

Review : Gilbert Achcar's « The New Cold War »

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Charlie Hore critically engages with Gilbert Achcar's latest book on China, Russia and the US.

Gilbert Achcar. *The New Cold War : The US, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine*. Westbourne Press, 2023. 368 pp, £16.99.

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Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it had become commonplace to talk of a 'new Cold War' between the USA and Russia and China. The 'end of history' that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the USSR lasted less than ten years. From the Kosovo war through Afghanistan and Iraq, the last thirty years has seen the world's major powers either at war or preparing for war.

Gilbert Achcar, a long-standing and prolific socialist academic whose [work](#) mostly centres on the Middle East, claims to have first coined the term to describe the confrontation between NATO and Russia over Kosovo. In this highly detailed book, he develops this argument at greater length, adding in the growth of tensions between the USA and China. The first part of *The New Cold War* dates from the late 1990s, while the second part has been newly written, but the two mesh together well to offer a consistent, if not always persuasive, argument.

Much of the book lays out the ways in which the USA has expanded its military and political reach in both eastern Europe and the Pacific, as the primary cause of increased international tensions between the 'strategic triad' of world powers : the USA, Russia and China. As he notes : 'The current level of the US defence budget corresponds rationally to the US aspiration to imperial expansion and exclusive global hegemony.' (p77) That was written in 1997 but remains true today, despite a short-lived reduction in the budget following the final withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2012.

In Europe this expansion has taken the form of NATO encompassing most of eastern Europe, while the process in the Pacific has been more uncertain, with the USA being much more reliant on its allies (in particular Japan), which have their own contradictory relationships with China to take into account. The process in the Pacific was also disrupted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which get surprisingly little mention (Iraq isn't even in the index), despite his recognition that because of these 'Starting with Obama, the United States has mostly resorted to cowardly remote warfare, mostly waged under the radar'. (p188)

However, it would have been useful to draw out the gap between the USA's imperial aspirations and its actual reach, which dictates the increasing reliance on allies, and the consequent tensions that entails. [As Chris Harman argued in 2003](#), in a useful corrective to the view of the USA as all-

powerful hegemon :

[T]he outcome will never be satisfactory for US capitalism. It cannot make enough out of imperialism in crude cash terms to compensate for its expenditures in the way that the European capitalisms did a century ago. Nor can it rely, as it could during the Second World War and the early years of the Cold War, on military spending allowing it to prosper with a prolonged boom... For these reasons, the US triumphant remains the US weak. The splits with the other powers will continue, even though they will alternate between defiant gestures and grovelling actions.

Russia and China

Achcar gives a detailed account of the rise of Vladimir Putin as a direct consequence of the neoliberal 'shock therapy' inflicted on the Russian economy in the 1990s, and shows that Putin's increasing belligerence was in large part a reaction to NATO enlargement into eastern Europe. As he puts it, Russia's rulers' '...main concern became at least to safeguard one layer of states as a buffer zone between their country and NATO' (p133), an ambition which he traces back to Stalin and more generally to the nationalism of '...a colonial power within the territorial continuity of the huge empire that it ruled from the eighteenth century', (p129) which has seen that empire eroded both by revolts in 'subordinate' nations and outside powers. His accounts of the wars in Chechnya, Georgia and Syria see them as attempts to maintain or re-establish that control.

The combination of the two factors also led to the catastrophic decision to invade Ukraine. Achcar is clear that explaining the wider context of NATO expansion and Russian militarist reaction in no way absolves Putin of the invasion, but rather helps us to understand what led up to it. He doesn't attempt a narrative of the war itself, or to predict how and when it might end, but points to a number of consequences that have backfired on Putin : the economic setbacks and the weakening of Russia's military might, but also the strengthening of both Ukrainian nationalism and NATO. He writes that the war has '...resurrected NATO's raison d'etre far beyond what Washington had managed to achieve in this respect through all its efforts since the fall of the USSR.' (p236)

The chapter on China is less satisfactory. In part, this is because Achcar echoes [Walden Bello's view](#) that *the jury is still out* on whether China is yet an imperialist power- this despite the fact that China is not only the second-largest economy in the world, but also [the largest exporter](#) and [second-largest importer](#), as well as the second-largest exporter of capital. China has also followed the West in seeing the global south primarily as a source of raw materials to be extracted with minimum concern for the environmental damage caused, as evidenced for Africa by Lee Wengraf's [Extracting profit](#). How and when China became an imperialist power is outside the scope of this review - one good overview is Pierre Rousset's recent article '[China ; a new imperialism emerges](#)'.

