

“Cruise Missile Socialists”: When Justifying Imperialist Intervention goes Wrong

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On July 1, an article titled “Libya and Syria: When Anti-Imperialism Goes Wrong” was published on the North Star website, signed by “Pham Binh of Occupy Wall Street, Class War Camp.” The article argues that imperialist interventions in Libya and Syria are justified because they are demanded by forces the author calls revolutionary. While claiming to cut against the grain, he formulates what is a common position among liberals, progressives and even some self-proclaimed socialists and anti-imperialists. As such it is important to respond.

When imperialist countries intervene in the affairs of oppressed countries, the justifications do not only emanate from the U.S. government and the corporate media. In each instance, various forces and individuals with liberal and progressive credentials succumb to the imperialist propaganda campaign and put forth pro-intervention arguments, albeit using progressive-sounding analyses and using liberal/left language.

Even if “progressive” arguments for intervention originate far away from the halls of power, and receive no wide audience among the ruling class, they nonetheless play an important role for the imperialist war drives. This is because such arguments address a specific audience: people with anti-war and progressive inclinations who are typically far less susceptible to run-of-the-mill Washington/Wall Street pro-war propaganda. By spreading confusion about the nature of the intervention, and the tasks of the progressive movement, those who would normally be the first responders in the anti-war movement are rendered inactive and passive. This is the value of this kind of propaganda for the ruling class.

In the lead-up and immediate aftermath of each intervention, such forces emerge to explain that while anti-imperialism is good in general and in past scenarios, this time is different. Each time they present their arguments as new and unorthodox. While it is important to refute the specific arguments of the pro-intervention “left,” we must begin with the broad observation that they continue a long and definite political trend in the imperialist countries. In the Iraq invasion, this trend received the name “cruise missile liberalism,” but 100 years ago Lenin referred to it as “social-imperialism.”

Demonstrations and opposition movements are not always “progressive”

The basic thrust of Binh’s article is that the Western left must respect the wishes of the Syrian “revolutionaries” for foreign intervention. This, he claims, would constitute real solidarity and support for self-determination. In his entire article, Binh conveniently assumes the very thing that needs to be proven—that the Libyan rebels and the Syrian opposition are revolutionary. This false premise, once accepted, leads to all sorts of false conclusions.

What is the political character of the NTC-led rebels in Libya? What qualified them as revolutionaries? How does Binh determine that the Syrian opposition is revolutionary and the government counter-revolutionary?

When analyzing an opposition movement anywhere in the world, this is the first question that needs to be asked. Just because part of the population of a given country comes to the streets or takes up arms does not mean that they are revolutionary or progressive. This is so even if they are responding to real social and political problems. Right-wing forces routinely mobilize parts of the population —predominantly disaffected elements of the somewhat privileged “middle class” and others—to promote right-wing agendas.

Fascists in Italy and Germany used rallies, marches and militant street actions as effective tactics to eventually take state power. In those cases, the fascists were not the opposition to socialist or otherwise revolutionary governments, but to bourgeois democratic governments that had been forced to grant some concessions to the working class.

In the United States, the Tea Party has staged rallies, including large ones of up to tens of thousands, in opposition to the Obama administration. No liberal, progressive or revolutionary would consider Tea Partiers to be revolutionaries.

In the aftermath of the overthrow of the Soviet Union, the U.S. government embarked upon a series of destabilization campaigns—now often called “color revolutions.” Most color revolutions occurred in the former Soviet Republics, such as Georgia’s Rose Revolution, Ukraine’s Orange Revolution and Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution. But there have also been (successful or attempted) color revolutions in other countries, such as Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution in 2005 and Iran’s Green Revolution in 2009.

Color revolutions usually include the formation of coherent and unified pro-imperialist political forces, which draw upon public discontent with economic distress, corruption and political coercion. They involve several operations, including the creation of division and disunity in the military and an intense propaganda campaign. The extent to which color revolutions are successful is largely dependent on the level to which the targeted state is already destabilized by the time street protests take place.

