

Does Bernie Sanders' Imperialism Matter?

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Critiquing Bernie Sanders from the left can be a lonely project. There is a “hope”-powered hysteria surrounding his campaign, and bursting the “hope” bubble can produce a fierce backlash. The Sanders “hope” explosion is so fierce because capitalism has become a hopeless place.

Hope can be positive by pushing people into political action, but it's also exploited by the establishment as shiny bait. Obama, for example, fished for votes using “hope” and reeled in the presidency.

He then clubbed “hope” senseless by betraying his promises, continuing war and maintaining the domestic policies of the 1%. Hope was so thoroughly thrashed that a new messiah of hope was needed to cure the Obama-fortified hopelessness.

Bernie's version of hope is deeper than Obama's shallow PR electoral campaign, but under capitalism real “hope” isn't a simple recipe, and Bernie is missing some key ingredients, most notably “anti-imperialism,” which is exemplified in Bernie's reactionary foreign policy positions.

Imperialism can be loosely defined as the multitude of actions that maintain the U.S. global empire. Most Americans don't realize the true political depth of imperialism — or don't even know they live in the largest empire in world history, which adds urgency to the educating and organizing around this issue.

Some on the left would dismiss anti-imperialism as a “secondary” issue, accusing those who insist on its inclusion as “dogmatic” or “purist.” “Bernie is doing so many great things,” they insist, “that focusing on his weak points is counter-productive.”

It's of course perfectly reasonable that many progressive/liberal and working class people would be attracted to Sanders' platform. But socialists/revolutionaries must have a broader perspective. Imperialism is, in some ways, the beating heart of U.S. capitalism: a central power of the “billionaire class” that stops progress abroad while blocking progress at home.

The rabidly pro-imperialist section of the establishment is the most powerful and class-conscious section of the ruling class, with deep roots in the military industrial-complex. It also has deep, racist roots in the South, where military enlistees remain vastly over-represented, and where many military bases are named after pro-slavery civil war heroes. This is the most hideously reactionary section of the establishment, who'd be the first to support fascism domestically, since they've already supported it in various forms abroad.

The U.S. pro-imperialist establishment has helped to create a network of global military alliances that funnel weapons internationally, while cash flows globally into the hands of the

1% via free trade agreements crafted by the pro-imperialist establishment.

Without this imperialism the exports or markets of the largest U.S. corporations would suffer: including the big banks, big oil, big healthcare/insurance corporations, defense contractors (the arms industry), agro-corporations, tech firms, etc.

Bernie's failure to confront this specific, crucial power of the "billionaire class" isn't a "blind spot" of his politics, since imperialism is like a tank parked in your living room, too big to ignore. By consciously allying with this imperialist-section of the establishment, Sanders has exposed himself as a push over, whenever the imperialists decide its push comes to shove over war.

This imperialist pressure to "fall in line" extends beyond war. Sanders helped write and gave crucial political support to Obamacare, betraying his longstanding "dedication" to universal health care.

Sanders knew that Obamacare was not "a step in the right direction," but a decision to spend all of Obama's political capital on a scheme that strengthens the health care/pharmaceutical corporations that act as the biggest barrier to universal health care. If elected, President Sanders would abandon much of his campaign promises and "fall in line" as quickly and ingloriously as Obama did.

Sanders surely knows that foreign policy cannot be separated from domestic policy. They are two sides of the same coin that directly affect each other. What happens abroad affects what is possible domestically, and vice versa.

For example, the U.S. imperialist project — via "defense" spending — drains the U.S. national budget (57% of discretionary spending), which could otherwise actually fund the things Bernie is proposing; universal health care and fully fund public schools, free college education, job creation, etc.

A Harvard study estimated that the full cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars alone will [cost over \\$4 trillion](#), a number that is already increasing as the wars get indefinitely extended. This is a big reason why public schools are being shuttered and health insurance remains unaffordable or absent for tens of millions of people.

This kind of imperialist spending has effectively vetoed the job and social programs that people would enthusiastically vote for. This imperialist veto over domestic programs exemplifies how oppression abroad limits your freedoms at home. True freedom and economic security cannot be won in a bubble within an international economic system, especially within a U.S. imperialist system.

Imperialism also directly affects race relations in the United States. The U.S. establishment finds it acceptable to commit atrocities against people of color abroad because people of color at home live in dehumanized conditions and are treated as second-class citizens.

The imperialist actions abroad reinforce the oppression domestically, the most recent example being the Muslim people who are bombed overseas and then discriminated against at home. This racism is purposely exacerbated by politicians and the media, serving to reinforce the position of the establishment by dividing working class people in both affected nations.

The same dynamic is used in Africa, where the underlying racism against African Americans is projected abroad, aiding and abetting the regimes that committed the Rwandan and Congo genocide. These U.S.-supported atrocities are then blamed on the “inexplicably savage” behavior of African “tribalism”, a racist lie used to legitimize the racism, mass incarceration, job discrimination, and crushing poverty experienced by African Americans.

