

Towards a World Order without Hegemony: A Proposal from the Global South

In 1994, Marxist political economist Chen Qiren taught a specialised course on global economic development to young doctoral students in the Department of International Politics at Fudan University.¹ China was still in the early phase of Reform and Opening-Up and the recent decline of the Cold War had ushered in an era of heightened triumphalism in the United States. This political hubris was accompanied by the global expansion of neoliberal economic policies. At such a crucial conjuncture, the question of where the world economy was headed also induced an epochal confusion about China's own path of economic development. By contrast, the US, steeped in a triumphalist mood, exuded unparalleled intellectual confidence. Western economists, such as Milton Friedman, Paul Samuelson, and Joseph Schumpeter, quickly became the focus of intense study among Chinese intellectuals and students.

In the historical context of the late twentieth century, the slogan of 'looking to the West' expressed the Chinese people's genuine aspiration for modern technologies and material progress, peace and stability, and better living standards. It also reflected the bold resolve of the early Reform and Opening-Up era – a pragmatic and unconventional willingness to explore all practical and theoretical possibilities in the quest for modernisation. Amid the turbulent tides of the times, what lay ahead was not a well-trodden path mapped out by predecessors, but an open doorway shrouded in darkness. We could dimly perceive figures ahead holding torches and beckoning us forward but had no inkling whether the space separating us from them contained chasms or avenues, pitfalls or smooth paths, a sea of blood or a green pasture. How to move forward and what would be encountered along the way were matters that required self-reflection.

In this era of profound and uncertain changes, the teleological questions of *why* and *for whom* we develop were just as critical as the directional and strategic questions of *how* and *where* to develop. It was Chen Qiren's relentless inquiry into these two teleological questions that led him, amid the great transformations of the early Reform and Opening-Up, to argue that the 'works on development economics' available in bookstores were, by their nature, 'not the kind of the textbooks I was looking for'. Chen pointed out that when applied to the unique challenges faced by 'nationally independent states', Western development economics suffered from a 'methodological deficiency'. This universal knowledge only studied 'quantitative and functional relationships in economic relations without addressing the relations of production'. It failed to distinguish between different relations of production in 'history and in real life,' nor did it grasp how concrete, complex relations of production constrain abstract economic laws.²

The realisation that knowledge of development originating in the advanced Western countries cannot be adapted to the practices of developing countries is not a novel insight that appeared out of thin air but the outcome of a long historical process in which the Third World sought autonomous development. On 10

April 1974, in his speech to a special session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Deng Xiaoping emphasised the Third World's common task of 'opposing colonialism, neo-colonialism and great-power hegemonism, developing the national economies, and building their respective countries'. The purpose of such development was to change 'the present extremely unequal international economic relations'.³ The political independence won by the former colonies and semi-colonies in the aftermath of the World Anti-Fascist War fundamentally transformed the existing international political order which had taken shape alongside the emergence of the world market. At the level of international law, empires as political entities had formally exited the historical stage. Yet the global economic structure, relations of production, and attendant cultural, legal, and social orders formed during imperialist expansion persisted despite the formal exit of empires. On the contrary, imperialism, as an epistemological framework, remained deeply entrenched in the existing structure of the world market whose foundation lies in how 'big industry has brought all the people of the Earth into contact with each other' and 'merged all local markets into one world market'.⁴

This imperialist epistemology emphasises the importance of hegemony in sustaining order, balance, and stability. Derived from European historical experience, this model of imperial order seeks to maintain peace through unipolar hegemonic monopoly or hegemonic alliances with balance-of-power mechanisms, and manages other countries and regions via various forms of interventionism.⁵ This model has failed to bring peace to the world. On the contrary, the old hegemonic order has proliferated the Hobbesian trap of mutual fear between nations – destructive cycles of trade competition experienced in European history have been projected on to the entire world.

Interconnected but highly uneven economic development formed the material foundation of the old order. Fuelled by a sense of panic over finite resources, the old order's epistemology regards monopolising limited resources as a fundamental imperative for survival. Such resources include not only the natural endowments but also the foundational conditions affecting agricultural production, such as soil fertility and climatic environment. The core of the old order's conception of land and wealth was to possess as many of these naturally finite resources as possible. Within this framework, it was assumed that one could not alter the fundamental limitation of natural resources. Consequently, the acquisition of wealth was viewed as an absolute zero-sum game: one party's gain necessarily entailed another's loss. All political-economic discourse under the old order correspondingly revolved around the rationalisation of unequal distribution. In other words, this hegemony-centric conception of order can be understood as a philosophy rooted in finitude and inequality.