Elements who participate in such street protests are often a small part of the population and do not represent the sentiments of the majority of the people, much less the interests of the working class. In fact, many participants in the protests may not support the agenda of the right-wing leadership and its imperialist sponsors. Still, the imperialist propaganda campaign utilizes the protests, however large or small, to promote regime change and the ascension of a client state. The imperialists are not fools to do so; this is precisely what such “democratic” movements produce absent an alternative working-class and anti-imperialist opposition.

To recap: revolutionaries and progressives must stand on principles, and make a political assessment of movements in question. Even if the majority of the population were swept up by a reactionary movement, that movement is not revolutionary. Even if the majority of Libyans supported imperialist intervention—which is highly unlikely—that would not justify support by progressives for imperialist intervention.

Proponents of “humanitarian” intervention clearly do not suffer from a lack of analytical ability. What they lack is revolutionary resolve to stand up to an imperialist demonization

campaign that all sectors of the ruling class supported. What is the political character of the Syrian and Libyan rebels?

The examples of color revolutions, fascist movements, and right-wing mobilizations disprove conclusively the notion that demonstrators, dissidents and opposition forces are revolutionary by default. The Libyan National Transitional Council and the Syrian National Council fall in this category as well. These forces have staked their entire existence on imperialist patronage. Their statements in open support of imperialist intervention, capital penetration, and “free” markets demonstrate the content of their vision, as does their prioritizing of diplomatic relations with the United States and its allies, including the potential normalization of relations with Israel. They leave little doubt about their political and class orientation.

What occurred in Libya, prior to the NATO bombing campaign, had the elements of a neoliberal color revolution, while also drawing upon the traditional fault lines of Libyan society (most significantly, regional competition from the oil-rich east as well as a long-standing trend of Islamic fundamentalism.)

In the early stages, the revolt included street protests in Benghazi, the defection of some high-ranking political and military officials (from the government’s neoliberal faction) to the side of the rebels, and the formation of the pro-imperialist National Transitional Council. Immediately after the rebels took control in Benghazi, numerous dark-skinned Libyans and migrant sub-Saharan African workers were lynched in city streets in a wide-scale campaign of terror. Known supporters of Muammar Gaddafi’s leadership were summarily executed; for months their bodies were found in ditches in and around Benghazi.

Despite a few initial victories, this rebellion lacked the strength to overthrow the Libyan government on its own, hence the necessity for foreign military intervention.

The NTC invited Republican U.S. Senator John McCain to the “liberated” area of east Libya, giving him a hero’s welcome. In a country that had long projected enmity, or an unstable relationship with imperialism, the rebels put up a huge billboard that read: “USA: You have a new ally in North Africa.” NTC leaders traveled extensively through the capitals of Europe convincingly promising Western powers that their oil companies would have unrestricted access to Libya’s oil. The message was: if we take over, there will be no more of Gaddafi’s “economic nationalism.”

U.S. leftists adopt confused slogans

What kind of revolutionaries, while quickly earning a reputation for racist violence, would give away their country’s resources to imperialist powers and beg them to bomb their country? In the face of these incontrovertible facts, some on the left, anxious to demonstrate their solidarity with the “revolution,” falsely dismissed the NTC as merely a “clique” among a diverse and loose opposition movement. Clouded by their blind hatred for Gaddafi, and bending to the imperialist propaganda, they continued to describe the revolt as a “people’s” or “democratic revolution.”

While Binh writes that the Left has been crippled by “knee-jerk anti-imperialism” with respect to Libya and now Syria, we observe the opposite. With few exceptions, the Left failed to mobilize against the imperialist attack and regime change in Libya, and appears to be heading in the same direction with Syria. Accepting uncritically the “Arab Spring” label

and the stories of impending humanitarian catastrophe, even those who claimed to oppose intervention did very little in practice.

Groups like the International Socialist Organization promoted the contradictory and academic slogan of “Yes to the Revolution, No to Intervention,” which only spread confusion in the anti-war movement. After all, the Libyan “Revolution” was the loudest champion of intervention. Its fate, whether it succeeded or failed, was based on the relative successes of the intervention. All the actors in the Libya conflict (the government, the masses who rallied against intervention, the rebels, and the imperialists) understood very quickly that the “revolution” and the intervention had become indissolubly linked. The only ones who denied this reality were groups like the ISO, which believed they could magically separate the two with a rhetorical contrivance.

