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# National-Democratic Tasks in the Era of Imperialism

## Lenin's Theoretical Contributions to Revolutionary Change and Socialist Transition

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### ABSTRACT

On the centenary of his death, Lenin's portrayal of modern imperialism remains highly relevant as imperialist interventions and neoliberal policies have dismantled state structures, eroded traditional welfare mechanisms, and fostered fragmented identities. In response, major Eurasian countries like China and Russia, along with Latin American left-wing movements inspired by national figures such as Simón Bolívar and José Martí, confront neo-imperialism and the "Three Evils" associated with Western-supported terrorism, separatism, and religious fundamentalism, which highlights the intertwined nature of national-democratic and socialist tasks in today's context. How did Lenin envision revolutionary strategy in the developing world? What is the contemporary relevance of his revolutionary strategy? How does Lenin's intellectual legacy contribute to the theorization of national-democratic tasks within the socialist revolution? Lenin's emphasis on integrating socialist and national-democratic tasks in revolutionary movements offers a strategic foundation for addressing the complexities of the imperialist era. Importantly, Mao's notion of

### KEYWORDS

Imperialism; Market Socialism; Nation-Building; National-Democratic Tasks; Socialism with National Characteristics; United Front

New Democracy builds on this Leninist framework by advocating for the centrality of national-democratic tasks to achieve both national independence and socialist transformation. In Lenin's work, one could discern four basic tenets with respect to the integration of socialist and national-democratic tasks: 1) adopting socialism with national characteristics in order to understand a country's unique economic and historical conditions; 2) building a broader national-democratic front to collectively overcome feudalism, absolutism, and capitalist-imperialism; 3) persisting in nation-building with the aim of promoting rapid economic progress and modernization by consolidating national integrity; and 4) liberating the productive forces under a socialist market economy in order to accelerate socialist transition.

## 1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union, coupled with the acceleration of neoliberal globalization and U.S.-led wars of aggression in countries like Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, led not only to the retreat of the international communist movement but also to the dissolution of nation-states in the 1990s and early 2000s. According to Cheng Enfu and Lu Baolin (2021, 51–53), this era marked the rise of neoimperialism, characterized as “parasitic and decaying late imperialism” and “transitional and moribund late capitalism”, which can be identified through five key features: the new monopoly of production and circulation by giant multinational corporations, the decisive role of finance capital causing economic financialization, the dominance of the U.S. dollar and intellectual property leading to global economic inequality, the formation of an international oligarchic alliance driving exploitation through money politics, vulgar culture, and military threats, and the intensification of capitalism's global contradictions resulting in a predatory and decaying form of late imperialism. These features rose to prominence starting in the mid-1970s, when the economic conditions of stagflation led to a decline in the use of Keynesian economic policies by governments. Neoliberal approaches began to dominate economic theory and policy, especially in neoimperialist countries, serving as the ideological and policy framework necessary to sustain neoimperialism. These neoliberal approaches align with the trends of globalization and the increasing financialization of monopoly capital, accompanied by the intensification of militarism (Cheng and Lu 2021, 22, 35–36; Cheng 2021, 646–47).

Against this backdrop, imperialist interventions fragmented state structures and created regional power vacuums. Meanwhile, neoliberal policies involving trade and financial liberalization, privatization, and deregulated labor markets eroded traditional welfare mechanisms, forcing working masses to rely on extra-state safety networks. Consequently, the erosion of citizenship ties fostered the rise of micro-nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and other fragmented identities (Amin 1997; Gürcan 2022b).

French political advisor Alain Minc (1995) described this situation as the “New Medieval Age,” marked by conflicts, disorder, and the revival of ethno-religious tribalism and superstition. These conditions, representing a significant historical step backward in the history of human civilization, undermined the modern foundations of socialism, while bringing national-democratic tasks to the forefront of the revolutionary agenda.

