

Revisiting Marxist Theories in International Relations: Insights from People's Multiparty Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Marxism has established itself as one of the world's most influential ideological frameworks for transformation in power relations. Beyond its role as a political ideology, it holds significant relevance in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and literature. Marxism offers a critical perspective for understanding society, devising essential tools for analyzing international relations. Since its inception, it has opposed capitalism and continues to demonstrate its relevance—particularly in an era marked by increasingly exploitative forms of global capitalism. The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, replicated a major political turning point for Marxist theory. Nonetheless, even its critics cannot ignore its enduring impact on ideological debates and discourses. Regardless of whether Marxism persists in its traditional form, its foundational principles continue to shape the field of international relations. Although Moscow-led communist ideology declined after the 1990s, it was adopted in Nepal by Madan Bhandari in the framework of People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD). In qualitative research design, I have examined the intersection of Marxist international relations theory and the PMPD model as implemented by the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist). It critically explores how Marxist principles have been adapted to contemporary political contexts through PMPD, offering a potential alternative to the liberal democratic order in the Global South.

Introduction

As we proceed through the first quarter of the twenty-first century, it is clear that the twentieth century witnessed revolutionary transformations—both physical and ideological—unparalleled in human history. Amid the ideological polarization that intensified in the post–World War II era, Marxism, first articulated by German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) in the nineteenth century, emerged as a profoundly influential and revolutionary ideology. Three primary historical forces contributed to the rise of Marxism: The first

was the French Revolution (1789–1794), a period of radical social upheaval introducing foundational ideals—equality, liberty, and fraternity—that inspired a new political consciousness. These humanist values, shaped during the early stages of capitalism, became cornerstones of modern revolutionary thoughts. The second force was the British Industrial Revolution. The dramatic economic transformations driven by industrialization—beginning in eighteenth century Britain with innovations such as the steam engine—gave rise to new class structures and forms

of exploitation. Marxism's political economy emerged as a response to these developments, critically analyzing the inequalities inherent in capitalist production systems. The third force was German philosophy. Thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), based in Germany's renowned universities, pioneered dialectical and materialist approaches to philosophy. Their work provided the intellectual scaffolding for Marx's formulation of historical materialism, the theoretical core of Marxist analysis.

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) published the *Communist Manifesto*, a work rooted in these favorable material conditions and the intellectual awakening taking place across Europe. Highlighting the significance of Marxism, George Thomson writes, “Marxism is not only one ideology among many ideologies, but it is a scientific idea established by refuting all those regressive ideologies” (Thomson, 1977). Marxism is both an idea and a philosophical theory, derived from the analysis and evaluation of concrete historical developments. In terms of structure, Marxism primarily consists of three core components: The first component is dialectical historical materialism. This explains life and the world through a scientific lens, proposing laws such as the unity of opposites, quantitative and qualitative change, and the negation of the negation. It affirms the belief that change is inevitable, as seen through the lens of historical materialism. The second factor is political economy. Marxist political economy introduces the laws of production and the theory of surplus value, asserting that human existence is fundamentally tied to material production. It analyzes how exploitation occurs and how capital is created from real-world conditions. The third is scientific socialism. This component addresses issues such as class struggle, proletarian dictatorship, and the theoretical basis of socialism. Marxism contends that the existing exploitation and oppression in society must be resolved through

class struggle led by the proletariat, ultimately guiding society toward equality-based socialism under the proletarian control of state power.

Historically, many countries have attempted to implement Marxism in its classical form, aiming to align political, economic, and social systems with Marx's principles—most notably the USSR. However, the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s marked a turning point in global political dynamics, leading to the decline of traditional Marxist ideologies as dominant governance frameworks. This shift created a vacuum that necessitated the adaptation and reinvention of Marxist principles to maintain their relevance in a rapidly changing world.

In this context, Madan Bhandari, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist [CPN-UML]), introduced a transformative framework that reinterpreted and localized Marxism within Nepal's socio-political context. Bhandari aimed to synthesize classical Marxist theories with Nepal's unique cultural, historical, and economic conditions. Bhandari's theory of People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD) emphasized the importance of contextualization, acknowledging that a rigid application of classical Marxism might not adequately address the complexities of the modern era (Bhandari, 1993). In this regard, this paper explores the evolution of Marxist international relations through the lens of Bhandari's PMPD. It examines how his reinterpretation of Marxism offers a nuanced perspective on sovereignty, global justice, and the interaction between local and global political dynamics. The study seeks to understand Bhandari's PMPD within the broader discourse of Marxist theory, highlighting its implications for contemporary international relations.

