The collective imperialism of the Triad (US-EU-Japan) evolved after the Second World War under the aegis of the United States to give strategic coherence to the expansion of monopoly capitalism against the socialist East and the emerging South. Its objective was to confront the unprecedented resistance to monopoly capitalism presented by both the Soviet system, which had emerged victorious against Nazism, and the Third World which was on the path of decolonization. This contradiction was the essence of the systemic rivalry of the Cold War. Its origins lie precisely in the two great anti-imperialist events of the twentieth century: socialist revolution and general decolonization.

It is said that the post-war period created a ‘bipolar’ system between East and West. In fact, the conflict was much greater. It consisted of a systemic contradiction between imperialism and all anti-imperialist forces, not just deriving from the East. What is more, in this contradiction, the essence of the conflict, even between East and West, soon came to revolve around the forces of national liberation of the peoples of the Third World. That is, national liberation struggles became the principal driving force of postwar systemic rivalry. They found in the Soviet Union a systemic counterweight to imperialism, if not direct support, while the East-West conflict itself gained its dynamism in the liberation struggles on the peripheries. It is no coincidence that the biggest nuclear confrontation of the Cold War took place on account of the Cuban revolution.

It also said that the West ‘won’ the Cold War. In the 1990s, neoliberals in their euphoria even postulated the ‘end of history’, while their ‘realist’ alter egos contemplated the ways and means of consolidating a ‘unipolar’ world. One of their achievements was to impose their terms on our debate, spreading not only neoliberal and culturalist theories, but also theories of ‘polarity’ and ‘geopolitics’, among others, borrowed from North American political science, unrelated to theory of imperialism of the Marxist-Leninist tradition. This present intervention seeks to provide some clarification regarding these concepts.

It is true that the terms of polarity today have already been appropriated by anti-imperialist forces to occupy a central place in our reflections. However, there is still need for clarification and adaptation, if we are to persist in using such concepts, given that in their original form they are distant from our purposes. Above all, the analytical emphasis on ‘great powers’ diverts the focus from what Marx had called the ‘Sixth Great Power’, people’s revolutionary power. Nor do they clarify the challenges of global development that confront the peripheral countries, which today, more than ever before, require that their external economic relations be subordinated to the power of popular sovereignty.

The most accurate term for the coveted transition, in our view, would be ‘polycentrism’. It postulates a multiplicity of centers in which countries and regions of the South are able to pursue paths of sovereign and popular development, that is, ‘delink’ from the law of value dominated by imperialism. But, after all, whatever the terminological preference, what really matters is the content of the analysis.

Who won the Cold War?

The theory of polarity survived into the post-Cold War period to contemplating a ‘unipolar

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1 These ideas were presented at the conference on Contemporary Popular Movements in India: Challenges, Prospects and Solidarities, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 9 June 2023, and at the Training Course of the Union of Socialist Youth in the debate on The New Global Order, the Climate Emergency and Socialism in the World – Is Marxism Still Relevant?, Itapecerica da Serra (São Paulo), 6 December 2023. I thank the participants for their comments.

2 The terms ‘polycentrism’ and ‘delinking’ were elaborated Samir Amin based on the revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century.
moment’. Yet, it is not possible to maintain that in that transition there was a clear victory for the West. Monopoly capitalism did not emerge from the Cold War unscathed. It was already in permanent crisis, since the mid-1960s, due to its own contradictory logic and above all its conflict with the East and the South. The West came out of the Cold War gravely injured.

What happened from the 1970s onwards was a retrograde attempt to rescue imperialist domination. Financialization, re-dollarization via the oil market, new waves of capital exports, military escalation, and technological leaps relaunched collective imperialism. Certainly, this revenge pushed the Soviet system beyond its limits and at the same time consolidated the neocolonial transition of the countries of the South. It would be more appropriate to see in this late phase of neocolonialism a long impasse in the systemic transition. For the fundamental contradictions of monopoly capitalism were never resolved; and financialization, capital exports, and militarization, despite the technological leaps involved, have all become elements of a secular decline.

Thus the net balance was not entirely in favor of imperialism. Despite sealing the neocolonial transition in most of the Third World, with the notable exception of China, the relaunch of collective imperialism did not reverse decolonization, that is, it failed to knock down the generalized system of national sovereignty achieved by the peoples of the Third World with the help of the Soviet Union. Even after almost half a century of neoliberalism, the regime has not been suppressed or overcome.