Under these circumstances, Lenin’s portrayal of modern imperialism and imperialist support for global obscurantism is more relevant than ever. According to him, the essence of imperialism lies in the “division of nations into oppressor and oppressed C.21, s. 409 (Lenin 1960, Vol. 21, 409),” with Asia becoming a center of gravity for the world revolution. With great foresight, Lenin went on to designate Asia as the bulwark of progressive movements in stark contrast to Western imperialism’s reactionary stance, reminiscent of today’s New Medievalism:

“The bourgeoisie of Europe, scared by the might of the working-class movement, is embracing reaction, militarism, clericalism and obscurantism (Lenin 1960, Vol. 19, 86).”

“Everywhere in Asia a mighty democratic movement is growing, spreading and gaining in strength.... And “advanced” Europe? It is plundering China and helping the foes of democracy, the foes of freedom in China!... All the commanders of Europe, all the European bourgeoisie are in alliance with all the forces of reaction and medievalism in China (Lenin 1960, Vol. 19, 99-100).”

In our epoch, major Eurasian countries like China and Russia, along with left-wing movements in Latin America, a region that experienced an unprecedented resurgence of socialism since the Cold War (Gürcan and Otero 2024), have taken the lead in resisting the “New Medieval Age” of neoliberal imperialism. In response to these challenges, furthermore, the China- and Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization identified a national-democratic agenda aimed at combating the “Three Evils,” which are often associated with Western imperialism and its interventions: terrorism, micro-nationalist separatism, and religious fundamentalism (Gürcan 2019). In Latin America, leftist governments in the 2000s reclaimed the legacies of key nationalist figures such as Simón Bolívar and José Martí in their resistance against U.S. imperialism (Gürcan 2010). Similarly, Xi Jinping, drawing on the national-democratic legacies of Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong, emphasized the increased importance of patriotism and national perseverance in pursuing the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Xi 2016).” This reveals not only the rising relevance of national-democratic tasks but also their intertwined character with socialist tasks in today’s conditions. In this regard, the Communist Party of China (CPC) acknowledged that building socialism takes longer than Marx, Engels, and Lenin had foreseen, and that China is still in the early stages of socialism, transitioning from the primary stage to an intermediate stage (Hu et al. 2021).

The essence of national-democratic revolution is encapsulated in the China-inspired dictum, “Countries want independence, nations want liberation and the people want revolution (Amin 2008, 27).” Mao (1967) used the term “New Democracy” to describe national-democratic revolution as the earliest phase of a socialist revolution. He defined it as the initial phase of a revolution where a transitory new-democratic society is

formed under the collective leadership of all revolutionary classes, led by the proletariat. This phase is particularly relevant for (post)colonial and semi-colonial (or developing) countries, characterized by an anti-imperialist stance, promoting national “dignity” and “independence” through a united front of various revolutionary classes (Mao 1967, 5, 12–13, 18, 28, 32). One cannot but notice that in today’s conditions, the concept of national-democratic revolution, or Mao’s New Democracy, has gained even greater relevance. While Mao primarily viewed the national-democratic revolution as an initial stage of the broader revolutionary process, contemporary experience demonstrates that national-democratic tasks can become prominent even after a successful revolution in contexts marked by the retreat of the international communist movement and intensified imperialist ambitions.

It is possible to trace the theoretical origins of national-democratic revolution, or New Democracy, to Lenin’s work. According to Lenin, successful revolutionary movements in the oppressed or developing world must integrate socialist tasks with what he called “bourgeois-democratic” (or national-democratic) tasks. In contemporary conditions, the term “national-democratic” is preferred over “bourgeois-democratic” given that these tasks are to be carried out within an anti-imperialist context in the lead of the working class rather than the bourgeoisie. As highlighted by Chen Enfu, any revolution aiming to build socialism under working-class leadership can be considered a proletarian revolution, which can occur in stages such as a national-democratic revolution and a socialist revolution. Importantly, the defining characteristics of any revolution are determined by its goals and leadership. Even in national-democratic revolutions, the first step for the proletariat is to control civil servants, the army, and government departments, followed by asserting control over ideological institutions, which radically differs from traditional bourgeois revolutions (Cheng 2021, 644–45).

