

A brief response about my purported “change of position”

December 7, 2022



Jean Vogel has written a critique of my recent short text more than three times longer than the text itself. He sees changes in position where there are none and practices a distorting reading of what he criticizes, to the point of completely inventing a quotation.

I wouldn't normally respond to this sort of critique, but as my name appears in the headline with the accusation of having made a “strange change of position” and since it is therefore likely to be found by anyone who might seek to inquire about my positions online, I find myself compelled to establish briefly that his assertion is erroneous.

Jean Vogel begins with a comment on the difference between the title of my February 27 Memorandum “on the radical anti-imperialist position” regarding the war in Ukraine and that of my November 30 text “for a democratic antiwar position.” He sees it as a “semantic change” that is, according to him, an “indication of a political change” — a sentence that he repeats later on. It did not occur to him that the titles correspond to the different themes treated: the general positioning on the war at the very beginning of it, in the first case; the position with regard to the demand for “peace” brandished since then by opposing sections of the antiwar movement and concrete discussion of the conditions for a just peaceful settlement, in the second. Moreover, the author himself quotes the phrase “democratic anti-imperialist antiwar position” used twice in my latest text. Unless one thinks that “radical” anti-imperialism cannot be “democratic,” there is no “political change” except in my critic's understanding.

He then asserts that my new text contradicts my Memorandum. To this end, he produces truncated quotations from the latter, without even indicating by means of ellipses that they have been truncated. However, it suffices to read the quoted passages in their entirety to see that my position has not changed.

February Memorandum:

“It is not enough to call for Russia to stop its attacks and to call for ‘an immediate ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table.’ We did not use such UN-like language when the United

States invaded Iraq but demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the aggressors, as we have done in every instance of invasion of one country by another. Likewise, we should demand not only the cessation of the aggression but also the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.”

Text of 11/30:

“Ceasefire with withdrawal of Russian troops to their positions of February 23, 2022.”

February Memorandum:

“The demand of Russian withdrawal applies to every inch of Ukraine’s territory – including the territory invaded by Russia in 2014. When there is a dispute on the belonging of any territory anywhere in the world – such as Crimea or provinces in Eastern Ukraine, in this instance – we never accept that it be solved by naked force and the law of might, but always only through the free exercise by the people concerned of their right to democratic self-determination.”

Text of 11/30:

“Reaffirmation of the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.” and “Negotiations under the aegis of the UN for a lasting peaceful solution based on peoples’ right to self-determination: deployment of blue helmets in all the disputed territories, both in Donbass and in Crimea, and organization by the UN of free and democratic referendums including the vote of refugees and displaced persons from these territories.”

The readers will thus be able to judge how real is my semantic-political “strange change of position.” I hope too that they can appreciate the difference between conditions for a ceasefire, opening the way to negotiations, and conditions for a lasting peace. I will not discuss the author’s comments on my above three points, as I believe that questions such as “Do the conditions for a ceasefire include all three points or only the first? And if so, should the withdrawal of Russian troops take effect immediately or be linked to the progress of further negotiations?” border on the ridiculous.

“Ridiculous” is what the author accuses me of by attributing to me the idea that “The ‘antiwar movement’ should put pressure on China to ‘join in this effort!’” (in “its” effort in the French original). This would indeed have been a ridiculous, and even grotesque, idea, except that I did not write this phrase, and that what the author presents between quote marks as if it were a quotation is only an invention on his part, from a standpoint for which putting “pressure on China” means cozying up to the Chinese government! He then lectures me about the latter, believing to have detected in me the pro-Beijing enthusiasm that once animated him. I reassure him right away: I have no sympathy at all for Xi Jinping, but that does not prevent me from denouncing the bellicose attitude of Washington and London towards China. The political tradition to which I belong never confused opposition to Washington’s bellicose attitude toward the Soviet Union with support for the Stalinist bureaucracy.

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[This is a rejoinder to Jean Vogel’s article, “The strange change of position of Gilbert Achcar,” replying to Achcar’s “For a democratic antiwar position on the invasion of Ukraine.” For further discussion, see the ESSF website.]