

# From Kosovo to Ukraine

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Gilbert Achcar's *The New Cold War* is a welcome addition for socialists to understand how we have found ourselves in the midst of heightening geopolitical tensions today. Achcar has long been a politically astute commentator on international politics and has written a number of useful interventions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, his contributions express a crucial ethos essential to Marxism but increasingly neglected by socialist writers on internationalism today: In the face of global contradictions and developing inter-imperialist rivalry, Marxists must discover independent political alternatives for the working class and support the right to self-determination of oppressed peoples on the ground against the imperialism of large nations. Achcar's political clarity on these issues has invited outrageous attacks and even falsifications of his positions from others in the anti-war left, like the lie that Achcar endorsed the U.S. imperialist invasion of Libya.<sup>2</sup>

In *The New Cold War*, Achcar takes a step back from conjunctural interventions to contextualize the development of global events that led us to this point. Contrary to those who smear him for his supposed imperialist support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Achcar provides in this book a deeply thorough critical analysis of NATO's activities after the fall of the Soviet Union—and of how its machinations have contributed to the destruction we see today in Ukraine. Particularly useful is his keen awareness of the diverse conditions that undergirded NATO's uneven development from the 1990s to the present day. The implication here is that to truly understand the forces and effects of imperialism, we must also understand that imperialism's development is often contingent on a multitude of factors, not guided by a coherent plan.

More importantly, while Achcar's understanding of NATO contextualizes Russia's decisions, it leaves no room to excuse Putin's Russian revanchism. The long chapter on Russia details how NATO's and Russia's actions function as haphazard reactions to each other's last play, rather than expressing the clear development of any long-term strategy. As Antonio Gramsci once remarked, military plans cannot be "elaborated and finalized in advance down to the last detail; only the nucleus and general design can be worked out in advance, since the particularities of the action depend, to a certain extent, on the moves of the enemy." Likewise, this interplay is "a vicious cycle of actions and counteractions"—though one that sees neither Russia nor NATO in permanent or stable positions of power in an uneven dynamic (232). Any developments in the world economy and geopolitics can unleash unforeseeable consequences, and the tensions between Russia, China, and the United States have been far from predetermined. Achcar recalls the strife within the Clinton administration

between the doves and hawks in the 1990s and how, for a period of time, Putin even expressed interest in joining NATO—only to be stalled and rebuffed.

The clear calculus present on all sides is how each power can best preserve and augment its share of the imperialist world system. Achcar's chapter on China, which details the rise of China in the world economy as well as its shifting relationship with the United States through the decades, tracks how this shared logic can lead to unexpected developments in geopolitics. Tension during the Tiananmen Square Massacre eventually gave way to engagement between the United States and China, especially with China's entry into the World Trade Organization. This policy of engagement now shifts closer to one of containment, as the U.S.-China rivalry fires up. Once again, none of these paths was predetermined: Achcar even suggests that "if it had not been pushed by Washington into Moscow's arms, Beijing might well have prioritized its relations with the United States over those with Russia, given its incomparably greater economic interdependence with the former" (277). Each nation seeks to preserve its own growth and security in the capitalist world system, though the contingencies of geopolitics create barriers to any straightforward political strategy, with each state increasingly triangulated in this New Cold War.

This brings us to another key intervention of the book: defining the New Cold War itself. Achcar's keen historical overview of the United States, China, and Russia in the global economy demonstrates the central principle that characterizes this state of tension. He argues in the introduction that the core of the "Cold War" concept describes not a competition between ideologies, but

a concept of the age of industry and total war, when military technology developed in parallel with increasingly rapid general technological progress leading to an ever-increasing cost of the "arms race"—a concomitant concept belonging to the same historical age. In that specific meaning, "cold war" designates the active preparation for a real war, with the economic implication of maintaining war readiness with a constant effort either to secure potential superiority over the adversary or to preserve an equilibrium of military force. (19)

This formulation provides a useful entry point to uncover a consistent throughline in geopolitics in our period, which has often been riddled with contradictions and contingencies that Achcar outlines. Despite an unprecedented level of global economic interdependence, especially between the three main actors in the New Cold War, readiness for war has indeed become a common goal. "Anti-China" hysteria has increasingly functioned as a political consensus in the U.S. Congress to justify the military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, just as the need to assist Ukrainian self-defense has become an excuse for lawmakers to call for the unrestrained increase in military funding. China continues to step up its performative military maneuvers in Taiwan's vicinity, and, more recently, Hong Kong's deputy police commissioner for national security instructed new police cadets to "maintain a sense of crisis in daily work, even though the society is relatively peaceful recently."<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, what should socialists make of other aspects of today's complex geopolitics that are not reducible to readiness for war between these three great powers? Achcar begins to outline in his book something like a Marxist view of the international relations between sovereign actors by underscoring the contingencies of these institutions, actors, and events. But an even deeper materialist perspective on geopolitics would take into account the increasing agency of mid-sized and smaller states in also shaping the parameters and development of this New Cold War. Lula's ambition to discover a middle path between Russian aggression and the United States' unfettered military consolidation may foreshadow the growing importance of other actors in shaping the development of ongoing international conflicts. Israel and, more recently, Saudi Arabia solicit economic and political resources from both the United States and China, while exploring new modes of collaboration in the Middle East as Saudi-Houthi talks on ending the war in Yemen show signs of progress. Seth Schindler and Jessica DiCarlo argue in their introduction to *The Rise of the*

*Infrastructure State*<sup>4</sup>, a collection of research essays they recently edited, that “Beijing and Washington may indeed compete to integrate territory, but they also must constantly adjust plans in accordance with the spatial aspiration of other governments, elite interests, political rivalries, and demands from civil society in host countries” (3). And thus, a useful line of inquiry building on Achcar’s narrative can entail further foregrounding the irreducible role of other actors and institutions in shaping how the New Cold War may continue to develop.

