

Ukraine: arms, alliances, and the logic of internationalism

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This is a reply to Gilbert Achcar, following his initial article, my first reply, and his reply to that, concerning two topics: the supply of arms to Ukraine, and the politics of international military alliances in the context of Russia's invasion.

Despite my criticisms here, Achcar's position is a considerable improvement on that of much of the left: it represents a real attempt to develop a position that is rooted neither in kneejerk support for, or opposition to, the interests of this or that geopolitical bloc.

Yet his position is unsatisfactory because rather than committing to the policy necessary to realize his stated objectives in the context of a full account of Ukraine's reality, Achcar instead tries to reconcile those goals with certain conventions derived from the broad-left and peace movement of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. That reconciliation, I believe, is a failure.

Arms

On arms, Achcar begins with the right idea: "The starting point is support for Ukraine's right to get what it needs to defend itself and push Russian troops back from the territory they grabbed since last year's invasion." Unfortunately, he precedes to establish a series of principles that ensure that, if followed, that goal will not be met. The result is a well-meaning case study in the impossibility of useful comment on any war without understanding its material-technical realities.

This is evident in four areas.

First, the distinction between offensive and defensive weapons is not merely "not clear-cut"; it is close to non-existent. Achcar attempts to distinguish the former from the latter, in a theoretical innovation hidden to generations of military theorists, first by saying that any weapon with the prefix "anti" is defensive, and second by saying that "long-range missiles and planes" are offensive. Let's consider the second of those conditions. How long-range does a weapon have to be before it counts

as offensive? The range of standard GMLRS ammunition (90km)? ATACMS (up to 300km)? The Storm Shadow (up to 400km)? And why is that the important figure? Defensive strategies necessarily involve a) offensive tactics (rendering any such distinction irrelevant, even if it could be coherently described) and, b) in particular, long-range missiles, as the example of the GMLRS in stabilizing Ukraine's lines last summer shows.

Second, limiting the range of munitions supplied by the West is not an optimum tool to manage escalatory risks supposed to be associated with strikes "deep into Russian territory." There are four important considerations that disrupt the relationship between the range of the matériel the West supplies, and such strikes:

- a. Ukraine's suppliers have insisted that technologies that they send, at least beyond the range of conventional tube artillery, not be used to target sites within pre-2014 Russian territory. This restriction has been observed. The reason it has been observed is that, as I mentioned in my previous piece, Ukraine's supporters have the ability to close off, at any time, an ammunition and matériel pipeline that operates on a basis somewhere between just-in-time and definitely-too-late. This is also the reason that a Ukrainian attempt to take Crimea or the Donbas by force could be prevented by Ukraine's external backers. There is an overriding incentive for Ukraine to abide by such restrictions.
- b. Several technologies have facilities that allow their target locations to be restricted, independent of their range. We know this includes the HIMARS (and therefore M270) launchers that fire both standard GMLRS and ATACMS munitions. It *may* cover the Storm Shadow or other air-launched munitions too: a similar modification was made to counter-battery radar given to Ukraine in 2015. In such cases, the same weapon, situated in Kharkiv can target sites in Crimea, hundreds of kilometres away, yet not target sites in Russia a few dozen kilometres away.
- c. Ukraine is not going to get air superiority, because it is not going to get F-35s. Russia's air defense envelope extends even into Ukrainian territory. Even with longer range air-launched munitions such as the Storm Shadow, Ukraine's aviation reach into Russian territory will always be fundamentally limited. The function of jets is to extend range through air-launched munitions fired from well within Ukrainian-held territory - as the Storm Shadow is already doing.
- d. Ukraine is manufacturing its own long-range strike drones, which have already conducted strikes up to 600km inside Russian territory - considerably further than even the Storm Shadow could penetrate.

In this context, preventing Ukraine from receiving ATACMS, jets, or more air-launched cruise missiles is neither necessary nor effective as a means to limit strikes deep inside Russia: its only function would be to make Achcar's purported objectives harder to realize.

