

Ukraine: “Which Peace Are We Talking About?” An Interview with Gilbert Achcar

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Gilbert Achcar has been a major left commentator on international affairs for many years. He grew up in Lebanon and has lived and taught in Paris, Berlin, and London. He is currently professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His many books include *The Clash of Barbarisms* (2002, 2006); *Perilous Power: The Middle East and US Foreign Policy*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky (2007); *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010); *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (2013); and *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013, 2022). His next book, *The New Cold War: The United States, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine*, will come out in early 2023. He was interviewed Dec. 7-9 by email by Stephen R. Shalom of the *New Politics* editorial board and editor of *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy*, a series of dialogues between Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar (Paradigm, 2009).

New Politics: Gilbert, on November 30, you published a short article entitled “For a democratic antiwar position on the invasion of Ukraine.” You begin that article by distinguishing two common positions on the left regarding Ukraine. One of these positions opposes weapons deliveries from NATO countries to Ukraine, arguing that as a peace movement we should be calling for diplomacy and de-escalation over arms shipments. Could you explain what you find wrong with this position?

Gilbert Achcar: The main position that I am concerned with in this regard revolves around the call for an unconditional ceasefire. It is often associated with the stance that you described. On the face of it, this is motivated by a desire for peace, a very noble goal indeed. And I do not doubt that among those who advocate such position, there are genuine pacifists and people who legitimately suspect Western governments, the U.S. government in the first place, of utilizing the Ukrainians as cannon fodder in a proxy war against Russia, their imperialist rival. I am, of course, less sanguine about those who began advocating an unconditional ceasefire only when Russian forces proclaimed that they had achieved their main goal or when they started losing ground in Donbas itself.

There are several issues involved here. The first is that it doesn't make much sense to call for peace in the abstract. This begs the question: which peace are we talking about? Imperial domination often called itself “peace” from the time of the Pax Romana (Roman Peace) at the beginning of the

Common Era, if not much earlier, to the sinister “pacification” enforced by French colonial troops in Algeria or U.S. troops in Vietnam. Peace must always be qualified: against wars of conquest, the correct position seeks a just and lasting peace, which can only be a peace without annexation. Calling for an unconditional ceasefire does not conform to this standard when it can mean the perpetuation of conquest and acquisition of territory by force. It becomes blatantly suspicious when raised at the very moment when the invaded starts repelling the invader, as if seeking to preserve as much of conquered land as possible under invader’s control.

When you look at things from the perspective of a just peace, the only stance that conforms with this goal is the call for a ceasefire coupled with the withdrawal of invading troops to their prewar positions. All the rest flows from there: those who are for a just peace, those who stand against wars of conquest while supporting liberation wars as legitimate self-defense, cannot oppose the delivery of defensive weapons to the victims of aggression and invasion. They should not oppose such deliveries until there is a ceasefire associated with the condition that I mentioned, and until the victims possess the means to deter further aggression of their territory.

This does not contradict in the least the call on Western governments to engage in genuine efforts to bring Russia to the table of negotiations. It is evident to me that the Biden administration has not genuinely and actively pursued this goal, unlike the governments of Paris or Berlin. But the truth of the matter is that it is the Russian side that has taken the most bellicose stance blocking the prospect of peace. The best illustration of this and of all that I explained about the call for a ceasefire is Vladimir Putin’s speech at the ceremony finalizing the annexation of the four Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia at the end of September. Putin said:

We call on the Kiev regime to immediately cease fire and all hostilities; to end the war it unleashed back in 2014 and return to the negotiating table. We are ready for this, as we have said more than once. But the choice of the people in Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhye and Kherson will not be discussed. The decision has been made, and Russia will not betray it. Kiev’s current authorities should respect this free expression of the people’s will; there is no other way. This is the only way to peace.

It is obvious that if you call for a ceasefire while asserting that the only peace in your view is that which includes the recognition of your forceful acquisition of land, and that this annexation—which you depict as resulting from the “free expression of the people’s will”—cannot even be discussed, you are slamming the door in the face of any prospect of peace negotiations. The onus is on the Russian government to show that it is genuinely open to negotiations for a peaceful settlement, which requires its willingness to put everything back on the table, not to demand recognition of its conquest as a fait accompli.

