cheaply as possible, which is only possible when the supply of this commodity is as large as possible in relation to the demand for it, i.e., when the overpopulation is the greatest."⁶³

But at the same time, there is also the reminder in the *Communist Manifesto* that, on the one hand, the surplus population "may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue."

In many countries we are seeing this pull in both directions.

With a backdrop of increasing instability, matched by growing declines in living standards, there has also been a generalized increase in overall discontent. In many countries this can be seen in a growth in nationalist and far-right ideas (from the United States to Brazil, India Turkey, the Philippines and beyond). The nationalism often acknowledges the worsening economic conditions while finding scapegoats in the population – be they refugees, migrants, oppressed minorities (as with China in relation to the Uyghur population), international trade deals (a la Brexit), or the rise in so-called conspiracy theories that seek to provide false explanations for people's discontent.

To mention a few:

In Brazil, plagued with rising inequality and chronic debt-driven austerity, Bolsonaro rose to power on his brand of reactionary nationalism, filled with prejudice against indigenous people, Black people, women, and LGBTQ+ people. He repeatedly made statements saying that he prefers a dead son to a gay son.⁶⁴ In January 2021, he explicitly endorsed the far-right mobilization at the U.S. Capitol and has repeatedly warned of similar events if he were to lose Brazil's election to voter fraud.⁶⁵

In India, increasingly encircled by China, and struggling to become more independent of foreign investment, far-right Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014. Since then, Modi has stripped the country's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, of its autonomous status, putting the region under intense repression and military occupation. Modi has compared the annexation of Jammu and Kashmir to Russia's annexation of Crimea and Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights. The Modi government has rolled out a host of laws that restrict citizenship, mostly impacting Muslims. In Assam, a state bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh, an estimated two million people were refused re-entry into India, the majority of whom were Muslims. At the border, they were removed from the citizenship rolls if they could not provide documentary evidence that their families were Indian citizens. Leading up to the 2019 elections, the Modi government engaged in large-scale voter suppression, removing an estimated 120 million eligible voters from the electoral rolls by demanding documentation to prove residency – an estimated 70 million of them were Muslims.⁶⁶

There have been many protests throughout India against these and similar laws, often by a majority of Hindus. Many of the protests were violently attacked by members of Akhil

Bharatiya Vidya Parishad (ABVP), the youth wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS was founded in 1925, as an organization fighting for both independence from the British and for Hindu nationalism, which included separatism from Muslims. The most prominent leaders of the RSS admired fascism and had direct links to both Mussolini and Hitler. Modi has been a long-time member of the RSS. Today it has an estimated membership of four million, who all swear oaths of allegiance and take part in military-style drills. Despite Modi's far-right nationalism, he remains extremely popular, especially among Hindus in India's growing middle class. As of January 2021, his approval rating was at 75%.⁶⁷

As overall conditions continue to stagnate or worsen, and as all of the above emergencies of climate change, pandemics, economic crises, and military conflicts continue to intensify, so does the need for the bourgeoisie to rely on scapegoats to divide the working class, and to further justify any reliance on military aggression.

Years of economic downturn and austerity in Britain gave rise to support for Brexit – the E.U. becoming the scapegoat for the crises of capitalism. It is too soon to measure the ultimate impact of Britain's exit from the E.U. But it is very unlikely to lead to an improvement in Britain's version of what is a globally shared stagnation.

Nonetheless, while the ruling class can point to a rise in nationalism, the last two years have also seen a rise in waves of popular discontent, often among the working class and the poor.

In Chile, a transit hike was sufficient to spark a national uprising against the whole government.

In Lebanon, a small tax on a social media app was enough to send people into the streets, ousting government officials, calling for a rewriting of the constitution, and uniting sections of the population long-seen as hopelessly divided.

In Iran it was the rising cost of living, particularly fuel prices, that sent people into the streets.

In Iraq, long-viewed as hopelessly fractured and demoralized from years of war, occupation, and internal conflict, a new generation born into these conditions began to rise up against the government and its utter failure to respond to the needs of the population.