An alternative epistemology believes in human agency. Cooperation and mutual assistance among people can not only maximise the utility of limited resources, but also *transform* the world into a space more suitable for harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature over a long historical process. This transformation encompasses two dimensions. The first is the material dimension: advancements in agricultural technology, the invention and discovery of new energy sources, and the exploration and innovations in engineering and science, all of which underpin the essential foundations of human survival and development. The second is at the level of social organisation: a spiritual quest – corresponding to material progress – to continuously explore organisational forms that are more inclusive and effective, better adapted to the survival of large-scale communities, better able to ensure the universal benefits of material progress, guarantee the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature, and liberate humanity from the shackles of resource finitude and the trap of unequal development.

These contrasting epistemologies give rise to two fundamentally different approaches to understanding the international order. The hegemony-centred conception of order, premised on finite resources, sees competition as its foundational principle, treats *order* as a political resource amenable to monopolisation, and regards great powers as the sole leaders of the international order, with the aim of expanding their own material and political monopolies, all based on preserving the unequal status quo. This perspective is plainly evident in Western anxiety surrounding challenges to the US-led ‘rules-based order’.

The alternative conception of order finds concrete expression in the practice of resistance against the great-power monopolies. This resistance also comprises two dimensions. Politically, the independence movements of former colonial and semi-colonial nations after the World Anti-Fascist War constituted resistance to great-power monopolies. Economically, modernisation through delinking from dependency served as the material bedrock for securing political independence. Neither of these practical dimensions can be adequately theorised by a hegemony-centric epistemology. In fact, dissatisfaction with Western modernisation theories was closely intertwined with frustration at the economic and political monopolies of the great powers. The United Nations platform became an important platform for the vast number of countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to express this dissatisfaction and attempt to change this monopolistic structure.

At the same UNGA session where Deng Xiaoping delivered his speech, the *Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order* was adopted. The declaration stressed that the new order ‘shall be founded on justice, sovereign equality, mutual interdependence, common interests and cooperation among all nations’, with the objectives of ‘rectifying inequalities and existing injustices, enabling the elimination of the widening gap between developed and developing countries,’ while ensuring that equality and peaceful development are bequeathed to future generations. To attain these objectives, the declaration stipulated that countries shall have the right to integrate and develop their resources through nationalisation to guarantee benefits for their own people; formerly colonial and semi-colonial countries may claim compensation from their former colonial powers; the activities of transnational corporations must be regulated to ensure they contribute to the economic development of host nations; and the international monetary system should facilitate the development of developing countries.⁶

The emergence of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) was the outcome of the sustained struggle for sovereignty by former colonial and semi-colonial nations. These struggles took place largely beyond the United Nations framework, manifesting in localised anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic armed resistance, alongside regional initiatives of trade cooperation and mutual assistance. At the international level, the contradictions between the United States and the Soviet Union – and the competing models of international order they embodied – constituted the basic geopolitical precondition for these struggles. The contradictions between the US and the USSR included not only an arms race but also a competition to expand their respective international influence.

During the early Cold War, ‘trade wars’ took the form of the US establishing trade alliances while imposing embargoes and containment measures against the USSR. In 1949, the US enacted the Export Control Act which mandated an embargo on all products that might contribute to the USSR’s military and economic development. From 1949 to 1994, through the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM) – an informal, secretive international alliance – the US enforced embargoes and trade restrictions against the USSR and the entire socialist bloc. Under the pretext of ‘the countering of communist economic penetration’, the US passed the 1962 Trade Expansion Act which severely restricted imports of ‘products of

any country or area dominated or controlled by international communism'.⁷

The trade wars of this era garnered broad support from US political and business elites. It safeguarded the economic and technological superiority of the Western states while undermining the hopes of developing countries to achieve economic autonomy through diversified trade circulation. In containing the USSR and its efforts to forge international trade relations, the US and its allies further ensnared developing nations in unequal, dependent relationships. The trade war waged by the Trump administration today has revived almost the same script as that of the Cold War era.

