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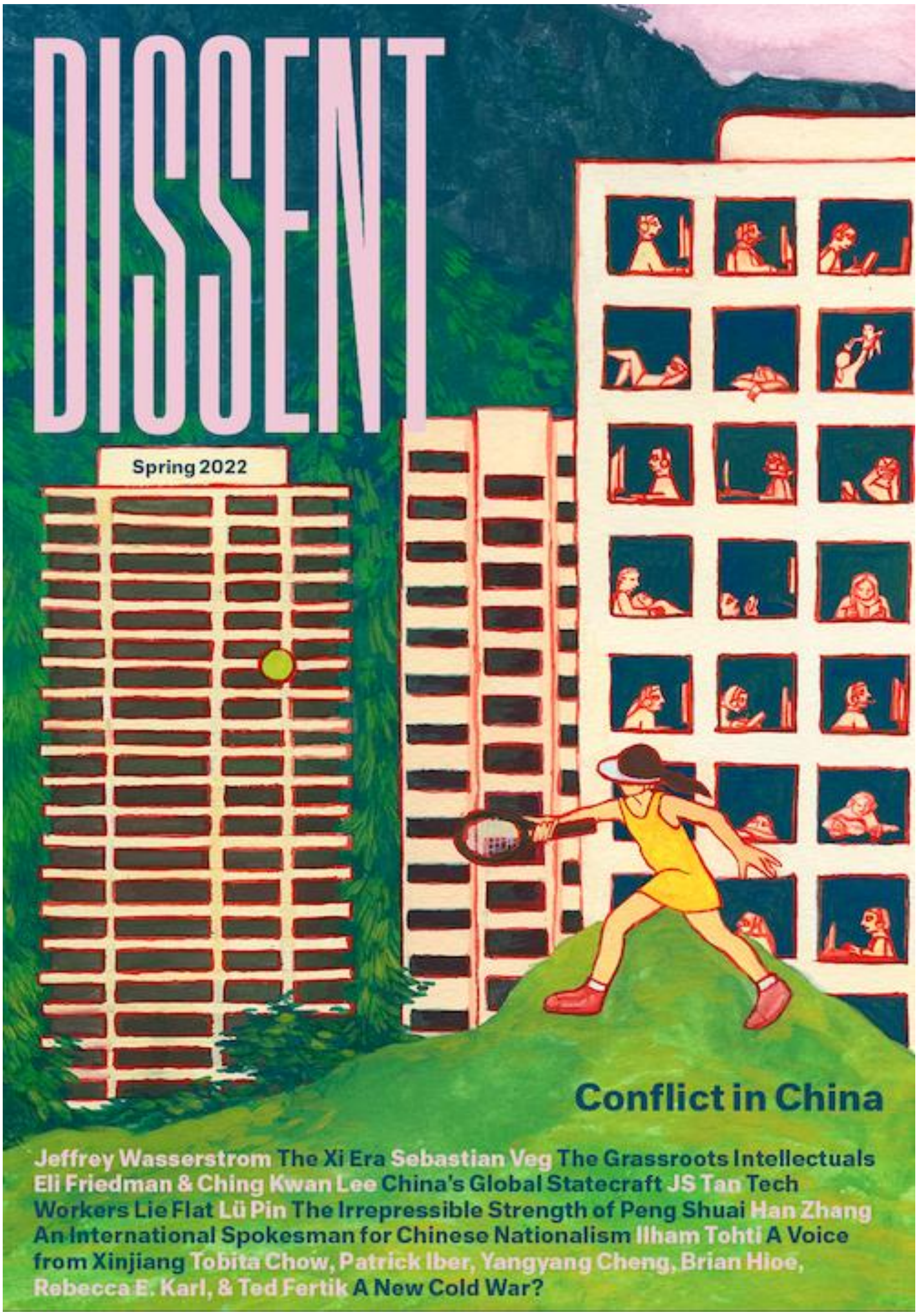
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Left Internationalism in the Heart of Empire

American leftists need an internationalist vision that universally and effectively joins anti-imperial and anti-authoritarian ethics.

