

The strange change of position of Gilbert Achcar

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A few days after the Russian invasion, Gilbert Achcar published a “Memorandum on a Radical Anti-Imperialist Position regarding the War in Ukraine” which made a positive contribution to clarifying ideas on the left in the emerging movement of solidarity with the Ukraine resistance. In particular, it highlighted the following points that distinguish this movement from a purely pacifist opposition to Russian aggression:

1. 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 should demand not only the cessation of the aggression but also the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.
2. The demand of Russian withdrawal applies to every inch of Ukraine’s territory – including the territory invaded by Russia in 2014.
3. We are in favor of the delivery of defensive weapons to the victims of aggression with no strings attached – in this case to the Ukrainian state fighting the Russian invasion of its territory. To give those who are fighting a just war the means to fight against a much more powerful aggressor is an elementary internationalist duty. Blank opposition to such deliveries is contradictory with basic solidarity with the victims.

In a response to a critique by Stathis Kouvelakis, Gilbert Achcar supported this point: “It is illusory to hope for a draw in the event of an invasion of one country by another. A ceasefire with an unconditional withdrawal of the invader to the borders before 24 February would be a victory for Ukraine. A ceasefire with the occupation of a large part of Ukrainian territory would be a victory for Russia. An outcome somewhere in between would be a mixed success for Moscow.” And in an intervention published in April, he underlined the necessary demarcation with the “pacifism”-alibi of some: “The attitude consisting in expressing sorrow for the Ukrainians and claiming to care for their fate by supporting negotiations and ‘peace’ in the abstract (which peace?) is rightly seen as hypocritical by Ukrainian socialists.... It doesn’t take much expertise in war history to understand that negotiations depend on the balance of forces achieved on the ground. The Chinese and Vietnamese have a long experience in this respect, summarized by the famous Maoist dictum: ‘Da Da Tan Tan’ (Fight, fight, talk, talk).”

The 11-point platform (which Gilbert Achcar co-signed) adopted by the European Solidarity Network

with Ukraine was fully in line with this spirit.

On 30 November, Gilbert Achcar published another memorandum "For a democratic antiwar position on the invasion of Ukraine." The metamorphosis from "radical anti-imperialist position" to "democratic antiwar position" is not just textual. As is often the case, the semantic change is an indication of a political change. This is already visible in the premises of this text, which addresses an "antiwar movement" that would have developed following the invasion of Ukraine, a movement with "very contrasting positions" but which all have in common "to claim to be for peace." In fact, this movement covers a wide spectrum, ranging from advocates of absolute pacifism, supporters of an unconditional ceasefire and opponents of arms supplies to Ukraine, to activists for active solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance, such as members of the European Network. However, in an article published in June, Gilbert Achcar rightly noted: "The anti-imperialist antiwar left around the world has found itself deeply divided over the war in Ukraine along rather unusual political lines.... At the time of Vietnam, both wings of the antiwar movement were in full solidarity with the Vietnamese. They both supported the right of the Vietnamese to acquire arms for their defense. Their disagreement was tactical.... Today, on the other hand, those who advocate 'peace' while opposing the right of Ukrainians to acquire weapons for their defense are opposing this peace to combat. In other words, they want Ukraine to surrender, because what kind of 'peace' could we have had if Ukrainians had not been armed and therefore could not have defended their country?" This deep divide is not tactical, it is about the basic position in this conflict and about principles (right to self-determination, internationalism or campism). It is futile to try to bridge it by enlisting all the protagonists under the banner of a common abstract aspiration for 'peace.'

From now on, Gilbert Achcar rejects both the position of the real or simulated pacifists, who advocate an unconditional ceasefire, and that of the "antiwarists" who are "setting the bar for peace too high" by making the withdrawal of troops from all parts of internationally recognized Ukrainian territory a necessary condition. The latter position, he says, risks being confused with that of the "ultra-nationalist Ukrainian hardliners." And so it is the same position that Gilbert Achcar advocated in his February memorandum, which he now describes as a "hard line."

