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UNDERSTANDING CHINA PT.3/5

Is China imperialist?

Image: *Scala Archives, 1790.*

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When it was founded in 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was among the poorest countries globally. Now, it's one the largest economies in the world, alongside powers like the US, Germany, and Japan – countries whose development was made possible through (neo)colonial exploitation, slavery, and genocide.

NEWS DESK

CHINA IN AFRICA: THE NEW IMPERIALISTS?



By Alexis Okeowo

June 12, 2013

OPINION

The looming threat of Chinese imperialism

With great power comes great temptation

Is China a New Colonial Power?

How well do the claims of neocolonialism stand up?

Topic: Security Tags: China, Imperialism, One Belt One Road, and Xi Jinping. Africa

Takeover Trap: Why Imperialist China Is Invading Africa

July 10, 2019 | By: Bradley A. Thayer, and Akol Nyok Akol Dok

While Western media often claims that China’s rapid ascent is also rooted in imperialism, the PRC’s leadership insists otherwise →



“We will never take the trodden path of colonial plundering, or the wrong path of seeking hegemony when one becomes strong. We will stay on the right path of peaceful development.”

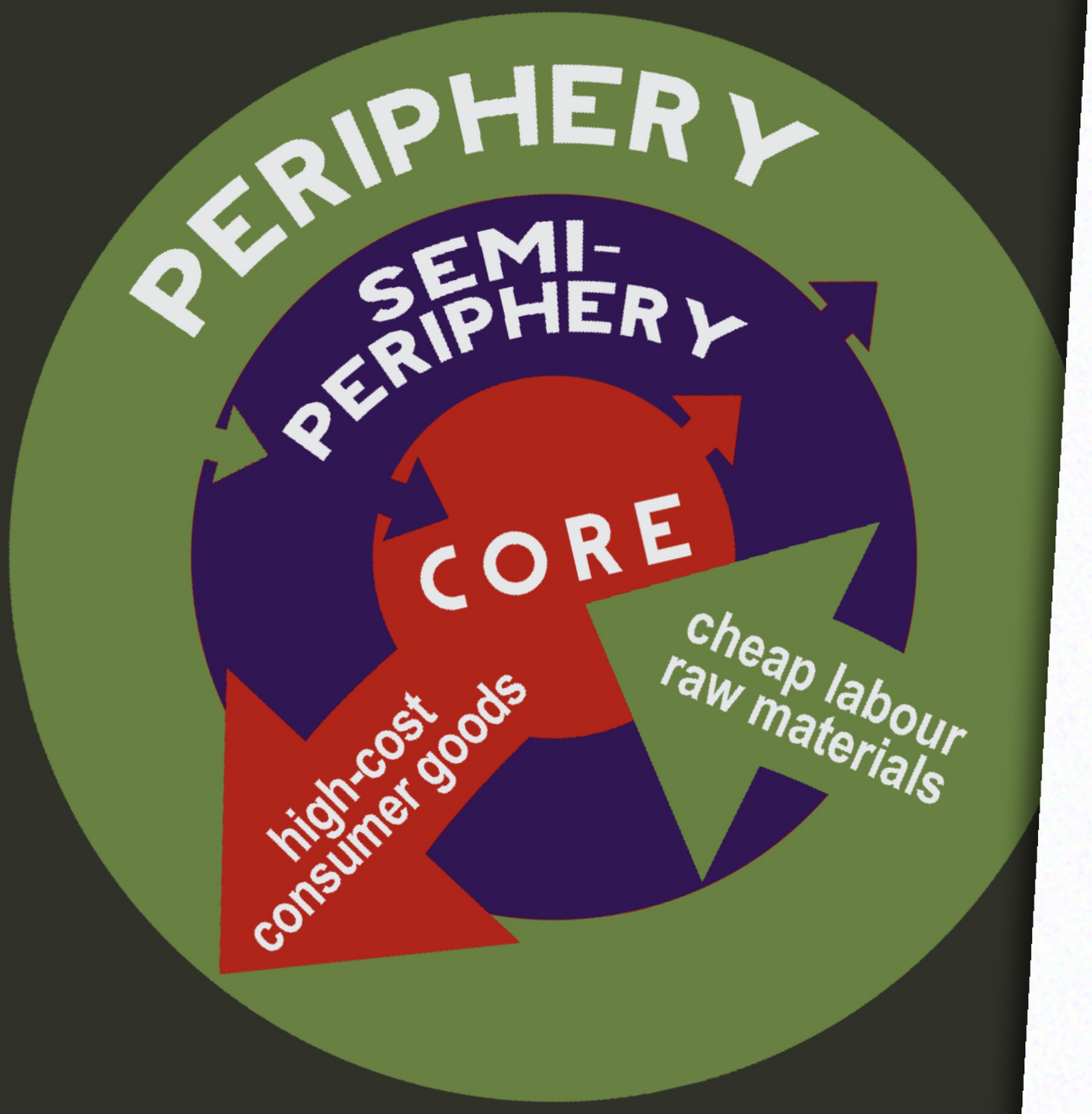
— President Xi Jinping, Address at the Conference Marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence

Image: *Xinhua/Li Tao, 2024.*

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So, is China imperialist or not?

To answer this question, we must first understand that capitalism is an uneven world system, structured into three interdependent zones:



Source: *Wallerstein, The Modern World-System (1974).*

1. **The imperial core** specialises in advanced manufacturing and accumulates capital by extracting labour and resources from the rest of the world.

2. **The periphery** is forcibly specialised in exporting low-value primary commodities (e.g. agricultural products and minerals), while remaining dependent on imported manufactured goods and capital for investment. This creates a cycle of underdevelopment where value is systematically drained from the periphery to the core.

3. **The semi-periphery** comprises countries whose partial industrialisation enables limited capital accumulation. They occupy an intermediate position in the global division of labor, extracting values from peripheral regions while remaining exploited by the core.

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Imperialism is the process in which core states subordinate the productive forces* of the periphery and semi-periphery to the interests of core capital through economic coercion, political domination, and military force.

To understand whether China is imperialist, we can investigate its role in the capitalist world system across 4 distinct areas →

* ‘Productive forces’ is a Marxist concept that refers to the material means of producing goods, including labour and the means of production (land, tools, machinery).

Source: *Hickel, Upstream (2025).* ***Image:*** *Miners in the DRC, Grow Think Tank.*



1. Global Division of Labour

During the Maoist period (1949–1976), the PRC's economic development was constrained by the US-led trade blockade and diplomatic isolation, which denied China access to crucial technologies and markets.

This changed with the introduction of 'reform and opening up' in 1978, a series of market reforms that integrated the PRC into the global capitalist economy by reorienting China's production towards the needs of the core, e.g. by supplying cheap, skilled labour for Western corporations. In this way, a large portion of Chinese production serves capital accumulation in the imperial core.

Sources: *Li, Monthly Review (2021); Hickel et al, Global Environmental Change (2022).* ***Image:*** *Edward Burtynsky.*

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2. Drain of Labour and Resources

Core countries suppress the price of wages and resources in the periphery, forcing peripheral countries to export an unequal quantity of goods in exchange for essential commodities from the core. This relation of dependency enables core countries to extract more value and resources than they give in return.

China plays an intermediary role in this process of unequal exchange. While Chinese production requires vast amounts of resources and embodied labour, much of which is imported from the periphery, most of the value ultimately flows to the core. In other words, China remains subject to imperialist exploitation.

Sources: *Li, Monthly Review (2021); Nag, The Work of Nations – Labor Footprints and Unequal Exchange (2025).*



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Image: *Workers sew shoes at a factory in Qingdao, Shandong Province, China. STR/AFP.*

So what about China's relationship to the periphery?

New research shows that while China does import more resources from the African continent than it exports, it exports more labour and energy in the form of high-value manufactured goods than it receives. This is in contrast to core states that net-import (i.e. appropriate) all three: materials, labour, and energy.