NP: You say that those who believe in the right of self-defense in a just war cannot oppose the delivery of “defensive” weapons to the victims of aggression and invasion. What do you mean by the term “defensive”? Does artillery fall under this heading? What is excluded?

GA: It has been my position from the very beginning to put emphasis on the defensive purpose of arms deliveries to Ukraine. It is true that there are no clearcut boundaries between defensive and offensive weapons, but the clearest distinctions are of two kinds: one refers to the whole gamut of “anti” weapons: anti-aircraft, anti-tank, anti-missile, which are defensive by definition. I fully support the supply of such weapons. The other distinction refers to the weapons’ range. I don’t support NATO delivering to Ukraine weapons of a range that would allow its armed forces to strike deep into Russian territory. Not because it would be unfair: Ukraine actually has a full moral right to strike deep into Russia since the latter is extensively pounding Ukraine’s territory, thus blatantly committing war crimes in deliberately destroying Ukraine’s civilian infrastructure. Moscow is

obviously seeking to force the Ukrainian population into cold and darkness and other disruptions, with murderous consequences in order to force them into capitulation. The recent Ukrainian strikes into Russia by means of reconverted old drones are all the more legitimate in that they targeted not Russian civilians but military bases from which planes that bomb Ukraine take off.

What I wouldn't support is NATO providing to Ukraine long-range missiles and planes, rather than just antimissile and anti-aircraft weapons. Nor would I support NATO enforcing a no-fly zone over Ukraine. Such steps would be a perilous escalation of NATO's involvement in this war, and no territory on earth is worth risking a major global war and a nuclear confrontation for its sake. Note that Washington itself is keen on avoiding that qualitative escalation, which is why it has been refraining from delivering long-range weapons to Ukraine. Those who blame Washington for this and demand that there be no limitation on the kind of weapons delivered are mainly to be found among Ukraine's ultranationalists and in those neighboring countries where anti-Russian resentment is at its highest for historical reasons. Add to them the warmongers on NATO's side who provide a mirror image of those in Russia. One example is former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, retired U.S. General Philip Breedlove, who has been calling from the start for NATO's direct involvement in the war and its enforcement of a no-fly zone over Ukraine. This Gen. Breedlove sounds very much like Dr. Strangelove to my ears. This is utterly irresponsible.

NP: In your November 30 article you criticized not just those who call for an unconditional ceasefire, but also those who "set the bar for peace too high." Can you describe this point of view and what you see wrong with it?

GA: I was referring to statements of the kind that do not even mention a ceasefire and the conditions for it, while asserting that there can be no peace without a full withdrawal of Russian troops from all the territories occupied since 2014, Crimea included. This amounts to a call for an all-out war against Russia, which can't be waged, let alone won, without a much higher degree of NATO involvement, both military and economic. There are three major problems with such stances.

The first, and most obvious, is that what they advocate is not endorsed by most Western states, including all the most powerful, as well as by public opinion majorities in those states. Upholders of such a position would need to join the likes of Gen. Breedlove / Dr. Strangelove in campaigning for a qualitative leap in NATO's involvement, which is a warmongering position whatever rightful principles it may invoke. The road to hell, as everyone knows, is paved with good intentions.

The second problem is that, by defining maximalist conditions for peace without even mentioning a ceasefire, such a stance plays into the hands of the opposing one, the position that I discussed in reply to your first question. Its advocates risk appearing in the eyes of public opinion as mindless warmongers in tune with Ukraine's nationalist hardliners, while the opposite stance would appear as the only one concerned with saving human lives since it would be the only one calling for a ceasefire—even if the ceasefire it calls for may actually be akin to the annexationist ceasefire called for by Putin.

The third problem is that as antiwar progressives, or internationalists, we believe that when there are legitimate disputes over the status of a territory, the matter should be decided democratically by the genuine "free expression of the people's will"—not a sham exercise staged under occupation by the invaders. So, of course, the "referendums" held under Russian control in Crimea and parts of Donbas in 2014 and 2022 have no moral or legal validity whatsoever, let alone those held in parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts too this year. Nevertheless, from an internationalist perspective, it seems obvious to me that there are legitimate issues concerning the status of Crimea and even those parts of Donbas identified by the 2015 Minsk II agreement. I stand against any "solution" of these issues by war, and in favor of a peaceful democratic solution on the basis of

people's self-determination. Obviously, the will to be expressed must be that of the original population of these territories as it was composed before the forceful change in their status, i.e. before 2014.