Still, Achcar’s analysis, precise in its evaluation of the interplay of effects between policymakers, offers a clear perspective on the topic, especially for a broad audience. As for the socialist left and other mass movements, Achcar’s study may benefit even more from engaging how mass movements and grassroots political institutions can shape the development of geopolitics, influencing the decisions of political and economic elites around them. For example, how would a study of the New Cold War be deepened if we factor in the multitude of wildcat strikes in China, especially against inhumane zero-COVID lockdown policies that were crucial to the security of Chinese bureaucratic elites’ hold over their supply chains at the height of the pandemic? In *The Revolution Betrayed*, Leon Trotsky writes that the outcome of “economic contradictions and social antagonisms” mainly depends on “a struggle of living social forces” on an international scale.<sup>5</sup> A full Marxist theory of geopolitics would thus consider not only the international relations between sovereign institutions but also the materialist basis for such interactions in the form of living social forces that determine their development.

Factoring in the role and capacity of social movements leading up to the New Cold War can also illuminate new directions for ongoing movements to provide clear internationalist alternatives. Especially so, as a key recommendation that Achcar offers in the final chapter may leave readers wanting: ensuring that “states must respect the code of conduct constituted by the UN Charter and international law” (320). The idea of making demands on the UN is nothing new within left-wing movements and is gaining new traction in recent discourse. A strong contribution by Trent Trepanier to the Democratic Socialists of America’s publication *Socialist Forum*, on Taiwanese self-determination, calls for rallying behind “a democratized and empowered United Nations” as a key plank of internationalism<sup>6</sup>; similarly, Ukrainian socialist Taras Bilous has also called for “the left ... to struggle for a democratization of the international security order” by reforming the UN.<sup>7</sup> But policy fixes within the UN and calling on sovereign states to respect its fundamental principles provide no sustainable solution for international conflict *in itself* without a strong independent mass movement with a clear platform for change against the capitalist system. In other words, calling to reform the UN is not *necessarily* a dead-end, but socialists must be clear that such a demand can be effective *only insofar* as it is informed by a larger program of action, grounded on quickening mass action that can ultimately break with all bourgeois institutions.

Trotsky, in the 1904 essay called “The Proletariat and the Revolution,” warns that we must not allow the “pent-up feelings” of the masses to find expression in “the illusion of legality.” Instead,

[t]he vanguard of the Revolution ought to wake from indolence all other elements of the people; to appear here and there and everywhere; to put the questions of political struggle in the boldest possible fashion; to call, to castigate, to unmask hypocritical democracy; to make democrats and Zemstvo liberals clash against each other; to wake again and again, to call, to castigate, to demand a clear answer to the question, “What are you going to do?” to allow no retreat; to compel the legal liberals to admit their own weakness; to alienate from them the democratic elements and help the latter along the way of the revolution. To do this work means to draw the threads of sympathy of all the democratic opposition towards the revolutionary campaign of the proletariat.<sup>8</sup>

In such a fashion should socialists approach bodies like the UN—not abstaining from it as a useful

site of struggle but tactically making use of it as a venue in which we can allow the masses to understand the limitations of bourgeois institutions. A path forward beyond the New Cold War must entail a variety of strategies and organizations; reforming the UN may be one such tactic, but it only has power when situated in a broader transitional program that links existing social movements and a longer-term revolutionary vision of social transformation. Achcar's brief concluding words on the necessity of "building a strong global movement for the related purposes of fighting climate change and achieving disarmament" begin to point toward such a longer-term program for action (309). But it would be even more effective if the decisive importance of social struggles was foregrounded as the motor of change that can lead to (though not guarantee) a path for the working classes beyond the New Cold War.

The strength of Achcar's *The New Cold War* lies in its incisive clarity in objectively narrating how this new era of inter-imperial tensions developed—without losing sight of the legitimacy of self-determination struggles against all imperialist countries in the New Cold War. Such a balanced clarity is needed as a principled position of supporting self-determination struggles in a new era of inter-imperialist rivalry has come increasingly under fire by propagandists of the U.S., Chinese, and Russian regimes. For one, *Washington's New Cold War*, by John Bellamy Foster, John Ross, and Deborah Venezia and published by *Monthly Review* around the same time as Achcar's book, offers a one-sided and propagandistic view that crudely and dishonestly overlooks the responsibilities of China and Russia in shaping this era of inter-imperialist rivalry. It is worth reading mainly as a timely, negative contrast to the strength of the analysis shown by Achcar on the exact same topic. Achcar's *The New Cold War* deftly arms internationalists with the historical knowledge needed to develop new strategies to build the international working class in a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry. What these strategies may be, however, remains only to be discovered beyond the pages of *The New Cold War*—in the existing conjuncture of struggle as it develops day by day.

## Notes

1. E.g., "Supporting Ukraine—Without Writing a Blank Check," *The Nation*, February 16, 2023.
2. Achcar has responded to this claim: "Letter to the editor: Libya," *International Socialism* 2: 134, Spring 2012.
3. "Deputy Commissioner of Police encourages police officers to maintain Hong Kong's stability and safeguard national security (with photos)," The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Press Releases, April 22, 2023.
4. Bristol University Press, 2023.
5. Ch. 3, Socialism and the State.
6. "Taiwan and Self-Determination as a Core Principle," *Socialist Forum*, Winter/Spring 2023.
7. "A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv," *openDemocracy*, February 25, 2022.
8. Leon Trotsky, "The Proletariat and the Revolution," 1904.