Aziz Rana ・ May 23, 2022

Ukrainians who are seeking asylum walk at the El Chaparral port of entry on their way to enter the United States on April 6, 2022 in Tijuana, Mexico (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

This article will appear alongside a series of responses in our Summer 2022 issue, out in July. Subscribe to get your copy.

The global international order seems to have entered what political theorist George Shulman has called an “interregnum.” The post–Second World War framework organized around U.S. international leadership is unraveling, but it remains unclear what will come next. As Shulman put it last year, channeling Gramsci, “the old gods are dying, the new ones have yet to be born.” To a significant degree, this unraveling is a product of American policymaking failures—whether destructive wars of choice in the Middle East, neoliberal practices that have promoted financial instability alongside extremes in wealth and immiseration, or internal political dysfunctions that have undermined any coherent strategy for dealing with a global health pandemic.

Interregnums offer historical openings; they carry the potential for genuine alternatives, both good and bad. Given the degree to which democratic socialists have been systematically excluded from wielding political power, especially foreign policy authority, in the United States, one might think that the unraveling of the postwar order could present a real political opportunity. After all, that long-standing exclusion from power means that none of the strategic errors of the bipartisan U.S. national security establishment can be blamed on the left.

And yet that is not how American politics in the last year has proceeded. Instead, developments from the U.S. troop withdrawal in Afghanistan to the Russian invasion of Ukraine have placed left foreign policy voices on the defensive. Understanding why and working through the tensions within the democratic socialist left's foreign policy world are imperative. At present, the possible futures that lay before us appear strikingly dystopian: either we languish in an old, broken Pax Americana or we slide into a new multipolar order dictated by competing capitalist authoritarianisms. Without a strong and coherent left alternative, finding a global pathway better than these options will only be that much harder.

Across most of the political spectrum, policymakers and commentators largely embrace the essential goodness of the security state as it is currently constituted. The idea that the U.S. government is a benevolent historical agent with the potential to establish a pacific and stable world community is a central feature of establishment foreign policy—including among American liberals. As this view would have it, whatever the flaws within U.S. society—whether racism, sexism, or class inequality—at root American institutions are more or less just, and are organized around principles of liberty and self-government. American liberalism thus offers a clear vision of internationalism: the security interests pursued by bipartisan policymakers are coterminous with the world's interests.

All of this justifies a presumptive political exceptionalism about how the United States operates on the world stage. Most liberals today would be hesitant to sign on to a strong account of such exceptionalism—that Reaganite cultural argument about the unique greatness of the country. Regardless, they would by and large agree that in a world of coequal nation-states in which no one has the real ability to enforce existing arrangements, it often falls on the United States to serve as the ultimate backstop of global security. It is therefore acceptable for the state to step inside and outside of established legal constraints if doing so helps ensure that the system functions and survives. American liberal internationalists acknowledge that the United States sometimes gets things wrong, even disastrously so—as with Vietnam or the second Iraq War—but these episodes are treated as particular follies of an otherwise legitimate and moral security project.

In response, many democratic socialists offer a general critique of U.S. primacy and faith in the objectives of the national security state. Such left activists question a rosy story of the postwar order. They note that U.S. violations of foreign self-determination were the overarching reality of the Cold War era. The period saw direct involvement or complicity in truly staggering forms of mass violence across large swathes of the world, including countless coups, political assassinations, and small-scale interventions. Rather than generating a stable and prosperous community of liberal democracies, U.S. power often encouraged economic exploitation and illiberal authoritarianism (as in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, and South Africa, to name just a few client states).