Furthermore, there is no question that China's expansion has come through its integration into the existing world economy - China was the biggest contributor to world economic growth following 2008, and [the IMF predicts](#) the same will be true of the next five years. As economist Ho-fung Hung argued in *The China Boom* (2015) :

The China boom has been dependent on the global neoliberal order, which is based on expanding, unfettered transnational flow of goods and capitals, and it is in China's vested interest to maintain the status quo, though China might seek to change the balance of power within this arrangement...China is more of a foundation of the global status quo and its contradictions than a challenge and solution to it. (p5)

Marxists from Lenin, Bukharin and Luxemburg onwards have seen imperialism as a necessary

product of the expansion of a national capital beyond its borders, with the consequent tendency for economic tensions between competing capitals to become political and military conflicts between states. If China could become a major capitalist power fully integrated into the world economy without becoming imperialist, that poses the question of whether there is any necessary relationship between capitalism and imperialism – a question that Achcar does not address.

The second, related, reason is that Achcar's account focuses almost entirely on political and military tensions between the USA and China, in particular over Taiwan, with very little attention paid to the economic relationship between the two that is at the root of those tensions. This is a serious omission, because it's not possible to understand the often contradictory stances that the USA has taken towards China's rise from a purely political-military standpoint – the key to the relationship is that American capitalism both relies on and fears China's economic growth, in a way that was never true of the USA-USSR rivalry.

Although the [US military presence in east Asia is expanding](#), it remains much smaller than at the time of the Korean or Vietnamese wars. A major social movement forced the closure of the two largest US overseas bases in the Philippines in the early 1990s. And though a much smaller military presence has since crept back, it is worth remembering that Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' failed to diminish China's power and influence, as Achcar notes. And there is no equivalent of NATO in Asia. SEATO, which only ever had three Asian nations as members, was wound up in 1977. The USA faces much greater political challenges in military expansion than it does in eastern Europe, in large part because east and south-east Asian states are caught between fears of China's expansion and economic dependency on China, in a way that isn't true of eastern Europe and Russia.

Lastly, the account Achcar gives of China's military expansion and aggression is sketchy compared to the space he gives to Russia's wars. The problem here is that to understand why the USA is having some success in returning to southeast Asia it's necessary to understand the increasing antagonisms between China and all of its neighbours, driven primarily by China's claims to control over areas of the South China Sea hundreds of miles from its shores.

Are we living through a new Cold War ?

The term 'new Cold War' is firmly established as a journalistic shorthand for the increased military tensions between the major world powers, but Achcar's intention here is to propose it as an analytic framework for understanding the dynamics of the process. Here I think he's less successful.

This is primarily because his definition focuses on military confrontation, and the return of what he calls the 'permanent war economy'. But the world today has changed out of all recognition since the classic John le Carré-era Cold War, where the world was essentially divided into two opposing blocs whose competition was primarily expressed in military terms. The rise of China, and of other major economies in the global South (Brazil, India, South Korea, etc) means that both the USA and Russia are weaker than they were at the height of their powers, but also that economic, political and military competition between great powers are once again entwined. And as he rightly notes '...collaboration between China and Russia is based on convenience, not love'. (p176) There is no 'eastern bloc' – and China is clearly the more economically powerful of the two.

Achcar does briefly discuss imperialism in the section on China, but it's not at the heart of his analysis, which in centring on military competition between the three big powers at times misses out the importance of other actors in the world system – and omits almost entirely resistance from below to the big powers. The lack of a substantial economic dimension means that what drives military competition is never really explained – at best, it's simply what big states do ; at worst, it's 'largely

through the bad decisions of a particularly incompetent man [Clinton]'. (p120)

To put it at its simplest, where great power rivalry in the Cold War was primarily driven by military and political competition, the new tensions are driven both by economic and political competition for influence over a transformed Global South - the discontinuities are more significant than the continuities. It seems to me more useful to see the present as a new phase of imperialism, in which the pre-1914 world is as useful a reference point as the Cold War, an argument made in different ways by authors such as [Ho-fung Hung](#), [Au Loong Yu](#) and [Pierre Rousset](#).

This is not to suggest that we are back in the world of 1914, when most of the world was directly or indirectly colonised by the major powers. The new imperialist world order is characterised both by increasing military tensions between the world's major powers, but also by economic competition as well as multiple inter-connections between those powers and new economic powerhouses in the Global South. *The New Cold War* provides a detailed account of the military side of these developments, at least between the USA and Russia, but its relative neglect of the economic dimension means that it falls short of providing the rounded analysis that we need to oppose imperialism today.

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