As the imperialists bombed away, the ISO ignored the masses of Libyans who rallied in defense of national sovereignty against imperialism, since they did not fit the convenient schema, invented by imperialist media outlets, of the “people versus the dictator.” In practice, instead of joining a united front with all those standing up against intervention, they formed an anti-Gaddafi united front with Libyans in exile who championed intervention.

In a recent article, the ISO distinguished their position from the pro-intervention arguments of Binh. But their centrism paved the way for such social-imperialism (socialist in name, imperialist in practice.) They accept all the same premises: that the Libyan government had no significant base of support and that the revolt was a popular “revolution” with an “understandable” desire for foreign help.

Moreover, the ISO pioneered the attack on “knee-jerk anti-imperialists” like the Party for Socialism and Liberation, leading the charge against us precisely as the war drums began to beat late last February. While misleading their readers that the U.S and UK “really, really don’t want Qaddafi to fall” (Feb. 24, 2011) and downplaying the growing evidence of racist lynchings committed by the rebels, they lashed out dishonestly against anti-imperialists like the PSL.

Even when the bombing had begun, they repeatedly attacked the few anti-war forces taking action around Libya—for having caused a “wedge” with the Libyan “solidarity activists” who urged war. What is an anti-war movement for, if not to cause “wedges” with precisely such pro-war forces?!

The ISO is now attempting to portray themselves as steadfast organizers against intervention, rather than offering self-criticism or reflecting on their own confusions and inactivity during the assault on Libya. (Even now, when the rebel movement’s right-wing political character has been made clear, they still attack the PSL for not supporting the “revolution.”)

Social-imperialists like Binh take the ISO’s senseless centrist position a big step to the right, with a full-throated call to stand behind the NTC and imperialism. He instructs us to accept as a matter of faith that because the Libyan rebels were revolutionary, the NATO bombing was a revolutionary act and the opposition to it “counter-revolutionary!” Binh is not alone as a “leftist” in support of imperialist intervention; Solidarity, a non-Leninist organization that comes out of a similar political tradition as the ISO, published two opposing pro-intervention and anti-intervention positions on Libya.

A hijacked revolution?

Binh writes: “When the going got tough and the F-16s got going over Libya, the revolution’s fair-weather friends in the West disowned it, claiming it had been hijacked by NATO.” Some progressive forces first sided with the rebels erroneously, but knew better than to support the NATO bombing. The “hijacked by NATO” position was a way for such forces to gracefully correct their error and rhetorically oppose, or at least not support, imperialist intervention.

But not every political force in the West started out defending the Benghazi rebels. From the very start, the PSL was among a small minority that insisted on analyzing the political character of the opposition, pointing out the nationalist and contradictory elements of the Libyan state, and exposing the imperialist motivations for intervention. Shortly thereafter, as more facts came out of Libya, the PSL and a few others exposed the right-wing character of the opposition movement.

The Libyan rebels were not a revolutionary force that was “hijacked by NATO.” Irrespective of the motivations of individual protesters/rebels, as a political movement defined by its deeds, policies and strategic alliances, the counterrevolutionary thrust of the opposition movement was made quickly apparent. The NTC was a right-wing force even before it served as the ground forces of the NATO invaders. It utilized discontent among parts of the population, much of it with a regional basis, to reverse the remaining elements of the nationalist process initiated by the 1969 progressive coup, also called the Al-Fateh Revolution, led by Gaddafi.

Those that assert the NTC was an unrepresentative clique must face the fact that no progressive leadership ever broke from it (which presumably would happen if a progressive movement were openly “hijacked” by counter-revolutionaries!), nor did any rebels protest the bombing of their country. Even with the inevitable grumblings of discontent or dissent within the opposition rank-and-file against the NTC, this did not change one bit the overall trajectory of the movement towards counter-revolution.

Popular support for Libyan rebels?

Binh writes: “NATO’s air campaign had mass support among revolutionary Libyans.” Near-unanimous popular support for the opposition is another unproven assumption of apologists for imperialist intervention in Libya, as well as Syria. The NTC did not enjoy the support of the entire Libyan population—nor does the SNC enjoy the support of the entire Syrian population. There is overwhelming evidence refuting such claims. On July 1, 2011, in the midst of the massive NATO bombing, hundreds of thousands—perhaps as many as a million people—rallied in Tripoli against NATO. The corporate media gave the protest scant coverage. Demonstrations of this size in a country of only six million people smashes the myth that the opposition had the support of all the people.