Under these pressures, politically independent nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America began to demand genuine freedom to trade at the United Nations. At the plenary sessions of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, Che Guevara stressed that 'the right of all peoples to unrestricted freedom of trade' must be established, and that all signatory countries should 'refrain from restraining trade in any manner, direct or indirect'.⁸ The UNCTAD was formally established with the mission of advancing 'trade liberalisation'.⁹ Its primary target of contention was the United States, which was then pursuing a trade war. The first Secretary-General of UNCTAD was Raúl Prebisch of Argentina, who emphasised that the body's mission should be 'to promote international trade... particularly trade between countries at different stages of development, between developing countries and between countries with different systems of economic and social organisation'.¹⁰ This stance stood in sharp contrast to the US-led embargo against the socialist bloc at the time.

The attempt to establish a New International Economic Order was just one in a series of historical efforts by Asian, African, and Latin American nations to pursue genuine development. In the resolutions adopted at the 1955 Bandung Conference, diverse attempts at order-building with profound implications for international law could already be seen. The resolutions reached among Asian and African countries on political, economic, cultural, and educational matters embody the basic spirit of mutual assistance and cooperation. Through solidarity movements, fragmented Asian and African nations united to resist pressure from major powers and strengthen their internal economic resilience. Through cooperation and exchange, they aimed to deepen understanding among their peoples and achieve decolonisation and liberation on cultural and educational fronts. The final communiqué of Bandung Conference, with its call for 'fuller economic, cultural, and political cooperation', asserted that true decolonisation and independence could only be achieved through solidarity and mutual assistance. With regard to economic cooperation, the communiqué explicitly stated that 'proposals with regard to economic cooperation within the participating countries do not preclude either the desirability or the need for cooperation with countries outside the region, including the investment of foreign capital'.¹¹ It is evident that from at least the Bandung Conference onwards, the dual orientation of South-South cooperation and North-South dialogue had already taken shape, conceived as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

This understanding is rooted in a clear recognition of the basic developmental conditions of Asian and African nations. After gaining formal independence, former colonial and semi-colonial countries could not acquire substantive capacity for decolonised development overnight. Over the long history of colonial globalisation, colonial powers spent centuries constructing a relatively complete global colonial economic circuit centred on themselves. The circuit was primarily built on a land-based colonial economic model before the eighteenth century. The occupation of colonial territories and the transformation of production

fundamentally altered the natural landscapes, ecologies, and even demographic structures of the colonies. Africa and the Americas, transformed by the colonial economy, formed the basic framework of the international division of labour that exists today. Originally diverse local economic communities were converted into components with ‘comparative advantages’, organised under colonial metropolises to form parts of the world system. These components each served distinct roles: the Caribbean as a centre of sugar production; South America and Central Africa as suppliers of minerals; Southeast Asia and Oceania as producers of rubber and fertilisers; West and East Africa as exporters of cocoa and coffee; and Asia and Africa as reservoirs of labour. During this long process of colonial economic globalisation, earlier small-scale regional or local economic circuits were entirely dismantled. Moreover, the ecological foundations that once sustained these economic circuits were severely damaged by large-scale plantations, the slave trade, and resource extraction.

Another foundation underpinning this globalisation was oceanic shipping. As the scale of the colonial land economy continued to expand, trade between different colonial settlements and between colonial powers and other major economies worldwide – including China – further impacted the land-based fiscal models of colonial nations. From the eighteenth century onwards, early mercantilist thinking, grounded in land-based finance and focused on the export of labour products in exchange for precious metals, was gradually supplanted by a new mercantilism that placed greater emphasis on economic exchange and the flow of imports and exports. In contrast to the earlier view that wealth was created through land-based production, the new theory stressed that trade itself could generate wealth. As the scale of trade flows expanded, the speed of wealth accumulation among the emerging commercial bourgeoisie in the core nations accelerated. This large-scale, rapid accumulation of capital provided the essential primitive capital for Britain’s Industrial Revolution. Such accumulation did not arise out of nothing; it was built upon the fundamental structure of the international division of labour established by the colonial land-based economy. At this juncture, a corporate global system began to take form, with industrialised metropolises as headquarters and colonies and semi-colonies as its departments.

The highly organised structure underpinning this corporate global system evolved over the long history of imperialist globalisation. By the mid-twentieth century – during the decolonisation movements of Asia, Africa, and Latin America – the newly independent states were confronted with a tightly organised colonial apparatus of military, bureaucracy, and education, together with a highly developed economic and financial system. In the face of such hegemonic power, the only way out for nations seeking independence was to unite to form larger communities. They needed to build self-sufficient domestic communities as swiftly as possible through regional circulation, international aid from friendly nations, and forms of engagement that did not completely decouple from the former metropolises – all to enable the shift from formal equality to substantive equity. This entailed reducing their high dependence on industrialised Global North nations – the former colonisers – across economic, cultural, and governance spheres.