After 1989 American unipolarity only reinforced these tendencies. The end of a perceived Soviet threat decreased the pressures that had led U.S. leaders to value—however partially—international institutions. The consequence was a systematic withdrawal by American administrations from the multilateral global order. The logic of U.S. political exceptionalism—the country's legitimate right to pick and choose when to be bound by global arrangements—became untethered from any meaningful external constraint.

From the International Criminal Court to the Kyoto Protocol, U.S. elites may have paid lip service to multilateral institutions and even presided over the drafting of new treaties for global governance, but they opted not to join the institutions they themselves had negotiated. The effects of this American defection became apparent in the Middle East, a region increasingly shaped by U.S. preferences for selective ad hoc coalitions and for unilateral and preemptive uses of force. The result today is a global environment in which postwar rules appear less relevant than ever as a framework for limiting state excess. Moreover, the U.S. role in these developments, as well as the internal political breakdown of its institutions as typified by the Capitol insurrection and the chaotic response to COVID-19, renders suspect new efforts by American policymakers to reassert global standing.

In keeping with this counternarrative of the American Century, left voices also often challenge the classic idea that the postwar national security apparatus fulfilled the interests, either at home or abroad, of those most oppressed. Take the twentieth-century history of American economic expansion. The Second World War generated real domestic growth, transforming the United States from one among various global players to the dominant economic force in the world. With European powers decimated, the United States became the hegemon, and the dollar emerged as the global reserve currency. Through the carrot of development assistance and the stick of military intervention and violent coups, the United States reconstructed foreign states in its image, in the process opening markets for American goods.

As a result, the living standards and social status of white unionized workers and middle-class U.S. citizens did indeed reach a high point in the 1950s. But over the long run, the consequences proved disastrous. Foreign policy decision-making was not driven by working people or their interests but by security experts and corporate elites. It was built around pro-business market goals and continuous military intervention in ways that intruded into the domestic sphere, whether through expensive and disastrous wars or the expansion of corporate rights that undermined the global position of labor.

Taken together, these policies eventually propelled cycles of conservative retrenchment and privatization, which only intensified after the Cold War. By the end of the century, the neoliberal austerity American elites had pursued abroad—from Eastern Europe to Latin America—had become the foundation of domestic politics too, and decimated whatever remained of working-class achievements. In the end, the state’s ties to business alongside the enormous growth of the security apparatus exacerbated inequalities everywhere.

For many on the democratic socialist left, this overarching critique suggests its own vision of internationalism. Precisely because the U.S. security state has furthered ends that sustain corporate power as well as class and racial hierarchies, its project is not consistent with the basic interests of oppressed communities. Thus, working-class and minority groups at home should develop an independent foreign policy that emphasizes solidarities with workers abroad or historically colonized populations. This alternative internationalism, unlike liberal internationalism, sees the American security state as a roadblock to the global common good, and thus in need of fundamental transformation.

A central problem for the American left is the matter of international transition: how to get from here to a transformed global order? The present order is composed of various destructive actors. A number of these actors emerged in the context of American foreign policy choices, even if those effects were unintended. This is the argument that some on the left have been emphasizing in discussions of Putin’s autocratic rule in Russia. The U.S. promotion of privatization and the starving of state institutions in Europe and elsewhere, alongside policies like NATO expansion, not only funneled money into a corporate military framework but also fed a mix of economic oligarchy and belligerent ethno-nationalism—conditions ripe for a takeover by a despot like Putin. Yet none of that historical analysis answers the question of what should be done now.

The national security establishment, liberals included, has a straightforward answer: the U.S. security state should intervene through its classic toolkit, with some combination of aggressive sanctions and militarized confrontation. For defenders of American primacy, the inevitable global fact of bad actors means that each outbreak of overseas instability is new proof of the necessity of U.S. political exceptionalism. In the immediate wake of previous strategic blunders—in Vietnam, in Central America, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Libya—there may be handwringing about past misbehavior. But faith in the unique responsibility of the United States means that with every new threat history essentially starts afresh. Rebooting the security apparatus takes precedence over thinking systematically about why the recent past has been littered with so much failure.

