

# Ukraine and the violence of abstraction

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Gilbert Achcar has long been one of the more nuanced socialist commentators on foreign affairs. In particular, he has considered the difficulties associated with the use of Western hard power in situations where one function of that power has been to protect human life or progressive formations. Whether one agrees or not in any given case, no one can accuse him of delivering off-the-peg answers.

Nonetheless, in a recent article on Ukraine for Labour Hub (and re-posted on *New Politics*) Achcar falls into a trap common amongst leftists seeking to reconcile their sympathy for Ukrainians with overarching opposition to the projection of Western hard power. The method of these commentators is unsatisfactory because it functions by means of abstractions: not the sort of abstraction which is unavoidable as a part of any theoretically grounded argument; but the reliance on key terms that only function within the argument by virtue of fundamental vagueness.

The problem to which this method is applied, however — war — is necessarily and brutally concrete. When the reconciliation between suspicion toward Western hard power and Ukrainian interests fails, it is typically Ukrainians who lose out. The first and most fundamental areas in which this method operates concerns the supply of weapons.

## **Achcar on military aid**

Achcar criticizes a motion passed by the British trade union GMB at its conference last month. The motion held that “Ukraine is . . . fully entitled to seek to import the most modern and technologically advanced weapons systems from across the world to resist the attacks and regain its territory.”

Achcar says this is

“tantamount to supporting quantitatively and qualitatively unlimited arms deliveries that

would enable the Ukrainian military to escalate the war and thereby increase the risks for Ukraine's population as well as for the whole world. . . . Ukraine's legitimate cause is thus used to dignify what is basically a thoroughly pro-NATO militarist stance."

Naturally, this raises the question of what quantitative and qualitative limits Achcar proposes to set. A ten-point program at the article's end provides no real answers, simply supporting "Ukraine's legitimate right to self-defense and for its ability to acquire defensive means from whichever source available." In the piece, he neither defines nor explains by example what weapon systems he considers defensive and offensive. There is no generally accepted definition of this distinction. In crude terms, a weapon is offensive when the forces using it are moving forward, and defensive when they are repulsing an attack or retreating. Ukraine used similar weapons during its successful offensives to retake Kherson and Kharkiv last autumn, as it had defensively until that point. The operational theory of "active defense" suggests that offensive tactics are necessary component of defensive warfare.

Achcar accepted in a February article for *The Nation* that Ukraine should be supported to retake territory up to the pre-24 February 2022 line. (He refers to certain "above-mentioned limits" that ought to apply to any NATO escalation, but it is not clear which of the limits he has discussed in the article, whether technological or geographical, he is endorsing, since his remarks on some of these are equivocal.)

Regardless, this poses a problem for his position: clearly weapons that could be used to push Russia back to that line could also be used to go beyond it. The problem arises theoretically from an attempt to limit the state of Ukraine's gains through the qualitative means supplied to achieve them, which is a fundamentally bad approach. Because Ukraine is so reliant on supplies of Western ammunition and finance, the reality is that the West exercises strong control, irrespective of how high-tech Ukraine's weapons are. If Ukraine regains all its land up to the border of Crimea, and if, hypothetically, the US judges that incursion into Crimea would present an unacceptable risk of nuclear escalation, it can use its control of the ammunition pipeline to prevent further Ukrainian operations. Limiting Ukraine's qualitative technological edge only decreases the prospect of Ukraine reaching any goal whatsoever – either an efficient defense or regaining more ground. The appropriate mechanism for limiting quantitative territorial gains, if this is the objective, is quantitative limits on supply of ammunition. (There is also no guarantee that the pre-2022 Russian-held areas of the Donbas will be taken last. Ukraine recently liberated a village it had not held since 2014.)