Third, it is part of Achcar's declared purpose that Ukraine should retake land. Retaking land means offensives. Offensives require offensive capacities. As a matter of logic, a policy that deliberately restricts some category of weapons on the grounds that they have offensive potential cannot meet this declared aim. Thus, if there were a distinction between offensive and defensive weapons, it would be incoherent with his own stated objectives to enforce a policy built on that foundation. As a matter of observation, long-range strike capacities are vital for these offensives; as we saw in Kherson a year ago, and as is being demonstrated in Zaporizhia today. Neither defense nor offense can succeed without systematic measures to destroy and push back command and logistic nodes: that needs range.

Although cluster munitions are opposed by Achcar on different grounds, it is important to note that the current offensive would already have had to stop were it not for the US decision to provide these munitions, due to a shortage of conventional 155mm shells. Because these munitions are being fired into the middle of heavily mined areas, there are fewer humanitarian concerns than in other use cases: these areas will be inaccessible to civilians pending future one of history's largest demining operations. The transfer of cluster munitions thus had more upsides and fewer downsides than were contemplated by those countries – not including Russia, the US, or Ukraine – which have agreed to proscribe them.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Achcar shows no understanding of the dynamics of escalation as they have played out in the war. (I gave examples in my previous piece, which he did not address.) Both sides will make use of all escalatory mechanisms within their grasp, and will do so irrespective of whether their opponent adopts a given escalatory step themselves. The reason for this is simple: to do otherwise would amount to willingness to accept defeat unnecessarily. Both Ukraine and Russia are rapidly expanding their production of long-range suicide drones, with greater range than anything the US will provide to Ukraine. The idea that either would halt production if only their counterparts were unable to produce the equivalent munitions is baseless invention. The qualitative limit to this escalation is set by the two parties' international partners: the use of chemical, nuclear, or biological weapons will not be permitted; and fortunately so.

Achcar expects the delivery of F-16s to be a "qualitative escalation of U.S. and NATO participation" that will lead Moscow to "do anything in its power to prevent their use (such as pounding Ukraine's airports) and conduct further murderous onslaughts on the country's civilian population in retribution." If anything, it is more likely that Russian attempts to strike military runways (F-16s need very level tarmac) will redirect Moscow's limited stock of ballistic strikes away from their usual, civilian targets. Even if a flurry of attacks on civilian targets greets the first use of an F-16, there is no reason to think that over time equivalent attacks would not have happened anyway: to believe otherwise is to be credulous about Moscow's own restraint.

F-16s do not, in fact, represent a drastic qualitative escalation; particularly in the form of the Mid-Life Update model currently promised. As usual Achcar does not say what he thinks this qualitative edge is supposed to be. F-16s will allow Ukraine access to a number of slightly more sophisticated air-to-air missiles, and additional air-to-ground munitions similar to those it already has. They will allow it to maintain and perhaps marginally expand the size of its air force, which otherwise would inevitably become unviable due to wear and tear: there is only so long that whole new airframes can be cannibalized for spare parts.

Undoubtedly, F-16s represent less of a qualitative escalation than did the MiG-21s which the USSR supplied to North Vietnam. In that case, Achcar has already argued, the supply of such armaments (and even the occasional direct involvement of military advisors in fighting) did not amount to the participation of the USSR in the war for the purposes of his theoretical framework.

Achcar wants Ukraine to mount offensives against prepared positions without offensive weapons, and specifically without being able to fire over a certain (unstated) range. He wants it to do so with a quantitative disadvantage in matériel (a given), and, perhaps, no qualitative advantage in certain crucial types of matériel (as a matter of policy). He wants Ukraine's partners to supply it, but not to increase net expenditure to do so (he never explains why this principle is so important, or how he is so sure it can be reconciled with his battlefield objectives), and also not to draw down existing stocks where these are problematic (as with cluster munitions). Something has to give. There is a need to bring objectives and means into alignment. On the basis of the means Achcar proposes, Ukraine could likely not even manage a sustainable defense, let alone the offensive action he seems to want.

Alliances

Achcar agrees with my characterization of the multiple causes of Russia's invasion, and is nearly correct that I insist on a defensive alliance involving the United States as a necessary means to prevent it – I wrote that the other option was that European countries considerably expand their military-industrial base. Achcar has two arguments against my position.