Methodology

This research is based on the integration of both primary and secondary data, collected from libraries, archives, and online sources. The primary data consist of original texts authored

by Bhandari, which offer firsthand insights into the conceptualization and implementation of PMPD. The secondary data include scholarly literature, journal articles, books, and other academic resources that analyze or discuss PMPD and its relevance in political theory and practice. Content analysis is employed as the primary methodological approach. This technique involves the systematic examination of texts to identify and interpret recurring themes and underlying meanings. Through this method, the researcher not only reviews the material but also provides an analytical and descriptive interpretation of the available texts and findings.

Results and Discussion

Marxism and the production system

In our social life, we observe a stark contrast between the rich and the poor. According to Marx, the wealth of the privileged class accumulates and grows enormously, while the underprivileged possess nothing but their own bodies (Marx, 1987a). A small number of people have managed to accumulate the vast majority of wealth. As the means of production became increasingly diversified and advanced, the production of consumer goods expanded, drawing the attention of certain individuals within society to the growing surplus.

These individuals seized control of the means of production and the resulting goods, maintaining private ownership over them. Despite increased productivity due to technological advances, there was no parallel increase in equitable distribution or savings. Instead, private accumulation became the foundation for class formation. Consequently, a few individuals gained wealth without labor, while the majority were denied access to productive resources. This inequality necessitated the establishment of the state to protect private property. Thus, productive power emerged as an integrated system consisting of the means of production, labor, and skills. At the same time, relations of production developed as mechanisms

to uphold dominance, ultimately giving rise to a structured production system within the course of social development (Rupert, 2021).

Marx analyzed this system, arguing that the totality of production relations constitutes the economic structure of society, which forms its real foundation. Upon this foundation are built the legal and political superstructures, along with specific forms of social consciousness. More broadly, the general social, political, and intellectual processes of life are shaped by material conditions of production. Therefore, it is not human consciousness that creates material reality; rather, consciousness arises from people's social existence (Marx, 1987b). By controlling the forces of production, the ruling class has established production relations and built state power to safeguard its dominance and interests. The integration of productive power and production relations forms the production system, which varies across historical eras. For instance, before the Industrial Revolution, the production system was predominantly labor-driven, while in modern times, it is based on highly sophisticated technologies. As the production system evolves, so do politics, judicial systems, philosophy, literature, art, and other cultural domains, following a similar trajectory of transformation.

In any era where state power is concentrated in the hands of a specific class, it becomes inevitable that the dominant cultural, philosophical, and ideological systems are also shaped by that class. In a capitalist system, these systems serve the interests of the bourgeoisie; in a socialist system, they are envisioned to be governed by the proletariat for the collective good. Thus, the production system in every era reflects the class dynamics of its time.

From a Marxist perspective, human history has passed through five major socio-economic stages. During the Primitive Communism era, there was no private property or class distinction, and society functioned on collective production and consumption. The emergence of private property ushered in the Slave Age, characterized by class

struggles, labor exploitation, and the development of institutions—laws, ideologies, and religions—to justify the dominance of slave owners. The decline of slavery led to the Feudal Age, where new forms of exploitation and social structure emerged through the growing productive forces. The Capitalist Age, propelled by the Industrial Revolution, intensified the exploitation of labor through the pursuit of surplus value, concentrating the means of production in the hands of a few. Lenin described imperialism as the final and most oppressive phase of capitalism. Finally, the Socialist Age envisions a society based on equality and collective ownership, where class-based exploitation ends, power is transferred to the proletariat, and the focus shifts from individualism (“I”) to collectivism (“we”).

The underlying theme of human history, according to Marxism, is the struggle to acquire the basic means of survival. As societies became divided into classes, class struggle emerged as the driving force of history. As long as class divisions persist, class conflict remains inevitable. Thus, Marxism advocates for class struggle to overthrow exploitative systems and replace them with an egalitarian society. As Marx and Engels famously stated: “The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it” (Marx & Engels, 1969).

Types of conflict and tenets of Marxist international relations

According to Marxism, the current global order is fundamentally shaped by the global production system. The contemporary world situation is determined by which class controls the majority of the world’s productive forces—this control dictates the nature of the prevailing world order. Today’s capitalism appears to have evolved from a colonial-imperialist foundation, driven by the desire to maintain dominance and perpetuate global inequality (Inequality, 2024).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the United States was widely expected

to sustain its economic and ideological dominance globally. However, as the world has moved toward multipolarity, U.S. unipolar dominance has weakened. In its place, various regional powers and organizations have emerged, challenging hegemonic structures.