Left skepticism about the existing national security state explains in part the broader experience of being on the political defensive. During the 1970s, an American leftist could look to the world and see an emerging and more emancipatory order marked by national liberation organizations across Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Organizations such as the African National Congress in South Africa enjoyed mass representative authority and promoted transformative economic and security agendas. Leaders like Michael Manley in Jamaica or Julius Nyerere in Tanzania painstakingly attempted to bring together a global majority around initiatives like the New International Economic Order (NIEO). As Adom Getachew has explored, such efforts aimed to replace Cold War rivalry with a multipolar regionalism committed to overcoming exploitation and dependencies in the global economy.

Today, however, little remains of this internationalist institutional infrastructure. Internally, after claiming power, liberation forces too often collapsed into authoritarianism or plutocracy. Indeed, just as liberals must reject a romanticized presentation of the Cold War past, leftists too should avoid their own distinct nostalgia. Externally, American political elites and their strategic allies systematically destabilized movements and nonaligned political formations. Left international institutions didn't simply recede; they were confronted and defeated by force.

For left internationalists today, the lack of a global institutional infrastructure and networks of solidarity is a massive political challenge. American leftists face a basic predicament when arguing against the prerogatives of the U.S. security state or seeking to articulate an alternative vision. The replacement across the world of liberation movements with autocratic states means that leftists have few representative organizations that speak on behalf of mobilized publics and could work hand in glove to develop a transnational agenda or appropriate responses to international crises. This means that leftists do not have *any* clear political agent, akin to the U.S. state, to serve as the engine of transformation.

These institutional limitations feed two tendencies within left circles that are deeply counterproductive. The first is to accede to the sharp separation between foreign policy and domestic policy that has marked so much of American politics since the early days of the Cold War. In the 1950s, American labor leaders largely accepted a political compromise that preserved their own hard-won New Deal victories while leaving the right to direct foreign policy to the state. This division created a ubiquitous conventional wisdom in which domestic matters, especially around the economy, were what Americans organized around, while foreign policy was an issue for security elites—except when the government put significant troops on the ground. This division proceeded even though foreign policy choices deeply influenced the terrain for internal struggle, including over the economy.

For some on the left wing of the Democratic Party, a basic ambivalence around the American state feeds a willingness to retreat into this long-standing divide. They embrace the U.S. state when talking about domestic politics by focusing on the egalitarian and social welfarist projects of the New Deal and the civil rights eras. Leftists who want to build electoral support for social democracy often invoke a version of what I call "creedalism," or the belief in the inherently inclusive promise of the American project. Yet such domestic left creedalism faces a political puzzle when critiquing the national security state, because American practices overseas are almost always framed in the moral terms of confronting authoritarian actors, whether the Taliban or Putin, precisely on behalf of domestic creedal values.

If the left creedalist accepts the justice of a statist project at home, why oppose its articulation on those very same terms by national security elites abroad? Why reject the power of the American state as a moral force when embracing it internally, and when the global figures being confronted often very clearly oppose underlying creedal values? Going back to the Cold War itself, a common mainstream left response has been simply to exit this debate and to retreat into matters deemed domestic.

A second, distinct tendency is to avoid the difficulty posed by the decline of a global leftist organizational and state infrastructure. Most brands of left internationalism accept at a deep level the principle that a multipolar order is preferable to unipolarity. One can see this in the old Third Worldist calls for multilateral institutions (like the NIEO) that promote federation and regionalism. With the breakdown of the postwar framework, there are incipient sites of multipolarity, but the most powerful of these are capitalist authoritarian projects, like China and Russia. These projects are fundamentally antithetical to left emancipatory visions, whether Third Worldist or from even earlier movements of the international working class.