The problem with Achcar's approach – which seeks to link certain varieties of armament to escalatory risks, based on an unsustainable distinction between offensive and defensive equipment – is demonstrated by one case in which Achcar has been specific. In a March 2022 article for *New Politics*, Achcar opposed "the delivery of air fighters" because they are "not strictly defensive," and would "risk significantly aggravating Russian bombing." But if Ukraine received no new aircraft at all, its air force would inevitably be entirely neutralized, especially because only Russia manufactures spare parts for its legacy equipment. Ukraine would therefore be limited by existing stocks of parts among friendly nations, and allegedly – although some reporting leaves room for doubt – cannibalizing the jets that have been sent from Poland and Slovakia for spares. The consequences for its defense would be severe, which is why the US has greenlit the delivery of F-16s by third parties. The announcement is not proven to be linked to any particular Russian escalation: the blowing of the Kakhovka dam just over two weeks later seems more likely to be linked to the brewing Ukrainian offensive in that vicinity, which it seemed designed to render more difficult. That the reservoir's water level had been allowed to get so high suggests that there had been a standing intention to blow it up – it was just a matter of when.

As this suggests, it is not clear that Russia's escalations are primarily linked to the supply of certain technology from the West, rather than Russia's own frustrations with its failures, however caused. It would be strange to think that, were it not for the West supplying arms, Russia would be meekly willing to accept defeat without seeking to escalate in response. Consider that the intensification of long-range attacks on civilian infrastructure in October 2022 appeared to correspond to the appointment of General Sergey Surovikin, who is notable for his preference for such tactics. In turn, Surovikin's appointment may have been prompted, or at least brought forward, by Ukraine's successful attack on the Crimean Bridge, which took place earlier the same day, and involved no known Western input.

Furthermore, even if the decision to send the Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) in Spring 2022 did cause Putin to escalate attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure several months later, it was nonetheless the correct strategic decision: first, because it was a necessary component of relieving artillery pressure on Ukrainian lines, and stabilizing them; and second, because the West was able to counter-escalate by supplying more and better anti-aircraft systems, including NASAMS and PATRIOT. Not all escalation is undesirable: on the contrary, escalation that an opponent cannot match is the principle means for any warfighting party to achieve its objectives. It is certainly quicker and surer than the alternative, which is to hope that the opponent runs out of steam. In this sense, allowing Ukraine to achieve ascendancy of escalation, within certain bounds, is desirable.

### **Chomsky on military aid**

Comments by Noam Chomsky raise structurally similar issues, in much more problematic form.

Early in the conflict, in interviews for *Current Affairs* and the *Intercept*, Chomsky opposed sending "advanced weapons." In an interview with Bill Fletcher Jr., he seemed to identify the Javelin man-portable anti-tank missile system as "advanced" – the system was vital, along with the British-Swedish N-LAW, in the salvation of Kyiv during the early weeks of the war. In April 2022, during the debate over whether to send the GMLRS, Chomsky told the *Global Policy Journal* that those calling to send more weapons were effectively working to "prolong the conflict." When the GMLRS, which would qualify as "advanced," was sent, it allowed Ukraine to systematically destroy ammunition dumps and command posts, and thereby stabilize their defensive lines. (During the interview with Fletcher Jr, presumably inadvertently, Chomsky quotes wrongly from a White House press release, in such a way as to introduce the phrases "advanced weapons" and "advanced anti-tank weapons," which appear nowhere within it.) Chomsky's policy at the vital, early stage of the war, is best read as a proscription on weapons that proved vital to save Kyiv – though his vagueness will save him from accountability in the eyes of some.

Subsequently, the term "advanced" disappeared in interviews with Owen Jones, Meduza, and New Politics. Speaking to Meduza, Chomsky goes so far as to support "any weapon of protection." He also appears to offer a broad caveat that supply of matériel should be limited by nuclear risk. Indeed, this is also the policy of the Biden White House. We can infer that Chomsky has a different assessment of the nuclear risks associated with a given sort of equipment than Biden, but Chomsky never has the courage to say in precise terms what equipment these considerations should prohibit, and hence allow the consequences for Ukraine of refusing to supply them to be evaluated. Abstraction functions as a means of evading responsibility.