From a Marxist international perspective, current global conflicts can be categorized into four main types: First, contradiction between imperialist and oppressed states – exemplified by power struggles between smaller nations and dominant global powers. Second, contradiction between imperialism and socialism – rooted in conflicting modes of production, namely capitalism versus socialism. Third, the contradiction between capital and labor – characterized by the concentration of capital among the capitalist class and limited access to capital for the working class. Finally, contradiction among imperialist states themselves – as they compete internally for dominance and resources, reflecting principles found in realist theories of international relations.

One of the key mechanisms for maintaining imperialist dominance today is the provocation of wars and the selling of arms—an agenda often led by what is referred to as “American imperialism” through alliances such as NATO. However, global public opinion, particularly among peace- and justice-oriented populations, stands in opposition to these imperialist interventions.

At present, the world faces a fundamental divide: on one side, imperialist powers; on the other, socialist nations advocating for justice, equality, and peace. This enduring struggle against imperialism has become a defining trend in international politics (Marsella, 2011). The destruction caused by wars instigated by imperialism is staggering, compounded by the destabilizing effects of terrorism. Issues such as poverty, famine, environmental degradation, and war are byproducts of the imperialist system. In contrast, socialism promotes ideals such as peace,

progress, equality, and a just way of life—values that, according to Marxist thought, are essential for global healing and sustainable development.

Applications

According to Marx—including historical materialism, class struggle, and communism—peace and war are interconnected. Marx believed that universal peace could only be achieved when states disappeared from the international structure. As he envisioned the future, a world socialist society could emerge through widespread global solidarity and collective action. Engels hoped that “it will not occur to anyone to disturb internal peace,” and that a communist society would not engage in aggressive wars, as they understand that “in war it will only lose men and capital.” From this it follows that the only war a communist society would fight, is a defensive war” (Buecker, 2003). Outlined in PMPD is a vision of how peaceful coexistence can be achieved globally. PMPD supports the peaceful existence of small states without fear of disturbance and calls for socialist solidarity to protect their sovereignty (Bhandari, 1993).

Today, the form of exploitation has evolved. Hegemony and imperialism are consolidating their power through subtle strategies rather than direct military intervention. In the past, powerful states used military force to occupy other nations. But under today’s neo-colonial policies, powerful states exploit the resources of smaller countries by imposing cultural, educational, and economic dominance (Bates, 1975).

One pressing challenge for small and non-industrial nations is the climate crisis. Environmental imbalance has become an international issue that transcends borders. These nations are suffering the consequences of actions they did not commit. The carbon emissions caused by centuries of industrial development in wealthy countries have become a global problem, yet developing nations are now forced to bear the burden. This issue has become central to contemporary foreign policy.

The second major implementation of Marxism occurred with the October Socialist Revolution in Russia in 1917. Following World War I, the revolution succeeded due to the prevailing balance of political power. After organizing workers and peasants under Soviet authority, the revolution established socialism in an unprecedented way. What capitalism had failed to achieve over two centuries, Russian socialism accomplished in just 72 years.

Marxism’s idea of the “core and periphery which is applicable” also applies in international relations. Major, powerful states occupy the core, while smaller, weaker states exist at the periphery. This kind of system has perpetuated exploitation and global inequality throughout history. Hence, Marxism advocates for a just world in which all states can exist on equal footing. Its final vision—communism—often criticized as utopian, imagines a future human society free from restrictions and discrimination (Kubáľková & Cruickshank, 2015).

Without favorable material conditions, the emergence of any theoretical vision is impossible, as it requires an ontological foundation. As previously discussed, Marxism was born out of specific historical and material circumstances. The Paris Commune of 1871 was its first practical experiment, where the commune governed for 72 days before being suppressed. Although the conditions were not yet ripe, Marx witnessed and critically supported this attempt.