But in contesting the real and ongoing imperial violence of the United States, and in conceptually embracing multipolarity, some leftist voices have engaged in acts of troubling political leniency. As Greg Afinogenov noted in a recent article for *Socialist Forum*, in rejecting American unipolarity, these leftists deemphasize the potential destructiveness of emergent global orderings. Such an approach can, at its worst, fail to consistently articulate opposition to both imperialism *and* authoritarianism. It may critique American imperialism but create justifications for local authoritarianisms, or ignore practices of empire not emanating from the United States or its circle of allies.

These two tendencies pose real dilemmas for left internationalists. Precisely because of the potential traps, it is incumbent on American leftists to develop the type of internationalist vision and politics that universally and effectively joins anti-imperial *and* anti-authoritarian ethics.

For starters, this requires having a coherent response to ongoing crises, especially given the role of these crises in retrenching the seeming inevitability of the national security establishment. The terms of foreign policy debate in the United States present each new emergency as a series of either/or choices, with the left at a decided disadvantage. This dynamic is further reinforced by the fact that U.S. officials huddle with allied state actors like Emmanuel Macron and Boris Johnson to devise their agenda. Without political power and with limited transnational institutions, global left voices are instead largely isolated even from one another. There is no mechanism for developing anything like a common alternative proposal, and so, unsurprisingly, left discourse in the United States can read as fractured and discordant. All of this promotes an environment in which “doing something” means supporting the security state’s approach, while questioning that approach amounts to “doing nothing.”

For this reason, the American left must inevitably pursue a difficult balancing act: offer a genuine account of how the security state could engage differently with the issue at hand while highlighting how American geostrategic priorities tend to subvert democracy promotion or civilian protection. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Middle East, where strategic objectives—whether propping up or toppling governments, tilting the regional balance of power toward allies such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, pursuing counterterrorism goals against actors like ISIS, or securing Israeli interests—have borne, at best, a contingent relationship to stated humanitarian values.

Recent events in Ukraine provide an example of the challenges involved in this balancing act. Russia’s invasion is a brutal act of imperialism that violates basic principles of self-determination. Ukrainians on the ground are engaged in a legitimate war of armed resistance that has so far stalled Russian advances, in part due to defensive military aid from abroad. The United States has rightly championed such resistance, but it has done so through a flawed policy framework that harks back to a mid-twentieth-century Manichaean idea of friends and enemies.

The approach is built on boosting military primacy in Europe (more troops are now on the continent than in over two decades), as well as ratcheting up arms across the region. Along with a “lend-lease” bill aimed at easing weapons supplies—with a name that invokes memories of the Second World War—Congress just passed a new military assistance package that involves massive sums ($40 billion on top of an earlier $14 billion, even more than what Biden requested). Together this is, according to the

Associated Press, equal to nearly the entire State Department budget and about one-third of Ukraine' s GDP. As historian Adam Tooze noted, all this means we are "financing nothing less than a total war," a worry reinforced by leaked (and then denied) reports that the United States is providing intelligence specifically directed at killing Russian generals.

Such policies have also gone hand in hand with an aggressive sanctions approach, effectively meant to cut off Russia from much of the global economy—despite scholarly evidence noting that most sanctions, while forcing civilian populations to pay a heavy price, rarely bring wars to a close. At the same time, the United States is supporting Sweden and Finland' s applications to join NATO and by all accounts has been cool on various third-party efforts to negotiate a diplomatic solution.

The United States is embracing an anti-imperial fight, but that genuine desire to confront authoritarian aggression is filtered through an existing set of national security paradigms and institutional practices. U.S. actions are effectively shaped by background geostrategic assumptions—in this case, to weaken a global antagonist on a relatively peripheral battlefield (for Americans, at least). The problem is that these framing drives—especially connected to sustaining a dominant global position—tend to reproduce a conveyor belt of common policies that lock into place whenever crises emerge. Taken as a whole, these policies often push in escalatory directions that can diverge from goals of humanitarian protection and peaceful resolution. They may deemphasize concern with the costs connected to keeping a conflict going if it can undermine Russia' s relative power vis-à-vis the United States and its allies.