From Lenin’s writings, four main tenets of the national-democratic strategy emerge, which will be individually addressed in the remainder of this article. First, revolutionary movements should leverage socialism with national characteristics to formulate their strategy, because a thorough understanding of national-democratic tasks requires due appreciation of national characteristics. Second, this strategy must encompass a combined struggle against capitalists, pre-capitalist/obscurantist forces (including religious fundamentalism, remnants of feudalism and tribalism, ethno-sectarianism, etc.), and imperialism. Relatedly, achieving this combined struggle requires constructing a broad revolutionary front. Third, nation-building stands as an important national-democratic task, which requires the correct handling of contradictions with nationalities vis-à-vis imperialism. Fourth, national-democratic tasks, which mainly derive from the underdeveloped state of capitalism and imperialist threats, also continue in the early phases of the socialist revolution, which necessitate carefully deploying state capitalism and other measures to accelerate socialist transition.

## 2. “Socialism with National Characteristics” in Lenin’s Work

Mao’s conceptualization of New Democracy accentuates the notion of socialism with national characteristics, which combines “the universal truth of Marxism ... with specific national characteristics (Mao 1967, 61).” This is highly reminiscent of Lenin’s emphasis (Lenin 1960, Vol. 24, 43) on the need to analyze class relations and historical peculiarities specific to each nation’s context before formulating revolutionary strategies:

THEORETICAL work must be directed towards the concrete study of all forms of economic antagonism in Russia, the study of their connections and successive development; they must reveal this antagonism wherever it has been concealed by political history, by the peculiarities of legal systems or by established theoretical prejudice. They must present an integral picture of our realities as a definite system of production relations, show that the exploitation and expropriation of the working people are essential under this system, and show the way out of this system that is indicated by economic development. This theory, based on a detailed study of Russian history and realities, must furnish an answer to the demands of the proletariat (Lenin 1960, Vol. 1, 296-297).

## 3. United Front Strategy in Lenin’s Work

In this framework, Lenin (1960, Vol. 1, 290-292; Vol. 2, 95) sees the remnants of feudalism and absolutism as major hindrances to the liberation of the working class in Russia because they stifle political development and impose an oppressive burden on society, which delays progress and maintains the autocratic government: “The bourgeois-democratic content of the revolution means that the social relations (system, institutions) of the country are purged of medievalism, serfdom, feudalism (Lenin 1960, Vol. 33, 52).”

Unarguably, fighting obscurantism and other archaic forces requires the participation of broader groups. In this regard, one should recall how Mao famously attributed the success of the 1949 Revolution to the CPC’s ability to build “a nation-wide united front against imperialism, feudalism, bureaucrat-capitalism and their general representative (Mao 1977, 11).” Drawing on Mao’s legacy, the CPC has continued this national-democratic task to the present day. This being said, the theory of united front strategy has its roots in Lenin’s works. Lenin asserts that socialism will be attained through the concerted efforts of the proletariat in only a select few advanced capitalist countries, not universally across all nations. He distinguishes that developing countries still face fundamental national-democratic challenges, such as eliminating foreign domination, which must be addressed before these countries can pursue uniquely socialist objectives:

Socialism will be achieved by the united action of the proletarians, not of all, but of a minority of countries, those that have reached the advanced capitalist stage of development... The undeveloped countries are a different matter... Objectively, these nations still have general national tasks to accomplish, namely, democratic tasks, the tasks of overthrowing foreign oppression (Lenin 1960, Vol. 23, 59).



According to Lenin, these national-democratic tasks require the formation of a broad revolutionary front by urging the socialist proletariat to win over the oppressed peasants and unstable petty-bourgeois democrats, distancing them from the liberal bourgeoisie and tactically engaging certain bourgeois segments that may exhibit anti-imperialist tendencies. This alliance, particularly uniting urban and rural proletariat, is crucial for leading a mass movement to overthrow the autocracy and fulfill the democratic and revolutionary aspirations (Lenin 1960, Vol. 12, 102-103; Vol. 8, 234-235; McMichael 1977, 208).