The national liberation movements across Asia, Africa, and Latin America were also movements of regional solidarity. The international order, institutions, and legal principles envisaged in this process placed the empowerment and development of states at the centre. This empowerment operates at two levels: First, organisational empowerment at the domestic level. Many underdeveloped countries faced significant constraints in natural resources, fiscal capacity, and human capital, which severely limited their nation-building efforts. At this stage, modern political parties and relevant organisations were crucial for mobilising scarce social resources. Second, cooperative empowerment at the international level. Imperialism and

hegemony, as systemic forms of oppression, could not be overcome through blind decoupling or by the isolated efforts of any single nation – collective struggle and mutual cooperation among underdeveloped countries was therefore critical. Such cooperation and mutual assistance were premised on non-interference in internal affairs and the voluntary and autonomous participation by all nations. Supporting ‘oppressed peoples and other developing countries in their just struggles to win and safeguard their independence and develop their economies’ is explicitly recognised in China’s constitution, Mao Zedong identified non-interference and mutual assistance as the hallmarks of ‘true internationalism’.¹² This principle of non-interference in international order comes from both China’s own historical experience and the collective historical experience of the Global South.

Whether referring to today’s Global South, the former Third World, or the earlier Tricontinental, these terms all encapsulate oppressed people’s dissatisfaction with the hegemonic order and their aspiration to end dependence and achieve modernisation through solidarity and mutual assistance. In contrast to the hegemon-centred perspective, the Global South affirms the agency of the governed and the oppressed. The Global South does not represent a ‘subaltern’ viewpoint, in the sense of late twentieth-century Western post-colonial academia, rather it represents the historical and theoretical significance of the concrete practices of resistance, struggle, and exploration. Within this long historical continuity, China’s relentless exploration for a path to modernisation, as part of this diverse practice and as a form of resistance to the hegemonic order, thereby acquires true theoretical universality. The aim of such anti-hegemonic practice is to construct an order free from hegemony.

A philosophy of practice is the only way to understand the Global South. This means that when the goal is to establish a non-hegemonic order, all attempts become transitional steps toward that future. It is precisely through conscious engagement in this transition that the Global South can truly assert its agency. In the movement towards a Global South order, all the subjects united by this historical process, in turn, imbue the Global South with meaning. This is the significance of discussing the Global South today, and the fundamental purpose of such discussions is to dismantle the structure that produces the challenges facing the Global South.

Notes

¹ Editor’s note: Chen Qiren (1924–2017) was a Marxist political economist from Xinhui, Guangdong Province, who taught at Fudan University and made major contributions to the study of imperialism and colonial political economy. He authored 25 monographs and over 150 articles, and led a National Social Science Fund project on Marxist international political economy. In 2012, he received the Shanghai Academic Contribution Award in Philosophy and Social Sciences.

² Chen Qiren, *Research on World Economic Development* (Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2002), 298.

³ Deng Xiaoping, ‘Speech at the Sixth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly’, *People’s Daily*, 11 April 1974.

⁴ Friedrich Engels, *The Principles of Communism*, vol. 1, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 81–97.

⁵ See A. F. Pollard, 'The Balance of Power', *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1923): 51–64.

⁶ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 3201 (S-VI), Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, A/RES/3201(S-VI) (1 May 1974).

⁷ Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment, CoCom and the Politics of East-West Trade* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 63.

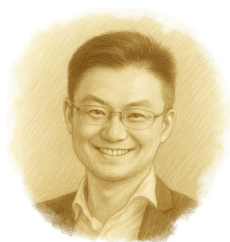
⁸ Ernesto Che Guevara, 'On Development', 25 March 1964.

⁹ UNCTAD, *Proceedings*, I: 26, 27, 32, 41.

¹⁰ UNCTAD, *Proceedings*, I: 15.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Final Communiqué of the Asia-Africa Conference' (24 April 1955).

¹² The State Council, 'Constitution of the People's Republic of China', The People's Republic of China; Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Literature Research Office, *Chronology of Mao Zedong (1949-1976)* Vol. 5 (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2013), 212.



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