The potential for dangerous ratcheting effects under established U.S. policy doesn' t mean that left voices should argue for nonintervention in the context of Russian imperialism. But it does require a tailored analysis that carefully disaggregates the bundle of conventional security policies that jointly have pushed toward destructive outcomes. Such analysis resists the security state' s "take it or leave it" stance, which habitually defines as left obstructionism any refusal to sign up to whatever package officials contend promotes freedom abroad.

Russia' s invasion calls for a left embrace of Ukrainian self-determination and support for genuinely *defensive* military assistance, aimed at preventing an illegitimate overthrow. The hegemonic position of the United States and its history of failed interventions tend strongly to countenance against American military involvement, especially if one begins from a basic principle of assessing policy choices through the prism of "do no harm." But that does not mean that in all cases leftists should oppose *any* kind of U.S. military support. I would argue, for instance, that the failure of the United States in the early to mid-1990s to provide similar assistance to Bosnians, also under circumstances of invasion, was a moral and political error. It set the stage for genocide and ethnic cleansing. And later, that very failure to provide defensive support became a justification for an illegal American and NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo—one that augured decades of sustained U.S. international rule defection.

Critically, though, any defensive assistance must be employed to deescalate rather than intensify hostilities and violence. In this case, that means carefully distinguishing between actual self-defense needs and a proxy geostrategic conflict—and refusing to fund a shift toward the latter. It also entails rejecting broad sanctions in favor of targeted measures that focus on those complicit in Russian aggression. And to the extent that other wider economic policies are also pursued, these should proceed through multilateral efforts to close tax havens that all oligarchs, not just Russians, take advantage of. Above all, defensive military assistance must be joined to a driving commitment to diplomatic negotiations that generate peace. Assistance cannot be used as a way—through seemingly unlimited funds—to trap Russia in a Ukrainian quagmire. That goal may aid American objectives in a "new Cold War" but would also intensify the humanitarian catastrophe on the ground.

Moreover, a leftist analysis should be deeply concerned about the further militarization of the European continent. Such militarization moves in the opposite direction of any truly peaceful order, which would be marked instead by mutual disarmament and shared decision-making. The idea of a European future governed by yet more American primacy and structured through the overwhelming presence of arms carries with it real dystopian possibilities, even if the prospect of a demilitarized Europe appears farther away than ever.

Russia is an incredibly dangerous actor, but it is clearly outmatched militarily and economically by U.S. allies in Europe, a fact further underscored by its reversals in Ukraine. At the same time, authoritarian populism is on the rise throughout the continent. Future scenarios exist in which the United States, and perhaps France as well, are run by far-right autocrats, in addition to various other European states. Sharply expanding military spending everywhere in this context is a recipe for hostile confrontations between belligerent and xenophobic foes on all sides. It also seems predicated on an implicit exceptionalism that views the United States and core European allies as impervious to democratic backsliding, despite the record of the last decade.

Furthermore, American left internationalists cannot stop at questioning U.S. geostrategy and offering a somewhat reframed policy path. The heart of left internationalism is an account of global solidarity that requires broadening the horizon of concern when thinking about conflicts and displaces traditional security narratives. With respect to Russia and Ukraine, this means pressing for humanitarian protections for civilians—through reconstruction aid, humanitarian assistance for the millions displaced, and food provision for Ukrainians facing hunger.

The last point hints at a policy objective that leftists can aggressively pursue in a way that expands the boundaries of meaningful global community. The UN World Food Program reports that "Ukraine and Russia account for 30% of global wheat exports, 20% of global corn exports and 76% of sunflower supplies." Along with a widespread energy crisis, the war has also dramatically increased world hunger. According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, 1.7 billion people are now "highly exposed" to food, energy, and finance crises, with people in states across Africa and the Middle East on the edge of starvation.