#### 4. National-Democratic Revolution and Nation-Building in Lenin's Work

Lenin also views national-democratic tasks as essential for transcending national fragmentation and disintegration in the struggle for independence and national dignity against imperialism. In illustrating his point, he refers to the case of early-20th century China, which faced a growing threat of internal division and collapse when it fell further behind Europe and Japan. The only way to counter this decline was through the combined heroism of revolutionary masses. This revolutionary spirit was needed to establish a Chinese republic politically and to promote rapid economic progress. By undertaking these national-democratic reforms, China could consolidate its national integrity and move towards modernization:

The more China lagged behind Europe and Japan, the more it was threatened with fragmentation and national disintegration. It could be “renovated” only by the heroism of the revolutionary masses, a heroism capable of creating a Chinese republic in the sphere of politics, and of ensuring, through land nationalisation, the most rapid capitalist progress in the sphere of agriculture (Lenin 1960, Vol. 18, 168).

In the context of nation-building, one should emphasize that Lenin values national pride as an essential sentiment among class-conscious proletarians, expressing love for their language and country, and a commitment to elevating the working masses towards democratic and socialist ideals: “Is a sense of national pride alien to us, Great-Russian class-conscious proletarians? Certainly not! We love our language and our country, and we are doing our very utmost to raise her toiling masses (i.e., nine-tenths of her population) to the level of a democratic and socialist consciousness (Lenin 1960, Vol. 21, 103).”

Lenin (1960, Vol. 22, 150-152) further emphasizes that the national-democratic tasks are closely tied to the right of nations to self-determination, but he also underscores that this right is conditional and should be carefully assessed within the context of broader socialist objectives. He cautions that supporting self-determination should not lead to the preservation of small, fragmented states, but should instead aim for the closest unity and integration of the proletariat across national lines:

We do not advocate preserving small nations at all costs; other conditions being equal, we are decidedly for centralisation and are opposed to the petty-bourgeois ideal of federal relationships (Lenin 1960, Vol. 21, 104).”

... our unreserved recognition of the struggle for freedom of self-determination does not in any way commit us to supporting every demand for national self-determination. ... We must always and unreservedly work for the very closest unity of the proletariat of all nationalities, and it is only in isolated and exceptional cases that we can advance and actively support demands conducive to the establishment of a new class state or to the substitution of a looser federal unity, etc., for the complete political unity of a state (Lenin 1960, Vol. 6, 454).”

The aim of socialism is not only to end the division of mankind into tiny states and the isolation of nations in any form, it is not only to bring the nations closer together but to integrate them (Lenin 1960, Vol. 22, 146).

Even if we assume that, in time, there will be a state frontier between Great Russia and the Ukraine, the historically progressive nature of the “assimilation” of the Great-Russian and Ukrainian workers will be as undoubted as the progressive nature of the grinding down of nations in America (Lenin 1960, Vol. 20, 31).

Importantly, Lenin’s perspective suggests that supporting or opposing national self-determination movements is to be assessed based on whether this stance aligns with imperialist interests:

The slogan of self-determination of nations should also be advanced in connection with the imperialist era of capitalism (Lenin 1960, Vol. 21, 293).