Sources: *Hickel et al, Nature Communications, (forthcoming); Nag, The Work of Nations – Labor Footprints and Unequal Exchange (2025).*

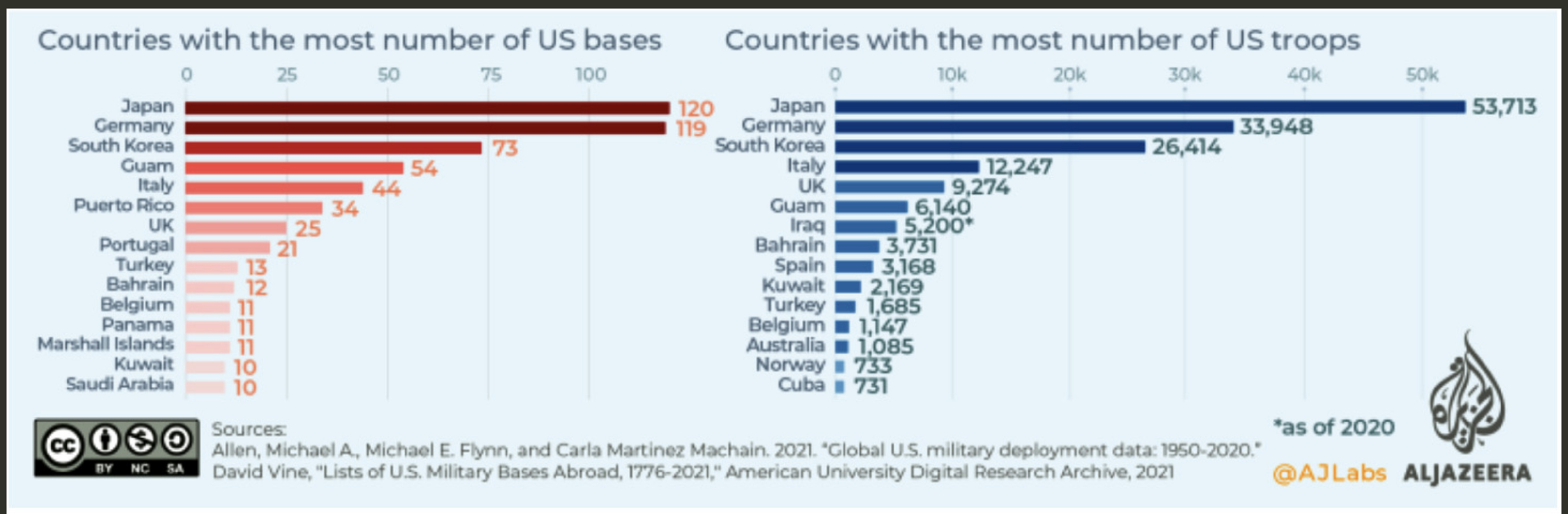


3. International Relations

The core also creates dependency through debt and international aid. In the 1980s, peripheral countries were coerced into accepting Structural Adjustment Programs, which conditioned foreign loans on privatising resources, opening markets to core corporations, and dismantling public services – all necessary to facilitate value drain.

China, on the other hand, provides loans without imposing austerity or completely restructuring recipient countries' economies – loans which generally have low interest rates and long repayment periods compared to core creditors. Through initiatives like Belt and Road, China has invested in building up the infrastructure for sovereign development in the periphery.

Sources: *Hickel, The Divide (2017); Xiaoyang, Tricontinental (2023); Bräutigam, Washington Post (2018).*



4. Military Aggression

Military intervention and war are the cornerstone of establishing and reproducing imperialist relations. A look at the primary imperial power – the US – tells the story.

The US has over 900 military bases in at least 80 countries around the world. Since 1950 it has undertaken 200 military operations and assisted over 60 covert regime change operations. The US defense budget in 2024 was $997 billion – three times that of China.

In contrast, China has not been involved in a major war since 1979 and today only has one single overseas military base.

Sources: *worldbeyondwar.org, Military Empires: A Visual Guide to Foreign Bases (n.d.) Kushi & Toft, Journal of Conflict Resolution (2022); O'Rourke, Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War (2021).* ***Image:*** *Aljazeera.*

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China plays a central role in the capitalist world system. However, based on its subordinate position in the global division of labour, its drain of value to the core, its approach to international relations, and its lack of military aggression, China qualifies as a semi-peripheral nation.

This is not to say that exploitative relations do not exist between China and other peripheral countries, but China is not an imperialist power.

This is part 3 of 5 in a series dedicated to understanding China.

In the following posts, we will critically examine China's approach to ecological sustainability and the US-led Global North's new Cold War on China.

Sources: *Webber, The Geopolitics (2021); Li, Monthly Review (2021); Hickel, Upstream (2025).*