These effects have rarely been presented on the nightly news, with its tight focus on the consequences for Europe and Europeans. War coverage, and the response of the United States and its allies, certainly play on racialized sentiments about who is (and who is not) worthy of moral concern. Pressing for a massive and sustained global redistributive effort to alleviate both the hunger and the extreme energy shocks generated by the war—which the money readily committed to arms shows is financially feasible—would underscore that the communities under duress are not just European. It also repudiates that vision of a Manichaean world divided between competing empires, where the goal of foreign policy is to aid allies and impoverish foes.

Ultimately, though, when specific crises subside, the American left faces a broader institutional quandary: the lack of strong transnational sites of organized power and any real agent for international transformative change. All of this puts a premium on thinking in the foreign policy domain about the process by which an emancipatory rather than an authoritarian multipolarity can emerge.

The revival of democratic socialist politics in the United States has created incipient links between movement organizations at home—whether the Movement for Black Lives, the Sunrise Movement, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, or the Democratic Socialists of America—and organizations overseas. Bernie Sanders himself has been involved in conversations with the likes of Yanis Varoufakis about what it would mean to build a Progressive International. But much more needs to be done to conceive of the types of revolutionary, or "non-reformist," reforms that would shift the existing terms of international power by facilitating global left institutional strength.

The idea of non-reformist reforms has become increasingly central to the domestic left political imagination, especially, as Amna Akbar writes, in discussions of prison and police abolitionism. But to date, it has not been a common frame for thinking about the global context, let alone internationalist institution-building within it. What would such reforms entail? A critical pressure point is consolidating the position of global labor. In recent years, perhaps the largest left electoral success story is Gabriel Boric's presidential victory in Chile and the push for a new Chilean constitution, built around working-class demands. These victories were the result of a 2019 rebellion against austerity, with labor—from teachers, miners, dockworkers, and transit unions—centrally involved. None of this is a surprise; for more than a century, the global history of left achievement has overwhelmingly been tied to labor movement vitality. This underscores the importance to left transnational power of elevating the bargaining strength of workers and their institutions.

Reforms connected to these aims involve imposing real constraints on the transnational property rights of corporations. They require seeing full employment and guaranteed jobs programs at home as going hand in hand with the end of business impunity abroad by enforcing environmental and labor standards, holding corporations responsible for what happens in their supply chain, and prosecuting those that violate the law. These are good policies on their own, but they are also efforts to unspool the role of neoliberal austerity in dismantling the institutional infrastructure of left politics and solidarity across the globe.

Relatedly, decriminalizing the border—and dramatically extending legal and political rights to migrants in the United States—should be viewed as a key component of left foreign policy. Precisely because of the extent to which immigrants are a critical part of the American working class, their enhanced power in U.S. society not only feeds domestic class politics but also creates further and deeper ties with transnational labor organizing elsewhere.

Above all, though, no American left internationalism will be able to push back effectively against the national security state unless its goals have the power of mass democratic pressure and are understood by local U.S. constituencies as essential to the achievement of social change. Organized movements on the ground must experience internationalism as related to their core material demands. That old divide between foreign and domestic must be repudiated as a matter of everyday political experience.

The security budget remains the best site for building such an effort, so a centerpiece of any internationalist ambition is the dramatic scaling back of the existing security apparatus. Contesting the budget is necessary both for transforming state infrastructure and acquiring the resources for pursuing social democratic ends—such as universal access to healthcare, education, housing, and jobs. Moreover, the politics of the budget also speaks to why working people should care about the larger and destructive geostrategic alliances that the U.S. government has maintained. Security spending amounts to a massive giveaway to corporations (embodied disastrously by the billions wasted on private companies in Afghanistan that did little to sustain a local army or a government with internal credibility). It facilitates a militarized relationship to the world and, through arms sales and financial assistance, bankrolls the extreme violence of specific regional allies.