The first is that I'm wrong to dismiss the OSCE and UN as guarantors of Ukraine's security because, although they are presently unable to fulfil those roles, they could be "revamped and enhanced so as to be effective guarantors of world peace." But absent some account of what these enhancements would look like, and how they could either neutralize the sources of Russia's aggression or deter it through credible threats to deploy countervailing force, this merely moves the abstraction to another set of terms, in a manner reminiscent of the most utopian versions of liberal institutionalism.

Achcar's second argument is that there was an alternative means available to prevent the sources of Russia's external aggression reemerging after the 1990s. He writes that the neoliberal "shock therapy" of that decade initiated the hyper-nationalist, externally aggressive version of Russian politics that we see today, and implies that were it to have been avoided "collective security organizations" would be sufficient to deal with the reduced pitch of tensions. This argument has several difficulties.

The first problem is that although Russia's path to its present condition ran through the economic catastrophe of the 1990s, history is replete with other paths to authoritarianism and imperial reassertion. There is a path leading not through recent national humiliation, but through wealth and power. That is the path that the US followed into the Iraq war, and that, perhaps, China is following now in respect of its intentions toward Taiwan. As a large hydrocarbon economy with a compact political elite steeped in an imperial ethos and weak civil society, the pressures in Russia toward authoritarianism and militarism were always going to be strong (compare Azerbaijan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia). Augurs of resurgent Russian revanchism were, *contra* Achcar, visible during the 1990s: in Transnistria, Chechnya, and Abkhazia, and in the Russian diplomats who told their Eastern European counterparts that Kyiv would soon be under Moscow's control again. (See D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*. 2nd Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2023, pp. 54-56.) This is why Ukraine sought the Budapest Memorandum: as a hedge against an evident danger.

M.E. Sarotte, who is a skeptic of NATO enlargement, in her conclusion to *Not One Inch*, accepts that while it is "reasonable to speculate" that rising tensions between Russia and NATO may have been contained without the latter's expansion, she admits that it is "impossible to know" whether Russia would not have chosen to engage in aggression anyway. We might also wonder whether the leaderships of NATO countries would really have moved, as Sarotte recommends, to admit frontline states to membership in the context of escalating Russian ambitions, should these have emerged anyway. It may have been that the late 1990s and early 2000 were a unique political window that made possible the expansion of NATO to the Baltics and Poland possible, and thus their ongoing security against Russian invasion.

Once this double uncertainty is admitted – that Russian aggression may have emerged whether the crisis of the 1990s was much softer or not, and whether NATO expanded or not – any worthwhile security policy, one with the interests of Eastern Europeans at its heart, must inevitably take place in that context. That implies deterrence, which for small states implies alliance politics.

The second problem is that, even if a different economic approach to Russia's 1990s crisis would have made all the difference, that recognition is wholly useless a) once the opportunity to act

differently had passed, and b) to any actors who did not have the capacity to deliver that different economic policy. It therefore implies nothing in policy terms a) since the mid-1990s, or b) to anyone save the most powerful actors within the US (and perhaps West European) political system that had the capacity to provide the necessary billions of dollars. What use is it to say to the Ukrainian majority who now favor NATO membership that the progressive alternative involves a time machine? What use is it to criticize the Polish and Czech leaders, who were so crucial in driving NATO expansion, on the grounds that there was an alternative route to their security that they had no capacity to enact? None at all.

Another world is possible. But it has to be dragged out of the sludge of the present through means available to specific actors at the moments in which policy is enacted, not established by pure critique of the aggregate consequences of historical development. Political actors, no matter how radical, propose their policies in a world in which the conditions of their action are defined by the mistakes, the practical limitations, and the deliberately vicious decisions of their predecessors. The subsequent policy debates are not primarily opportunities to rerun the debates of the past, with a view to proving one's own political current to have previously been correct. Rather, they are primarily invitations to take responsibility for certain reasonably foreseeable consequences in the deplorable conditions of the present.