It is on these grounds that I defined what I believe to be the kind of position that antiwar internationalists should adopt on the issue of a ceasefire and peace negotiations. Here are again the three points that I submitted for a democratic antiwar platform:

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.

Now, it takes a serious misreading of the actual situation to see in that a reversal of my anti-invasion position, let alone a betrayal of the Ukrainian cause. The fact is that setting the condition for a ceasefire as being the withdrawal of Russian troops to their positions of February 23 is already setting the bar very high indeed. For as I explained in my November text, this itself requires a major amplification of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, with substantially increased support from NATO countries, along with an increase in their economic pressure on Russia. However, it is the only acceptable condition for a ceasefire from a perspective that repudiates the acquisition of territory by force. Only the Ukrainian side is entitled to accept a ceasefire for less, if the actual conditions bring them to that. As for waging war until the whole of Donbas as well as Crimea are regained, well, had Ukraine launched such an offensive before the Russian invasion on February 24, I would certainly have regarded it as reckless nationalist adventurism, however legitimate it might have been. It is for the same reason that I do not support the call for a continuation of the war until all these territories have been recovered by Ukraine.

NP: Your third point relies on the United Nations. But given Russia's veto power in the Security Council, wouldn't you in fact be allowing Moscow to get its way in the disputed areas?

GA: Let me ask you first of all: What alternative is there to the UN for overseeing a peaceful democratic settlement of the conflict? Could NATO be that alternative? To ask the question is to answer it. As for the so-called Normandy Format (France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine), it has failed beyond repair. Short of a collapse of Putin's regime that would radically change the situation, the only way to get Russia to abide by the conditions of a peaceful settlement is to get it processed through the UN where it would require Russia's approval as well as China's. Of course, Russia won't agree to such a settlement unless it is compelled by the military situation on the ground and by its economic situation. But to object that proceeding through the UN would give Moscow veto power amounts to saying that a settlement can be imposed on Russia against its will. This would take us back to the warmongers' doomsday scenario.

One should look differently at the matter: a UN-controlled settlement is one that involves an agreement between key NATO powers on the one hand, Russia on the other, as well as China. Obviously, there can be no peaceful settlement ending the war without such an agreement. The deployment of UN troops in the disputed territories—ideally along with the withdrawal of Russian forces, but even if that proved impossible to obtain before the self-determination procedure and they were to remain until its completion, on the condition that they be confined to their bases and barracks—is the only means of getting genuine self-determination referendums organized by a UN-mandated body. Only such a settlement can be buttressed by international legality backed by great

power consensus. I can hardly imagine another scenario for a peaceful democratic settlement.

NP: In your November 30 article you say that the antiwar movement should try to put pressure on China to help bring the war to a favorable conclusion. How could such pressure be exerted and why do you think China might play such a role?

GA: The shortest way, and the least costly in human lives and destruction, to a ceasefire under the conditions described above is for the NATO powers to get China to add its “friendly” pressure on Moscow to their military and economic pressure. Berlin and Paris have made attempts to that effect, but they are hampered by Washington’s provocative attitude toward Beijing that Donald Trump brought to a peak and that Joe Biden has continued. China is clearly unhappy with the ongoing war, which goes against its economic interests and has already considerably strengthened the geopolitical West that the United States has been striving to build up against Beijing and its “eternal friendship” with Moscow. This means that China may realize that Putin is doing a disservice to their joint opposition to U.S. “hegemonism” and that letting him carry on his botched invasion can only further the damage. Moreover, Beijing’s silence on this invasion plainly contradicts its declared commitment to international law and the principles of sovereignty and integrity of states.

All Chinese foreign policy documents emphasize the central role that the UN should play in world politics, and yet China has until now made no effort at the UN to bring it to play a key role in stopping the war, which is what the UN has been primarily designed to do. Instead, Beijing has taken refuge in abstention in the face of the most serious threat to global peace in recent history, an attitude that is certainly not worthy of the second mightiest power on earth. In that context, I believe that the antiwar movement should put pressure not only on Moscow and Washington as it does, or more accurately as different sections of it do on one or the other of these two capitals, but also on Beijing, which bears a major share of responsibility for the continuation of the war by its choice not to act to stop it. The antiwar movement should wake up to the fact that China too—increasingly so—is one of the global powers that bear responsibility for the state of the world.