After the fall of fascism in World War II, a wave of socialist revolutions swept across Eastern Europe. Anti-imperialist liberation movements also gained momentum. Marxist theory served as a foundation for many of these struggles. At one time, one of the world’s six continents was largely governed by socialist regimes. The Indian independence movement and the decolonization of many Asian and African countries also reflected anti-imperialist sentiment. In 1949, China’s People’s Revolution was completed, and communist parties were established in most countries. In Nepal, the Communist Party was formed on April 10, 1949,

marking the introduction of Marxism into the country. A major transformation occurred in 2005 through a joint mass movement of communist and democratic forces, ultimately abolishing the monarchy. These instances exemplify the widespread application of Marxist thought.

In 1990, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought an abrupt end to many socialist powers. This raised the question: does the fall of the USSR signify the failure of Marxism? A global sense of uncertainty followed. However, certain core tenets of Marxism support its continued relevance. Marxist scholar Aijaz Ahmad observed,

Marxism has a much older and greater history than the Soviet Union, other communist parties, and governments. This history continues even after the fall of those governments. In my opinion, as long as capitalism continues in the world, its importance will remain the same. Because whether or not there is any government mechanism to understand and change Marxism class society does not make any difference in its importance and necessity. Rather, its importance depends on how helpful it is in understanding the world of the past, present, and future. (1996, p. 10)

As for the creative application of Marxism, every state has its own specific characteristics. Based on these, the programs and their directions may vary. Marxism serves as a foundational philosophy of social science, offering answers to unresolved societal questions through its perspective. However, there are some core principles of Marxism, which can be applied in the specific perspective of every state. Ahmad asserts:

... these four things are the most important things in the history of Marxism. The first is the question of democratic rights, the second is the question of being the owner of one's own labor, the third is the question of women's rights, and the fourth is the question of freedom from imperialist oppression. Marxism looks at all countries and all

societies around the world in the light of these questions. (1996, p. 10)

These four principles are fundamental to both the application and creative use of Marxism. The bourgeoisie may address these issues selectively, raising some while ignoring others. In contrast, Marxism addresses all four in an integrated and systematic manner. The question of democratic rights is inherently tied to labor ownership, and women's rights are likewise connected to both. Imperialism often suppresses these movements using domestic reactionary forces.

Countries that have embraced Marxism as their ideological foundation have generally adopted a policy of proletarian internationalism in their foreign affairs. This means supporting oppressed peoples and nations struggling for recognition and justice. During the Soviet era, regional alliances such as the Warsaw Pact were formed to resist imperialism. The USSR promoted solidarity with Third World states. China, meanwhile, adopted the Panchsheel principles in its foreign policy, which remain central to its diplomatic approach. Ultimately, most countries prioritize national interest in their foreign policy. However, imperialist powers have historically imposed unequal treaties and agreements, forcing smaller nations into exploitative arrangements.

Marxism in PMPD: International relations perspectives

Nepal's feudal structure and the legacy of the Rana regime made it fertile ground for communism, leading to the formation of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in 1949 under Pushpa Lal Shrestha (K.C., 2004). Despite the emergence of democracy in 1951, feudal attitudes persisted, and King Mahendra's 1960 ban on political parties pushed communist factions underground. Among them, Bhandari emerged as a key leader, advocating peaceful democratic change through his theory of PMPD. Bhandari's philosophy emphasized creative Marxism, rejecting violence and promoting unity among political forces.

During Bhandari's rise in Nepali politics, both global and national landscapes had distinct characteristics. The Cold War was at its peak, shaping international power dynamics, while Nepal remained under a feudal monarchy that exerted significant influence over political and societal structures. This system not only dictated governance but also controlled social hierarchies and economic activities, reinforcing traditional power relations. In this context, Bhandari navigated a complex political environment where ideological struggles and structural constraints shaped the course of national politics (Bista, 2024). Bhandari's emergence reflected the broader tensions between traditional authority and evolving political ideologies. His leadership strengthened the 1990 movement for multiparty democracy and united various factions into the CPN (UML). Bhandari's PMPD gained broad support, becoming a cornerstone of Nepal's democratic leftist politics. Globally influenced by the Cold War and locally driven by Nepal's socio-political realities, PMPD shaped both domestic and foreign policy strategies (Bista, 2024).

PMPD reflects a fusion of deep philosophical insights and pragmatic responses to Nepal's socio-economic realities. At the time, Nepali politics was rooted in a feudal system, while society remained highly imbalanced—most people lived below the poverty line, and marginalized communities, including Dalits and women, were deprived of equal access to resources. Rooted in Marxism-Leninism, Bhandari's PMPD emphasizes freedom, equality, and social justice as foundational principles. Bhandari's ability to adapt these ideals to Nepal's specific challenges demonstrates his practical approach, as reflected in the fourteen characteristics of PMPD. This comprehensive theoretical framework includes provisions for foreign policy (Bista, 2024).