Securing labor rights, decriminalizing the border, and scaling back the security budget are only a few of the possible ways to meaningfully build left internationalism in the United States. They would be part of a broader American left agenda that may include numerous initiatives ranging from climate justice to shifts in the terms of U.S. regional alliances—for instance in the Middle East—basic alterations to its sanctions regime, and genuine global investments to address structural hierarchies in the world economy. Even this is hardly an exhaustive list.

But I focus on those three reforms due to their direct connection to transnational power building. Global labor protections and decriminalizing the border enhance the bargaining position and collective institutions of left working-class constituencies. When these groups enjoy greater power in the context of their specific political struggles, this has a ripple effect that strengthens a wider transnational left. As for the security budget, when left working-class constituencies within the United States see their material interests as tied to shifts in foreign policy, it fosters mass movement energy around international matters as well as a sense of common purpose with workers overseas and broader sites of global solidarity.

Just as with much of the rest of the left's agenda, these goals face an incredibly steep uphill battle. But part of their significance is also to alter the *way* that Americans think about foreign policy. While leftists need concrete responses to developments abroad, too much of the collective imagination has been built around the idea that foreign policy is mostly about the United States extinguishing fires that simply arise out of nowhere. Besides contesting this framework of moral innocence, it is also critical to appreciate how the structure of international relations is the water within which domestic political struggles swim. The options available today for U.S. communities are bound to international frameworks that took hold in the past—like how domestic neoliberal entrenchment is fundamentally joined to the 1970s American and European repudiation of nonaligned and Third Worldist ideas of a shared global commons. A political agenda for altering that overarching structure is essential for all freedom projects at home.

In the final analysis, any left internationalism in the United States faces the challenge of the symbolic importance to American life of the country's hegemonic role. For nearly one hundred years, Americans have become accustomed to a global project that William Appleman Williams called "empire as a way of life." The political culture takes for granted that the security state, even if flawed at the edges, is precisely what liberal internationalism assumes it to be: the rightful agent of transformative world change.

Americans may be comfortable with critiques of particular wars, or even of the War on Terror more generally. However, to question the essential legitimacy of the security state's position in the international order is quite another thing. Part of why national security elites can continuously reinvoke the necessity for American primacy and ignore how past American behavior connects to current dilemmas is this background cultural experience. The very idea of the United States for many Americans is wrapped up with the fact that the country has had the capacity and the right to reshape the world as long as anyone can remember.

Any committed version of left foreign policy requires steadily giving up on the symbolic and practical power of American primacy: the idea that the U.S. state should be at the center of all global matters. All of this suggests that left foreign policy involves creating the conditions for the meaningful dispersion of actual power. How can we challenge the current global system in which a small number of wealthy actors—whether in the United States, Europe, or China—enjoy a monopoly over the terms of the global commons?

To say that out loud in the United States is to run up against deep currents of national self-understanding and collective pride. This speaks to an inherent tension in sustaining an anti-imperial ethic from what amounts to the very heart of modern empire. This tension explains why many of the most significant left internationalist formations in the past—including those coming out of the long history of anti-colonial struggle—emerged principally in the periphery and outside metropole centers. There is very little history of empires willingly abandoning the power that comes with overweening authority. And this fact may prove insurmountable in the United States.

But the struggle to shift American self-understanding, alongside the push for specific policy changes, nonetheless remains essential. The world is ensnared in a series of profound tests, from the pandemic to unfolding ecological disaster, that require dramatically rethinking the health and welfare obligations of states. Prevailing frameworks, whether pursued by the United States or its foes, simply refuse to acknowledge the need to rethink anything. All of this makes building an alternative foreign policy more than just a left desire. There is no path to securing the world's collective future without a genuine change.

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States of constitutional veneration in the twentieth century and how it has shaped popular politics.

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