

## Countering Hegemony (反对霸权)

Roland Boer, April 2021

This is a term you will hear more and more frequently over the coming months and years: ‘countering hegemony [*fandui baquan*]’.

First, the meaning: ‘*baquan*’ (霸权) is a word rich with connotations and history.<sup>1</sup> The semantic field of ‘*ba*’ (霸) includes a leader of feudal lords, a tyrant or despot, a hegemonic power, and to dominate and tyrannise – in short, to rule by might rather than right. The term ‘hegemon [*bazhu* – 霸主]’ came to the fore during the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BCE to 476 BCE), when the various states within China struggled for dominance. When one so did for a time, through military might and political manoeuvring, its leader was dubbed a ‘hegemon’. The term ‘hegemony’ gained a whole new layer of meaning during China’s long anti-colonial struggle and humiliation at the hands of foreign colonial powers. The Western colonial powers, along with Japan, came to be seen as modern-day ‘hegemons’, invading, colonising, massacring, and ruling by might rather than right.

Now some history: as the heyday of European colonialism faded, the former colonisers known as the ‘West’ began to use other means to assert their hegemony. These means were primarily financial and economic, along with efforts to control the global discourse in terms of ‘universal values’. Of course, the last European colonial power – the USA – has since the Second World War used military might to assert its dominance, interfering with and seeking to destroy other countries, thus becoming an abuser of human rights and guilty of crimes against humanity.

Thus, it should be no surprise that when he was speaking of international matters, Deng Xiaoping already in the 1980s spoke of the need to counter ‘hegemonism [*baquan*]’ or to ‘struggle against hegemony [*fanba douzheng*]’. In doing, he spoke of behalf of scores of formerly colonised and developing countries.

Why not speak of anti-colonialism and the long anti-colonial project (so Losurdo)? This was indeed the preferred way of speaking up the 1970s, but by the 1980s the more common term in China became ‘countering hegemony [*fandui baquan*]’. For example, in the important 1981 resolution by the CPC Central Committee, we imperialism, colonialism,

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<sup>1</sup> Some may be reminded of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who developed an influential theory of ‘hegemony’ in Western Marxism. But the Chinese term has a somewhat distinct sense, coming out of a long history.

and racism connected with 'hegemony'. But countering hegemony is the key, for it is the stronger term:

While upholding our own independence, we respect other people's right to independence. The road of revolution and construction suited to the characteristics of a country has to be explored, decided on and blazed by its own people. No one has the right to impose his views on others. Only under these conditions can there be genuine internationalism. Otherwise, there can only be hegemonism. We will always adhere to this principled stand in our international relations (CPC Central Committee 1981).

I began by stating that the world will hear about the need to counter hegemony more and more in the coming months and years. The turning point came in March of 2021, at the China-USA summit in Alaska. At this moment, Yang Jiechi, director of the Office of Foreign Affairs, broadsided the US delegation by pointing out that a few countries led by the USA do not set the 'global rules'. Further, Yang pointed out that these countries have a history of invading other countries, destroying them, and causing untold chaos and suffering. In short, the USA and its few lackies have engaged in hegemony, in dominating, tyrannising, and ruling by might rather than right. China, for one, will no longer put up with this. But Yang Jiechi did not speak on behalf of China alone; he spoke on behalf of all developing countries in the world, who have all been subjected to such hegemony.<sup>2</sup>

Why was this moment different? China may have been speaking of countering hegemony for 40 years or so, but the situation has changed: China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage. Now everyone listens, every word spoken counts. And you can be sure that many other voices will speak in the same terms – in Africa, Eurasia, Central Asia, Latin America and the Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

A final question: what is the alternative? This was already clearly stated by Zhou Enlai in 1953, when he articulated the 'Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence'. These are: 'mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence'. This has been China's approach ever since: 'neither dependent [*yifu*] on others, nor plundering [*lüeduo*] others', as Xi Jinping puts it. Or, to quote from the *Book of Rites*: 'All things are nourished together without their injuring one another'.

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2 China has much closer relations with such countries, understanding and working with them in a way that is simply beyond the understanding of the former colonisers known as the 'West'.

3 For example, see the most recent 'Arab Barometer' report of 2021, which tracks public opinion in the MENA countries (Middle East and North Africa). On three crucial counts – favourability, threat to national interests, and foreign policy – China doubles and even trebles the score of the United States. The report notes that changing regimes in the United States make no difference, since this is a long-term trend.