Instead of these two "deviations," an authentic "anti-imperialist democratic antiwar position" (nice synthesis!) should consist in claiming:

1. Ceasefire with the withdrawal of Russian troops to their positions of February 23, 2022.
2. Reaffirmation of the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.
3. 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 Donbas and in Crimea, and organization by the UN of free and democratic referendums including the vote of refugees and displaced persons from these territories.

Gilbert Achcar does not only propose his position to the "antiwar movement." He also believes that "the Ukrainian left should also determine its position on the terms for ending the war" and thereby distance itself from that of its own government.

In any case, this position lacks clarity and remains ambiguous. 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? Does point 2 imply as a precondition the annulment of the annexation to the Russian Federation of the four Ukrainian oblasts of Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia by 30 September 2022 or does it depend on the outcome of the referenda proposed in point 3? Wouldn't "negotiations under the aegis of the UN" mean under the aegis of the UN Security Council, which amounts to subordinating the fate of Ukraine to negotiations between the great powers?

The second flaw of this proposal is even more serious. Gilbert Achcar himself recognizes that the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territories conquered this year “is a very difficult objective to achieve” or that it “supposes a major amplification of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, with quantitatively and qualitatively increased support from NATO countries.” The path to peace that he proposes should therefore follow the very path of the hardliners to which he wanted to turn his back. Far from being a way out, it is rather a dead end.

Gilbert Achcar gets out of it, as in bad theatre, by the intervention of a *deus ex machina*: we must call on China! This is a much quicker solution and one that is “at much less human and material cost” than war! Doesn’t this China, which claims to respect the principles of international law and which “has a decisive influence on Moscow’s position,” have all the keys to a happy solution to the conflict? And since the Ukrainians have not yet thought of this, let the antiwar movement do it for them and “should exert pressure on China to do” in the sense of the Achcar proposal! Of course, in this world where you get nothing for nothing, the antiwar movement will also have to pay China back, “while criticizing belligerent attitudes towards Beijing” of Washington and London.

Reading this astonishing conclusion to his memorandum, one thinks that perhaps we should first remind Gilbert Achcar that the Beijing government’s commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states has, in this case, remained exclusively generic, that it has never publicly expressed the slightest condemnation or criticism of Russian aggression and that it has imperturbably attributed exclusive responsibility for this war to the United States alone. Let us also remind him that China is a great power whose leader Xi Jinping has clearly stated that it aims to achieve global dominance over the next thirty years. Neither China’s rivalry with the United States nor its « unlimited » alliance with Russia is driven by concern for international law, but by the logic of its interests in a context of imperialist confrontation. The distancing, disavowals or pressures that China may show towards Putin are above all the product of his military and political failures. All other considerations aside, it has no desire to be chained to a sinking ship.

The practicality of his conclusion is laughable, not to say ridiculous. The “antiwar movement” should put pressure on China to “join in this effort”! It is not entirely clear whether Gilbert Achcar imagines this pressure in the form of demonstrations denouncing Chinese passivity, a bit like what happened in relation to the non-intervention policy of France and Great Britain during the Spanish Civil War, or whether it is a proposal of alliance made to China by the “antiwar movement,” which would also commit itself to defending its cause against the “belligerent attitudes” of Washington and London. Perhaps is Gilbert Achcar dreaming of overcoming the deep rift that the war in Ukraine has caused in the radical left by bringing it together under the protective umbrella of Beijing?

For my part, I continue to believe that solidarity with Ukraine must continue to follow the two simple lines of action adopted from the outset:

- the decisive factor is the resistance — armed and unarmed — of the Ukrainian people. It was this resistance that first of all blocked the Russian invasion and then inflicted the first defeats and started to push it back.
- The Ukrainian resistance and the solidarity movement with it must preserve at all costs their political independence from all powers, whether enemy, neutral or ally. In particular, the modalities and conduct of negotiations and the terms of a peace agreement must remain in Ukrainian hands and not be left to the benevolence of the great powers.

[This is a reply to Gilbert Achcar’s “For a democratic antiwar position on the invasion of Ukraine.” For Achcar’s rejoinder, see [here](#). For further discussion, see the ESSF website.]