Bhandari's influence emerged during a time of global shifts when the failure of Moscow-based communism and the rise of neoliberal globalization fostered skepticism toward traditional communist

ideologies. Having studied in India during a period of political upheaval, he gained a nuanced understanding of international relations and recognized Nepal's need to engage with global dynamics shaped by Cold War rivalries. Bhandari characterized Nepal's socio-political structure as semi-feudal and semi-colonial, arguing for the necessity of a strong democracy to overcome these constraints.

Panchsheel and Bhandari's concept of nonalignment remain central to managing Nepal's international relations. Among the 14 characteristics of PMPD, Bhandari emphasized foreign relations guided by Panchsheel principles (Bhandari, 1993). In his paper presented at the Fifth National Convention, Bhandari (1993) advocated for relations with neighboring countries grounded in these principles. Bhandari also recognized the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a vital platform for opposing racism, colonialism, aggression, hegemony, imperialism, interference, nuclear proliferation, and war, while supporting national independence and social liberty. Bhandari argued for incorporating these values into pragmatic, principle-based policymaking.

In Bhandari's PMPD and other writings, one of the central tenets is the maintenance of world peace, emphasizing the importance of international law and the rejection of all forms of aggression in foreign relations (Bhandari, 1993). PMPD features the aspirations of forging solidarity against human rights abuses, arms races, regional conflicts, and direct attacks, actively promoting global harmony while safeguarding the rights of landlocked nations (Bhandari, 1993).

Bhandari's vision for Nepal's foreign policy was rooted in national sovereignty, independence, and balanced diplomacy. He strongly advocated for Nepal's non-alignment, emphasizing that the country should not be swayed by global power struggles, especially during the Cold War. Instead, Bhandari endorsed a foreign policy based on mutual respect, non-interference, and national self-reliance. Furthermore, Bhandari was particularly

critical of excessive foreign influence in Nepal's internal affairs and stressed that diplomatic decisions should serve national interests rather than external pressures. Bhandari believed Nepal should maintain friendly and cooperative relations with both its neighbors, India and China while ensuring that neither dominated its political or economic landscape.

Additionally, Bhandari emphasized economic diplomacy, arguing that Nepal should leverage its unique geographical position and resources to develop trade and economic ties that benefit its people. His foreign policy approach also aligned with his broader political philosophy, which prioritized nationalism, democracy, and socialism. Ultimately, Bhandari's foreign policy vision aimed to make Nepal a sovereign and self-sustaining nation, free from undue foreign influence, while maintaining a balanced, independent, and pragmatic approach to international relations.

Conclusion

Marxist ideology is a theory that scientifically examines production, production relations, and consumption, identifying the causes of exploitation and offering pathways for remedy. To understand how capitalism infringes on people's rights and expands its global reach, the study of Marxism is essential. Engels's statement on the necessity of studying Marxism remains relevant: "As Charles Darwin (1809–1882) discovered the subject of biology in the field of zoology, Marx also discovered the laws of the development of human history." He uncovered a fundamental truth that has long been obscured by ideological narratives.

On this theoretical basis, Marxism's concept of international relations should be both examined and applied. During Marx's lifetime, there was no Marxist revolution in the world, and he did not witness any government formed according to his ideology. However, when the communists came to power in the Soviet Union through the October Revolution in 1917, a Marxist foreign relations model began to take shape. The egalitarian and non-interventionist foreign policy later adopted by

China is also seen as part of Marxist international relations theory. Although sometimes criticized as state capitalism, China has maintained a policy of non-interference in other states' internal affairs. If all countries adopted similar policies, small nations would experience significant relief.

PMPD stands as a transformative framework that integrates philosophical depth with practical strategies tailored to Nepal's unique socio-political realities. Rooted in Marxism-Leninism but adapted to local challenges, PMPD emphasizes freedom, equality, and social justice, while also advocating democratic values and nonalignment in foreign relations. Bhandari's forward-looking approach—shaped by global shifts and Nepal's semi-feudal and semi-colonial context—underscores the necessity of international cooperation, adherence to Panchsheel principles, and the promotion of world peace through solidarity and respect for international law. His ideas continue to inspire efforts toward a more equitable and harmonious global order, offering a pragmatic pathway for Nepal's democratic evolution.

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