This perspective underscores the importance of internationalism and the need to evaluate each national movement’s potential to either contribute to or hinder the progress of socialism and the overthrow of imperialism. In light of the complex history of Marxist debates and policies concerning the ‘national question’, from the late nineteenth century until today, the reader should be aware that the usage of ‘nation’, ‘national’, and ‘nationality’ faces both the challenge of texts translated from Russian and Chinese into English, and subtle shifts in the connotations of the terms that are not always clear in the English rendering.” Yet, from a sociological point of view, it is possible to agree on a common vocabulary to distinguish between nations and nationalities. In this context, the nation-state refers to the bounded territorial community of citizens (Fairbrother 2021, 348), where civic-national bonds prevail over ethnic bonds or nationalities. It goes without saying the idea of a nation-state does not automatically involve national oppression. Similar to how Lenin refers to imperialism in assessing the national question, Mao himself asserts the historical relevance of the nation-state in the context of communism:

The Chinese nation is known throughout the world not only for its industriousness and stamina, but also for its ardent love of freedom and its rich revolutionary traditions. The history of the Han people, for instance, demonstrates that the Chinese never submit to tyrannical rule but invariably use revolutionary means to overthrow or change it. In the thousands of years of Han history, there have been hundreds of peasant uprisings, great and small, against the dark rule

of the landlords and the nobility. And most dynastic changes came about as a result of such peasant uprisings. All the nationalities of China have resisted foreign oppression and have invariably resorted to rebellion to shake it off (Mao 1939, par. 5).

All our minority nations should trust each other, no matter what nationalities they are... The questions are whether they have communism and how much. This point should be explained clearly to our national minorities... We need our regions but not regionalism (Mao 1958).

At this point, one should add that rebuilding nation-states has taken on even greater relevance under current circumstances. In the World War I context, empires were disintegrating, sparking a major wave of decolonization, and Lenin saw self-determination as a potential means to destabilize imperialist powers and advance socialism, while insisting on the closest unity and integration of the proletariat, including national assimilation. However, in today's context, as the neoimperialist project seeks to dissolve nation-states in the developing world, rebuilding civic nation-states stands as an important national-democratic means to destabilize neoimperialism and advance socialism.

## 5. Continuation of National-Democratic Tasks and State Capitalism in the Early Phases of Socialism

Finally, Lenin sees the state as an essential instrument for achieving and consolidating socialism, particularly during the transition from capitalism to socialism: "Marxism differs from anarchism in that it recognises the need for a state and for state power in the period of revolution in general, and in the period of transition from capitalism to socialism in particular (Lenin 1960, Vol. 24, 68)." The state thereby assumes a key role not only in nation-building but also in the transition from capitalism to socialism. Yet, Lenin cautions that pure capitalism cannot directly transform into pure socialism, which also explains the hybridity of national-democratic and socialist tasks: "Nowhere in the world is there pure capitalism developing into pure socialism... (Lenin 1960, Vol. 25, 19)." Instead, he advocates for state capitalism as a necessary phase within a socialist republic, where the state, representing the proletariat, can control and limit capitalist practices in the early phases of socialism:

... it seems very strange to everyone that a non-socialist element [namely state socialism] should be rated higher than, regarded as superior to, socialism in a republic which declares itself a socialist republic. But the fact will become intelligible if you recall that we definitely did not regard the economic system of Russia as something homogeneous and highly developed (Lenin 1960, Vol. 33, 419).

Certainly, Lenin's thesis of state capitalism derives from the Soviet experience with the New Economic Policy, but one should note that its relevance transcends this historical period. As Robert Michael (2023, 184) highlights, for example, China's experience since 1978 "was a New Economic Policy (NEP) as in 1924 in Soviet Russia but going much further and longer into what some have called a new socio-economic formation within the transitional economy." In China's case, this new transitional socio-economic

formation takes Lenin's formulation even further, ensuring that the capitalist mode of production does not dominate the Chinese economy. In China, the rate of profit does not determine the investment cycles and the state-owned sector is not dominated by the market (Roberts 2023). Therefore, while Lenin's thesis remains an inspirational starting point, in today's context, one should begin by building "a socialist market economy with public ownership as the main form (Gürcan 2022a, 54)", which guides the private sector and encompasses a broader scope than mere state ownership, including not only state-owned enterprises (SOEs) but also collectively-owned enterprises (COEs) and various forms of mixed ownership. Certainly, the relevance of state capitalism and transition to socialism in the context of an under-developed capitalist economy speaks to the revolution's national-democratic tasks.