Similarly, Chomsky never identifies what an advanced weapon is, what a weapon of protection is, or if there is such a thing as an advanced weapon of protection. He never specifies how one is supposed to know whether a given system will be escalatory, except through it being advanced. (Similar to Achcar, the only thing he specifically doesn't want to send is jets – although these have now been

promised.)

While Achcar's position is much preferable to Chomsky's, both adopt forms of words that allow them to sound critical notes on arms supply, but which are too vague to compel accountability for any particular restriction (except of military jets), and its likely or real consequences. They should be more specific. When their specific recommendations have not been followed, as in the case of jets, they should make a sober assessment of the consequences, both in terms of Ukraine's improved capacities, and Russia's real response. This means engaging in detail with military reality, on both a technical and strategic level.

Cluster munitions have now been approved for transfer to Ukraine on a stop-gap basis, and there have been recent reports that ATACMS munitions for the GMLRS (M142 HIMARS and M270) may join them. We may therefore be approaching the point where, qualitatively, Ukraine has close to the full range of ground-based materiel it has publicly requested. Even in terms of aviation, only the Typhoon, F-18, and latest F-16s (rather than the mid-life update model currently on offer), and certain air-launched missiles are at issue. It is understood that F-35s will not be provided in order not to expose them to Russian radar profiling and human intelligence collection. The United States does not sell the F-22 and there are not enough Swedish-made Grippens available.

There can be no doubt that several key decisions on the supply front have been taken too late. The few leftists who have called in advance for the GMLRS, F-16s, Storm Shadow, ATACMS, etc. have distinguished themselves through a clear commitment to Ukraine's cause, and an understanding of its needs, to which the capitals of the NATO powers have only latterly acceded. Each delay has been a lost opportunity for Ukraine to exploit qualitative edge in both offense and defense. We cannot know what lives they have cost, in pursuit of the false hope that limited quality of armaments was a tool to manage escalation that could be used whilst securing adequate battlefield outcomes.

### **Achcar on NATO and "collective security organizations"**

A second sort of abstraction is revealed in Achcar's call to replace NATO with "collective security organizations such as the OSCE and the UN." These organizations exist, but have been entirely powerless to do anything about Russia's invasion. The anti-NATO variety of neo-campist identified by Achcar have a ready answer to this problem: they insist that, were it not for NATO and its so-called "aggressive expansion" (in fact, a series of small countries close to Russia joining in order to seek a measure of protection), Russia would not have invaded Ukraine in the first place, in which case the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the UN would be adequate.

The truth is that there were several drivers of Russia's invasions. In 2014, Putin wanted to prevent Ukraine moving closer to the EU economically, and to establish an open conflict to reduce the already minuscule prospect of Ukraine joining NATO to zero. By 2022, he also seemed to fear that increased military cooperation between Ukraine and the West threatened to make the country a tougher nut to crack in any future invasion, and hence harder to bully. He also claimed to have been concerned that anti-missile emplacements would in future be established within Ukraine, and that these could notionally be used to launch offensive missiles too. On both occasions, Putin likely wanted to shore up his domestic popularity (as previous "military operations" had done); demonstrate that popular, anti-plutocratic mobilizations, such as Ukraine's 2013-14 Maidan Revolution, would not be tolerated; and give expression to a chauvinist Imperial vision of a greater Russia to which Ukrainians, whether they like it or not, by rights belonged.

Thus, he had a variety of motivations. Between 2014 and 2022, Ukraine was therefore in a difficult position. On the one hand, clearly increased military cooperation with the West would antagonize Putin. On the other, failure to cooperate with the West at all would leave Ukraine in its 2014

position: wholly unprepared to resist unilateral assaults on its territory. Ukrainian leaders were acutely aware that, in that year, Russia would have been able to overrun it completely, had it wished to do so. In the subsequent eight years, however, domestic reforms and external military cooperation allowed it, against every expert prediction, to preserve the autonomy of its domestic democratic order when the full-scale assault did come. Because there were multiple factors driving Putin's aggression toward Ukraine, it wasn't possible before 2022 (and it still is not possible now) to say that the full-scale invasion would not have happened anyway, and that Ukraine would not have hence been rapidly subordinated to Moscow.