It is an uncontroversial fact that Libya, under Gaddafi’s leadership, had a very small, almost negligible, military. After the NATO bombing started, the Libyan leadership opened up arms depots in Tripoli to the population, urging everyone to defend the country against foreign attackers. This is clear proof that, at least in Tripoli, the government enjoyed considerable popularity. Otherwise, why would an “unpopular dictator” arm the masses who would likely use the arms to fight against the state?

Binh suggests that the rebels were the key actors in overthrowing Gaddafi. But when, at the

insistence of imperialist powers, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 was adopted on March 17, 2011, the Libyan rebels were on the verge of complete defeat. Forces loyal to Gaddafi had been gaining control and rapidly moving towards Benghazi, having already made it past Brega. All of these are established facts acknowledged even by the pro-war imperialist media.

In fact, the rebels' imminent collapse was the reason the United States and its junior partners frantically rushed the resolution past the UNSC. If NATO had not started its merciless bombing campaign, the rebels would have lost all their remaining territory.

NATO carried out thousands of bombings and sorties over the course of seven months, delivering blows too severe for the Libyan state to overcome. NATO did not take its leadership from a ragtag group of NTC rebels that NATO itself saved from annihilation. On the contrary, during the months of the bombing campaign, the Libyan rebels did not just receive military training and advice, but functioned under the operational command of NATO. In a coordinated fashion, NATO provided aerial support – i.e. murdering pro-Gaddafi forces by bombing—which cleared the way for the rebels to move on the ground. The final siege of Tripoli was planned and operated by U.S. and European special forces units. Is this not evidence that the imperialist powers, not the NTC rebels, were in control?

Binh even praises “NTC’s stand against foreign invasion and for foreign airstrikes.” While NATO did not deploy ground troops in its military campaign in Libya this was not due to NATO’s respect for the wishes of the Libyan rebels. To the extent possible, imperialists always attempt to minimize their casualties by using part of the population of the country they are invading/occupying/bombing to do the fighting on their behalf. This is what Nixon’s “Vietnamization policy” was designed to achieve.

The author correctly refers to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq as “transparent empire-building exercises.” Yet, the United States did not land forces on Afghan soil until after the Taliban forces were already defeated by a combination of heavy U.S. bombardment and the U.S.-supported “Northern Alliance” Afghan forces on the ground. The preferences of the NTC in the case of Libya, or the Northern Alliance in the case of Afghanistan, were insignificant to imperialist plans. Imperialists want to minimize casualties, not because they care about the loss of life of their military personnel but to minimize the possibility of the growth of the anti-war movement at home.

In his zeal to attack anti-imperialists, Binh offers another apology for the NATO bombing campaign: “NATO’s methods and the war’s outcome were totally at odds with what the anti-interventionists envisioned: There was no massive NATO bombardment of civilian targets, there was no Libyan highway of death, no Black Hawk Down, no Wikileaks-style Helicopter gunship atrocities.” While accurate information is hard to come by, it is difficult to imagine 10,000 bombings in a country of 6 million did not cause wide-scale civilian casualties. The pictures of the destroyed city of Sirte tell a thousand more words than Binh’s reassurances.

The meaning of self-determination

Some assume that civilian casualties, inevitable in all such bombing campaigns, are the only or the main reason why anti-imperialists oppose intervention. Even if not a single civilian were killed in a given imperialist bombing campaign, (a virtual impossibility), it is still unjust.

Revolutionaries and progressives must not only stand with civilians, but recognize the

ultimate justice of those fighting for their country's independence against imperialist attackers. The crowds in support of the Libyan government swelled once the imperialist bombing began, a testament to their sense of national dignity. They did not deserve to die. But in Binh's mind, those Libyans who risked and lost their lives to defend their country's independence against NATO and the rebels under their command were fair game.