In India, in addition to nationwide protests against Modi's racist citizenship laws, 200 million of India's small farmers and workers participated in days of nationwide strikes against various land reform bills that threaten the farmers' livelihoods and overall poor working conditions. Workers from steel, coal, IT, transportation, ports, and banking joined the strike. Some of the demands included an emergency relief payment and food stipend for the poor, higher wages, better pensions, and an end to the privatization of the public sector.

In opposition to China's security law – a further extension of the Chinese state into Hong Kong – a mass movement of millions of people, mostly youth, erupted. The movement was violently repressed, the law ultimately implemented, and the movement suspended once the pandemic broke out – but the discontent has not diminished.

During the pandemic, workers around the world have organized against unsafe working conditions – including in China, South Korea,

throughout Europe and the United States, in South Africa, all over Latin America and beyond – in many industries including health care, transportation, and manufacturing.

In Argentina, a decades-long fight to legalize abortion succeeded in December 2020 after hundreds of thousands of people – mostly young, mostly women – poured into the streets, making Argentina the fifth country in Latin America to legalize abortion without restriction during the first 14 weeks of pregnancy.

In the United States, millions of people took to the streets in response to the police murder of George Floyd. On June 6 over half a million people protested on a single day, and by July over 25 million people had participated. Protests took place in small towns in every state and in some of the most conservative counties in the country. Demonstrations of solidarity occurred in over 60 countries and on every continent except Antarctica.

The list is longer. It includes the Yellow Vests in France, the anti-SARS protests in Nigeria, uprisings in South Africa, Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Belarus, Sudan, Poland, Ireland, Tunisia, Algeria and more.

The pandemic has put the brakes on some of these movements, but it has ignited others. In most cases, it has also exacerbated the underlying causes of the movements. Ultimately, capitalism, in its state of emergency, is producing more discontent, out of which many future rebellions are growing.

Conclusion

The drawn-out crises of capitalism have revealed more than rising discontent. In many cases, they have further discredited traditional bourgeois parties. In Europe, social democracy

has been unable to offer any alternative to austerity and inequality.

This period has also underlined the inability of spontaneous popular uprisings to contest power effectively. In each instance, they reach a limit and often dissipate or get trapped into classic bourgeois referendums that exhaust the movement.

Nowhere have revolutionary socialist forces been able to substantially offer a perspective to these movements. This is much less a crisis of working-class leadership, and much more a crisis of organization – without revolutionary organizations implanted in the working class, there is hardly any leadership to speak of. In many countries, the current size and influence of most groups of revolutionaries is too small, in fact often negligible. For the most part, the revolutionary left still lacks organizations through which they can intervene on the requisite scale.

The emergency situation engendered by capitalism cannot be confronted through any set of gradual reforms. The ecological front alone necessitates highly centralized emergency measures: halting extraction, rapidly transitioning energy sources, overhauling transportation systems, completely reorganizing agriculture, and much, much more. This is something only the dictatorship of the proletariat can accomplish in the time we have left to turn things around.

But as this period is marked by crises that can shine clarifying lights onto the problems in front of us, so too can this clarity provide new opportunities. Perhaps the internationalization and homogenization of the problems of capitalism can create new opportunities for internationalism. Perhaps the urgency of this emergency situation can lead to new regroupments among revolutionaries around

the world and within countries, overcoming the residue of long-held sectarianism. Perhaps the urgency of this period can sharpen the focus of those with a common agreement that the working class is still the revolutionary agent against capitalism and cannot be replaced by other classes or false short cuts of opportunism. Perhaps this urgency can provide a renewed priority to building organizations firmly rooted in the working class. Perhaps revolutionaries will find new opportunities to expose the system that lies at the foundation of this emergency. Perhaps the lesson of the early days of the pandemic can be renewed and re-clarified: the working class is essential ("The boss needs you; you don't need the boss."). Perhaps this emergency coupled with recurring mass uprisings can provide the fertile ground for revolutionary organizations to take root.

Perhaps.

It will take every ounce of energy and talent and determination we have.

New possibilities can emerge only if we try.

Let COVID-19 be a wake-up call to the emergency we are in. Now is the time to impatiently explain. We are quickly becoming the last ones with a chance to try.

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