This is the nature of the inter-state system: under ordinary circumstances, state actors are bound by no de facto institutional limits, hence their behavior is unpredictable, and hence it is rational to undertake security-seeking behavior by way of precaution. It is part of the tragedy of that system that sometimes these structural incentives produce inflammatory spirals. Sometimes, diplomacy can short-circuit such spirals by giving each side confidence in the other's future behavior. But this is not possible when one party has shown a willingness to disregard formal agreements, as Russia did with respect to both the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, and the first Minsk agreement. Clearly, even once a formal treaty is signed, that power's assurances cannot be relied upon. It would be irrational for any state not to take precautionary measures under such circumstances.

In the absence of NATO, could collective security organizations such as the OSCE and the UN have prevented the invasion of Ukraine? No one can assert this with confidence. Even if a collective security organization had been able to give Putin assurances over the possible deployment of anti-missile batteries, it would not have dealt with the tension between the dynamics of liberal modernity in Ukraine, which were pushing it closer to the European Union, and Putin's authoritarian imperialism, based as it was on denial of Ukraine's existence as a distinct nation, and the assumed right to set limits to its politics. It was this tension, crystallized in the issue of Ukraine's potential accession to the European Union, that provoked the initial invasion in 2014.

There is every reason to think that this fundamental tension remained at the forefront of Putin's mind. His apparent interpretation of the fundamentally-vague Minsk II agreement, as reflected by demands articulated through the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in 2015, would involve measures that, in one summary "would in effect destroy Ukraine as a sovereign country . . . introducing a constitutional Trojan Horse that would give the Kremlin a lasting presence in Ukraine's political system and prevent the authorities in Kyiv from running the country as an integrated whole." As Putin continued to press for the implementation of the agreement (as he purported to understand it) during 2021, it is likely that he retained the objective to dominate Ukraine's internal politics.

Several analysts have suggested that a more consensual alternative to NATO might have been available during the 1990s, including M.E. Sarotte. But this suggestion has never been plausibly integrated with a full account of the motivations for Russia's imperial revanchism. Unless such a structure contained the essential element of NATO - a defensive alliance including the United States that would be activated in the event of an attack by Russia - it could not fulfill the necessary deterrent function. (A defensive alliance not including the United States could theoretically fulfill a similar role, but only if the component countries significantly expanded their defense spending, military-industrial base, and combat power.) Similarly any "security guarantee" that Ukraine would be able to rely on would necessarily have the same qualities. Even if Russia were to sign such a guarantee itself, for face-saving purposes, everyone would understand that the instrument's real function was to provide a defensive alliance for Ukraine against Russia. No one seriously believes that the United States might invade Ukraine. Because war requires an industrial foundation, that real alliance would inevitably be reflected in networks of production, just as NATO is.

Membership in NATO has never carried with it any obligation to become involved in extraterritorial, non-Article 5 operations, still less those of the United States. But the reality is, irrespective of any formal arrangement, as long as the Russian threat persists, Ukraine will feel a substantial pressure to participate in these – as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq – in order to strengthen its relationship with the material guarantor of its security.

The notion of any “collective security” organization that meaningfully incorporated Russia, and hence gave it institutional say over the deployment of the organization’s resources, would not be able to perform the functions for which is needed. The very notion of a “collective security organization” is an abstraction whose insufficiency becomes clear as soon as it meets the particular realities of Russia’s desire to dominate its neighbors. Like the notion of “defensive” weapons meeting the reality of war, although well-intentioned, it has the effect of confusing readers, and preventing a thorough engagement with Ukrainian reality.