Binh writes: "The moment the Syrian and Libyan revolutions demanded imperialist airstrikes and arms to neutralize the military advantage enjoyed by governments over revolutionary peoples, anti-interventionism became counter-revolutionary because it meant opposing aid to the revolution." According to this bizarre rationale, the right of self determination, a right all progressives uphold at least in words, means nothing less than support for imperialist military intervention.

In the imperialist era, the right to self-determination has been bound together with the "national-colonial question," that is the specific global division of power between imperialist oppressor and oppressed nations. This has long been a cardinal question for revolutionaries inside the imperialist countries: what attitude they will take towards their own ruling class' imperialist plans, and towards the independence movements among the oppressed nations. Lenin, the Russian Revolution and the early Communist International recognized that these independence movements weakened imperialism and could hasten its downfall. They offered a united front, although not necessarily political support, to independence movements in the struggle against imperialism. This is the specific meaning of self-determination in the era of imperialism.

Regardless of one's political differences with or opposition to the Libyan government, those carrying the green flag became an independence movement when the imperialists started providing material support for the rebels, and eventually attacked.

Imperialism is a system

Binh makes no attempt to explain why, in the case of Libya and Syria, imperialist powers happen to be on the "good side." Why would the imperialists unanimously support, not just diplomatically but militarily, genuine revolutionary movements?

Apparently, for those like Binh, imperialism is just a bad policy choice that can be reversed by good ones. In reality, it is a system that seeks world domination in order to secure its control of markets and capture of resources. It pursues the overthrow of independent states, even ones that only partly block the penetration and profit realization of oil giants and other profit-seeking corporations. This pursuit of markets and resources is the motivation for a rational and murderous set of policies, not subject to fundamental change by this or that politician, or this or that set of circumstances.

Real anti-imperialists oppose all tactics imperialism uses to subjugate oppressed peoples, whether they are outright invasions, occupations and bombings, or sanctions, coups, assassinations, funding and organizing pro-imperialist opposition forces, propaganda campaigns, etc.

It is possible for one imperialist country, or a grouping of imperialist countries, to temporarily aid independence movements in the oppressed world in order to weaken the hold of their imperialist rivals in a different country. This happened on occasion prior to World War II, when different imperialist powers were engaged in an intense struggle to

expand their spheres of influence at the expense of others. At the end of WWII, U.S. imperialism became the dominant imperialist force. The other imperialist countries, both the victors and the defeated, were relegated to the role of junior partners to U.S. imperialism. In today's U.S.-dominated imperialist world, it is highly unlikely that one imperialist power will support a genuine revolutionary movement. It would be impossible for all imperialist powers to support and fund a genuine revolutionary movement. It would defy the logic of the imperialist system to do so.

The case of Libya was not about inter-imperialist competition, with one power supporting a liberation movement in hopes of making gains against their rival. All the imperialist powers supported the rebels and have already benefited from the ascension of a client state. Hugely profitable oil contracts have already been signed, and are continuing to be granted by the generosity of the new Libyan government towards the oil giants. U.S. oil companies ConocoPhillips, Marathon and Hess Energy, France's Total, Italy's Eni, British Petroleum and other oil giants are each grabbing part of the spoils. The Libyan neoliberals, who had to compete with the nationalist-oriented forces inside the previous Libyan government, are firmly in control.

Binh considers what happened in Libya "a step forward," overlooking the racist lynchings and the wholesale betrayal of the Libyan nation to imperialism.

Standing against imperialist demonization is not easy

In its essence, this is not a theoretical issue. Binh and other proponents of "humanitarian" intervention clearly do not suffer from a lack of analytical ability. What they lack is the revolutionary resolve to stand up to an imperialist demonization campaign that all sectors of the ruling class supported. By comparison, siding with imperialist intervention is the easy thing to do; it is the path of least resistance to make a more "mainstream" and "respectable" left.

Binh correctly condemns U.S. interventions in Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans, as well as the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. But anyone can oppose past imperialist interventions as questions of academic and historical debate. When those interventions don't go well, even some ruling class politicians are critical.

The Binhs of the future will undoubtedly look back and condemn the Libya intervention as a historic crime, only to justify the next imperialist intervention. Revolutionaries, anti-imperialist by definition, struggle against imperialist interventions, not just in historical perspective, but more critically, in the here and now.

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