Lenin further argues that state capitalism [or market socialism in today's context], managed by the working class, is a tool to combat the combined forces of the petty bourgeoisie and private capitalism, which oppose both state capitalism and socialism:

State capitalism is capitalism which we shall be able to restrain, and the limits of which we shall be able to fix. This state capitalism is connected with the state, and the state is the workers, the advanced section of the workers, the vanguard. We are the state (Lenin 1960, Vol. 33, 278).

In this framework, Lenin views mixed companies and cooperatives as essential tools for economic development led by a socialist government. Mixed companies, involving private capitalists and Communists, help the state learn how to organize competition effectively (Lenin 1960, Vol. 33, 274, 470-471). He also argues that the socialist state should grant economic, financial, and banking privileges to cooperatives to encourage their growth, as they play a crucial role in organizing the population along socialist principles. While cooperatives are inherently bourgeois and not politically trustworthy, they can be effectively used for administration and construction within the framework of state capitalism, benefiting the socialist state (Lenin 1960, Vol. 29, 288; Vol. 32, 347-348).

Importantly, Lenin underscores the importance of learning from and utilizing capitalism's legacy even under a socialist government. He asserts that building socialism hinges on integrating Soviet power with the advanced achievements of capitalism, including its technology, engineering, and scientific discoveries via state-guided policies:

The possibility of building socialism depends exactly upon our success in combining the Soviet power and the Soviet organisation of administration with the up-to-date achievements of capitalism (Lenin 1960, Vol. 27, 259).

Socialism is inconceivable without large-scale capitalist engineering based on the latest discoveries of modern science (Lenin 1960, Vol. 27, 339-340).

The construction of a socialist society relies on the material and cultural foundation created by capitalism, despite its bourgeois mentality. Lenin (1960, Vol. 29, 70-71, 214-215; Vol. 30, 147; Vol. 27, 344-345) thereby stresses the necessity of using the expertise of bourgeois specialists, as their knowledge is indispensable for socialist construction in the transitional phases of the revolution.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, this article highlighted the enduring significance of the national-democratic revolution, or New Democracy, as conceptualized by Lenin and Mao. Lenin's emphasis on integrating socialist and national-democratic tasks in revolutionary movements offers a strategic foundation for addressing the complexities of the imperialist era, particularly in developing countries. Mao's notion of New Democracy builds on this Leninist framework by advocating for a collective leadership of revolutionary classes, led by the proletariat, to achieve national dignity and independence.

The post-Soviet era, marked by neoliberal globalization and U.S.-led interventions, has fragmented state structures and fostered regional instability, making the national-democratic tasks increasingly relevant. Major Eurasian countries like China and Russia, and left-wing movements in Latin America, have actively resisted these imperialist forces within a national-democratic framework. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's agenda against terrorism, separatism, and fundamentalism also illustrates a contemporary application of these revolutionary strategies, including **the adaptation of united front politics in the international relations of the developing world** as a form of coalition-building between capitalist and socialist countries. More recently, Xi Jinping's call for patriotism and national perseverance in China's ongoing socialist transition further underscores the continued importance of nation-building and national-democratic tasks. These efforts reveal how national sovereignty and progress remain interconnected in the struggle against modern imperialism.

Understanding the theoretical origins of these concepts in Lenin's work provides crucial insights for contemporary revolutionary movements, emphasizing the centrality of national-democratic tasks to achieve both national independence and socialist transformation. From a Leninist perspective, one could conclude that successful implementation of these tasks is contingent on four conditions: 1) adopting socialism with national characteristics in order to understand a country's unique economic and historical conditions; 2) building a broader national-democratic front to collectively overcome feudalism, absolutism, and capitalist-imperialism; 3) persisting in nation-building with the aim of promoting rapid economic progress and modernization by consolidating national integrity; and 4) liberating the productive forces by leveraging the advanced achievements of capitalism under state control to accelerate socialist transition.

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