There is certainly a degradation of the national sovereignty regime in the peripheries. It results from constant imperialist aggression and deep social polarization, especially manifest in the gigantic growth of labor reserves, generating neofascist forces within countries and even leading to new semi-colonial situations in a series of countries that have succumbed to imperialist invasion and territorial fragmentation. However, it is worth emphasizing again that the general regime of national sovereignty has not been overthrown to this day, and this is a sacrosanct victory for the peoples of the South.

Nor did the end of the Cold War put an end to the communist movement, despite the collapse and dismemberment of the Soviet Union. The communist movement retreated, but it also underwent transformations to the point of making a spectacular economic leap, especially in China, as well as important innovations in Cuba under the weight of the economic blockade. The obvious question may put again: is it still possible to say today that the West won the Cold War?

It would be more accurate to say that the impasse of late neocolonialism is being undermined by the renewed advance of anti-imperialist forces, which this time around find a systemic counterweight in China itself. Even today an analytical focus on ‘great powers’ is not justified. On the one hand, nationalism in the peripheries has been radicalizing and, on the other, China’s trajectory remains closely linked to the Third World. The future of China itself will depend on the character of this relationship.

Throughout this systemic impasse, the transatlantic alliance maintained its effective cohesion and its insistence on expansionism and aggression, given that NATO’s sole purpose has always been the destruction of the obstacles to monopoly capitalism. The alliance expanded its operations into Africa and Asia, devoured Eastern Europe and continued to threaten the dismemberment of Russia. But internally, the same monopolistic logic, once financialized and generalized, caused wages to stagnate and eroded the policy of full employment, undoing the social pacts and the material pillars of the social democratic experiment. Under such conditions, the return to fascism was a matter of time, on both sides of the Atlantic. There are even those who believed that neo-fascism would create a crisis in NATO itself, that the arrival of Trump would put its liberal essence in check! But liberalism was never NATO’s raison d’être, but rather the generalization of monopoly capitalism.

**The resumption of the Cold War**
The systemic contradictions that led to the long impasse of late neocolonialism are now intensifying. If the emergence of China is the force that most took advantage of the decline of collective imperialism and undermined the economic infrastructure of the neocolonial system, NATO’s violent confrontation with Russia in Ukraine and the genocide in Palestine constitute a turning point.

Russia, as the main heir to the Soviet Union – integrating a large part of its territory, its people and its memory, and benefiting from its technological capacity, energy resources and nuclear energy – continued to present obstacles to NATO’s expansionism. The focus of the dispute returned to Ukraine, which has always had superior strategic value in the designs of NATO, as of the Nazi army before it. Ukraine’s transformation into the spearhead of imperialism was a matter of time.

NATO’s instrumentalization of Ukraine was anything but an exercise in sovereignty. National sovereignty is, above all, an anti-imperialist formula for the exercise of popular power. The instrumentalization of Ukraine through a coup, the promotion of neo-Nazi forces in the state apparatus, its tutelage by the NATO military apparatus and the launch of a war against Russian ethnic minorities in the east of the country, in Donbas, was an act of liquidation of sovereignty. Ukraine plunged into a simulated semi-colonial situation, without being directly occupied and divided, but nevertheless re-programmed to launch a war against itself and to point weapons at Russia. In such a situation, any attempt to incorporate the country into NATO, with troops and missiles on the border, was obviously a casus belli for Russia. Russia had the right to intervene.

The intervention was carried out against a consolidated NATO-Neonazi Axis. Over the past two years, a horrific war has been fought at the expense of the Ukrainian people and the youth on both sides recruited in the war effort. Far from its supposed liberal ideals, NATO has shown once again that it has no qualms about supporting Nazi forces outside its borders, whatever the cost, and sponsoring wars overseas, by systematically upping the stakes with ever-increasing budgetary allocations and transfers of heavy weaponry to Ukraine. NATO also doubled the size of its land border with Russia due to Finland’s entry into the alliance in April this year. An extensive front against Russia has taken shape once again, with a supremacist ideology. NATO’s capacity for provocation and escalation of conflict is always a given, even if there is currently evident exhaustion with the war.

It should be added that this war is also a tragic warning about what happens when a more vulnerable country is unable to sustain a policy of Positive Non-Alignment towards states that are more capable of defending their strategic interests. After all, this was the most important historic lesson of the Bandung Movement: the reason for non-alignment was precisely the preservation of smaller states against their own incineration in a fight between the larger powers.