It’s no exaggeration to say that U.S. imperialism is the most politically reactionary force in the world, directly and deeply shaping governments and militaries/police across the world that then use these U.S.-made weapons against their own citizens.

For example, a recent article in Salon was named “[35 Countries where the U.S. has supported Fascists, Drug Lords, and Terrorists](#).” The point is well made; U.S. imperialism artificially shoves governments across the globe far to the right, preventing these governments from becoming examples or allies for social movements within the United States.

The 700+ U.S. military bases across the globe directly affect the politics of every hosting nation, while U.S. imperialist political pressure is also applied via military alliances (NATO), arms sales, training military/police, supporting dictators, supporting military coups, proxy wars, direct military intervention, etc.

Supporting Bernie Sanders means ignoring — or minimizing — his imperialism, since political campaigns are won through cheerleading not criticism. And by ignoring Bernie’s foreign policy — because it might “hurt the campaign” — imperialism is reinforced through valuable political cover. The most powerful section of the U.S. establishment thus benefits.

Some Sanders supporters might respond; “at least his foreign policy is better than Hillary’s.” But Sanders himself has been unable to provide a real argument to support this claim during the ongoing debates.

When Sanders attempted to frame Hillary as “pro-regime change” in relation to the catastrophe she created in Libya, Hillary pointed out that Sanders voted “yes” to support that regime change. As the war machine rolled into Libya Sanders wasn’t a speed bump; he was a lubricant. Clinton and Sanders both have Libyan blood on their hands.

Sanders has Afghan blood on his hands too, having voted for the invasion of the now-endless Afghan war that triggered the beginning of the flurry of Middle East wars. And while Sanders brags about voting “no” for the 2003 Iraq war, his vote soon morphed into a “yes,” by his several votes for the ongoing funding of the war/occupation.

Sanders also voted “yes” for the U.S.-led NATO destruction of Yugoslavia, and supports the brutal Israeli military regime that uses U.S. weapons to slaughter Palestinians.

When it was announced that Obama was choosing sides and [funneling guns to the Syrian rebels](#) — thus exacerbating and artificially extending the conflict — Bernie was completely silent; a silence that helped destroy Syria and lead to the biggest refugee crisis since World War II.

Sanders is consistently on the wrong side of history; he’s also been a direct accomplice to a series of massive war crimes.

Sanders often uses weak rhetoric to mitigate his imperialism. On his campaign website he

says that the U.S. needs a “strong national defense infrastructure” and a “strong defense system,” but adds the caveat that he’s “concerned” about the military budget, and wants “accountability” for the enormous amounts that are spent. Obama the candidate spoke more clearly about war and peace than Sanders does.

Highlighting Sanders imperialism is especially important because the left has been repeatedly duped by imperialist wars in recent years, to the point that imperialism is becoming increasingly ignored, and consequently strengthened.

Large sections of the left were silent about the destruction of Yugoslavia, Libya, Afghanistan and Syria. They were blissfully ignorant of the ongoing imperialist adventures throughout Africa, most spectacularly in Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia and the Congo. The worst dictators in Africa — for example in Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda — are “good friends” of the United States.

By not giving adequate focus to the U.S. foreign military adventures, valuable political cover is given to allow these wars to continue. The U.S. anti-war movement was mostly silent about Obama’s imperialism while two historically important countries of the Middle East — Libya and Syria — were obliterated.

By not educating and organizing against imperialism, it’s impossible to make alliances with forces fighting imperialism abroad. Creating international alliances has a long tradition among the left among unions, Black liberation, and the socialist/communist movements.

There have also been powerful connections that helped curb apartheid South Africa, strengthen the Venezuelan revolution and empower Palestinians against the apartheid Israeli government.

However, the people on the ground in the Middle East who preferred that the U.S. not destroy their nations, have had little solidarity with people in the United States. In fact, the United States in many of their eyes is the number one enemy, which in turn makes them think that terrorism against U.S. citizens is justified.

Ultimately, the nationalist demands of the Sanders’ campaign cannot be achieved while simultaneously allowing international imperialism to thrive. Imperialism is a bogeyman that haunts social progress, re-appearing in countless forms to keep resources flowing endlessly into wars abroad that stunt domestic spending and distract from working class demands. A new military “crisis” will always strive to take priority over domestic considerations.

It’s obligatory for the left to challenge imperialism by any means necessary, waging campaigns and raising demands to stop foreign aggression.

By lowering our voices in response to Bernie’s campaign, an opportunity is missed to amplify our voices in strategic interventions such as the successful Black Lives Matter actions at Sanders’ rallies. Silence on these issues always benefits imperialism at the expense of everybody else.

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