If this war in Ukraine is an extension of the East-West dimension of the Cold War, the war in Palestine, which broke out again in October this year, is the essence of the same enduring North-South conflict. This is a classic situation of settler colonialism sponsored by imperialism, one of the last unresolved colonial questions of the last century and the most consequential for the systemic transition in the twenty-first. The Zionist State never stopped fulfilling its essential functions, which is to dominate the peoples of the region, degrade their sovereignty, and control energy resources and trade routes.

The ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people is clear proof of the barbarism of collective imperialism led by the United States and the fascist nature of its strategic designs. We are witnessing a declared ethnic cleansing against a people under occupation, perpetrated by the Zionist state and supported by the United States and the European Union. Sixteen thousand Palestinians have died in the two months since October 7th, of which 40 percent have been children, and another forty thousand have been injured in the bombings. If there was still any doubt about the civilizational character of the West, it has already turned to dust in the bombings of Gaza.
This tragedy is also a demonstration of how the so-called ‘multipolar transition’ will evolve from now on: while the semi-peripheral powers seek to play in all directions on the chess board, in a new phenomenon of ‘multi-alignment’, the working people of the Third World, trapped and asphyxiated in labor reserves, will rebel and force the systemic transition forward.

It should be added that the only possibility in cracks from the inside of NATO is by implosion of one or more governments under popular pressure. We cannot rule out this possibility in our time, although the proletariat in the West still lacks organization and historical consciousness. But the neoliberal-neofascist dynamic directed by the monopolies inside national arenas has long taken over the entire region and set it on a path of decline and social polarization which will also fuels revolts.

Moreover, the marginalization of immigrant communities of African and Asian origin adds a crucial factor in driving the revolts. The recent massive demonstrations against the Palestinian genocide have in many cases propelled racially oppressed communities to the forefront of the political dynamic. These fissures will deepen. The exact ideological coloring of any cracks remains unpredictable, and we know that fascism is always pouncing at every turn of events. But in the twenty-first century the course of this dispute is no longer pre-determined.

**Challenges of systemic transition**

The fissures at the world level are more mature. The infrastructure of neocolonial rule is buckling under the weight of the permanent crisis of imperialism and the emergence of China. In the last twenty years, the world economy has moved to an entirely new pattern of trade whose center today is China, with this country being the main trading partner of the vast majority of countries in the world. China is also a huge source of finance, which the West itself absorbs to sustain itself.

The role of economic resistance on the part of Russia is also notable at this juncture. In addition to blocking NATO’s military advance, it also successfully confronted the unilateral sanctions regime, safeguarding its currency and establishing new trade partnerships. Furthermore, the heavy sanctions imposed on Russia and the confiscation of 300 billion of its dollar reserves reinforced Russia’s convergence with China and Iran. Such a strategic partnership today present new possibilities for economic transactions and the oil trading outside the dollar and Wall Street, that is, outside the operational mechanisms of the unilateral sanctions regime. The cracks promise to increasingly expand the space for maneuver for the Third World and even for popular revolts.

However, a caveat is in order: except for sudden financial collapse in Wall Street, which also cannot be ruled out given the degree of debt, the road to an alternative monetary and financial system remains long. This applies to the BRICS initiative, led by China, which theoretically has the potential to shift further the correction of forces. But the future of the BRICS will depend on the degree of cohesion among a group of countries whose political systems, for the most part, remain unpredictable or unreliable in strategic terms, which simultaneously maintain close economic and/or military relations with imperialism, in this phase of ‘multi-alignment’. Their international posture still lack the necessary conviction to sustain a robust advance against the economic structures of neocolonial domination. This is the case for most members, namely Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, India and Brazil itself.

If judged by the neocolonial structure still in force in this phase of imperialism, the new polycentric world – commonly called ‘multipolar’ – has not yet taken shape, even though it is on its way. Whatever the terminological convenience, it is worth emphasizing that the term ‘polycentrism’ concerns not only the distribution of a set of military, economic and other capabilities, but the ability of countries and regions to disconnect from the world law of value dominated by imperialism and build a path of auto-centered, sovereign and popular development.

The construction of a polycentric world, in the terms stated here, presupposes a more precise
assessment of the set of challenges that prevail in this permanent crisis. In the terms put here, the systemic transition remains in its infancy; and the principal contradiction remains the same between imperialism and the working people of the Third World. However, the main contradiction has acquired new contours as the crisis of monopoly capitalism has continued to deepen, consisting of the following elements.

(a) The massive expansion of labor reserves in the world economy and their concentration in the system’s peripheries, configuring historically distinct and enduring social formations that present unprecedented challenges due to the severity of the crisis of social reproduction that convulses working people.

(b) The concentration and, at the same time, the increasingly tighter absorption of peripheral bourgeoisies in global value systems under the command of monopoly-financial capital, although with shifts in commercial orientations towards China and, in some contexts, in the process of anti-imperialist radicalization and unilateral sanctions, the emergence of patriotic bourgeois fractions associated with state incentives (China, Russia, Iran, Yemen, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, etc.).

(c) emergence of China in the Triad’s own economic terrain, that is, in trade, finance and technology, and in addition, the economic integration of the whole world into China’s trajectory.

(d) The acceleration of global warming and extreme and especially catastrophic climate phenomena in the tropics, precisely where labor reserves are concentrated.

(e) The inauguration of a long era marked by permanent insurrectionary pressures, which emanate from the already deep social polarization, where labor reserves are once again concentrated.

(f) The widespread military escalation of the West, expanding its military presence around the world, articulating new alliances and reaching a new level of hostilities, even setting up a confrontation on the borders of a UN Security Council member and now promoting, without any moral constraint, a genocide against the Palestinian people.

If polycentrism is not consolidated in time, what is really on the agenda of the twenty-first century is serial genocide against the working peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, that are facing existential crisis.

**There is no transition other than to socialism**

The construction of a polycentric world, which will certainly be a long road, implies above all the construction of socialism itself. And in this construction, it would be obvious to look at China and its leadership. However, the limits of China itself need to be analyzed, especially in the context of the intensifying systemic contradiction.

On the one hand, China leveraged institutional innovations in its central planning system that shielded it from the worst effects of the worldwide law of value, creating conditions for its own development path. Despite extensive concessions to capitalism, it is the country that navigated the challenges of economic transformation with more clarity, innovation and agility, without giving up the substantive gains of the 1949 Revolution, especially in its agrarian question. Also, it demonstrated that capitalism can only function for the benefit of the people on the peripheries under the control of a Communist Party. After all, this was always the meaning of socialist primitive accumulation.

However, one of the biggest questions facing this unique socialist trajectory is the future of its economic relations with the peripheries. As a new round of primitive socialist accumulation has occurred, it today has a global dimension, unlike anything we have seen before. It is worth recalling that the Soviet Union did not have substantive economic relations with most of the Third World, with the notable exceptions of India, China, and Egypt for a time, and Cuba until the end. The path this new world economic relationship will take is crucial for the polycentric transition.
The most that can be expected from China is that it continues to circulate surpluses via the Belt and Road Initiative, that it builds new and modern infrastructure, that it shares advanced technologies, and that it plants seeds for peripheral industrialization. But none of this will be enough to meet the challenges facing the Third World today. China will not displace the worldwide law of value to the point of favoring widespread capitalist peripheral industrialization, nor will it suppress the law of value outside its borders by producing public utilities at the height of the current crisis of social reproduction.

In the current conditions, the polycentric transition will not depend on China but on us, on our insurgency, on our abilities to change the correlation of forces. Salvation does not come from outside – just as it did not come from outside in the Cold War of the last century.

Taking the path of polycentrism means very concrete things: absorb into decent working and living conditions the enormous labour reserves concentrated in the Third World; stabilize and balance, economically, socially and politically, rural-urban relations by means of radical agrarian reforms; planning for sovereign industrialization, both rural and urban, without fear of dismantling and recomposing production systems; and confront climate change at different levels of action but especially through new forms of socialist property to establish a new relationship between economy and nature.

Changing power relations on a national and regional scale in the peripheries remains crucial to the overall systemic transition. And the deadline is no less crucial: the transition must occur, substantively, by the middle of the twenty-first century, if the catastrophic growth of labor reserves and the worst consequences of global warming are to be avoided.

Is there any other measure of the transition to polycentrism if not through the transition to socialism? We already find ourselves in a world pre-revolutionary situation, under permanent insurrectionary pressure on the peripheries, which can no longer be ignored. It is worth remembering, in this sense, Marx’s words at a time when ‘five great powers’ competed for power on the European continent and overseas: what really matters, Marx affirmed, is the ‘sixth great power’. In his words, written in February 1854:

[… we must not forget that there is a sixth power in Europe, which at given moments asserts its supremacy over the whole of the five so-called ‘great’ powers, and makes them tremble, every one of them. That power is the Revolution. Long silent and retired, it is now again called to action by the commercial crisis and by the scarcity of food.]

3 See www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/russia/crimean-war.htm#17, accessed on 06/08/2023.