

Book Review of Gilbert Achcar's Hidden History of the New Cold War

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The New Cold War:

The United States, Russia, and China from Kosovo to Ukraine

by Gilbert Achcar

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023, 350 pages, \$22.95 paperback.

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IN *THE NEW Cold War*, Gilbert Achcar describes how the United States abused its “unipolar moment” after the collapse of the Soviet Union to try to ensure that Russia and China would never be able to challenge it. The attempt failed, and the result is the current geopolitical conflict. The alternative that Achcar proposes is a return to the principles of the United Nations and its 1945 Charter.

Achcar doesn't excuse the Russian and Chinese governments for their conduct, domestically or internationally. But he sees the U.S. government as continuing to push global relations in the worst possible direction, toward militarism and war, when the world should be focused on fighting climate change, pandemics, economic crises, and their socioeconomic consequences.

Achcar's empirical evidence is irrefutable. His analysis can be debated. His solution may seem utopian. But getting beyond the “U.S.-NATO good, Russia-China bad” narrative in the Western media is essential for a real understanding of the New Cold War and possible ways out.

For this reviewer, Achcar's method recalls I.F. Stone's work exposing U.S. responsibility for initiating and escalating the first Cold War. In 1952, Stone published *The Hidden History of the Korean War, 1950-51*.

Refuting the Truman administration's claim that “the Communists” were solely responsible for starting the war, Stone exposed the real, two-sided escalation: U.S.-backed raids by South Korean commandos across the 38th parallel into North Korea provoked counterstrikes, and the conflict spiraled into war.

Stone's method was a close reading and analysis of published accounts, making his revelations hard to refute. He used the same method to deconstruct the Johnson administration's account of the 1964

Gulf of Tonkin incident, the pretext for direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War.

Gilbert Achcar, of Lebanese and French background, is a veteran activist and author of *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder* (2002, 2006), *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010), *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2013), *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (2016), and other books and articles. He is currently a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London.

Genesis of the New Cold War

The Introduction, “On Cold Wars and the New Cold War,” explores the history of the term Cold War and the origins of what Marxists labeled a Permanent War Economy. It is interesting and worth reading in the book, but we’ll bypass it here for reasons of space.

Part I, “Genesis of the New Cold War,” consists of the two chapters that made up Achcar’s 1999 book *La Nouvelle Guerre froide: le monde après le Kosovo* (The New Cold War: The World after Kosovo).

Chapter One, “The Strategic Triad: The United States, Russia and China,” was written in 1997 and first published in English in 1998. As the article explains, U.S. military spending peaked in 1985, as the Reagan administration, continuing the policy of the Carter administration after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, escalated the U.S. arms race with the Soviet Union. The pace was unsustainable and, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, unnecessary.

The Bush and Clinton administrations promised a “peace dividend” from the end of the Cold War. Yet they maintained real spending at Cold War levels. For 1997-2000, the Clinton administration maintained it at 85 percent of the average annual spending during the 1948-1991 period. The article asks two obvious questions: Why is the “peace dividend” so meager? Who is the real enemy?

It deduces that the “the implicit scenario to which U.S. defense expenditure really conforms, but which cannot be made too explicit for political, strategic and tactical reasons, is that of two simultaneous wars against Russia and China.” (76) The U.S. government’s declared policy was “engagement” with Russia and China. Its undeclared policy was containment.

Rasputin Plays Chess

Chapter Two, “Rasputin Plays Chess: How the World Stumbled into a New Cold War” was written in 1999 and first published in English in 2000.

Relations among the triad had deteriorated. NATO had just admitted Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, and adopted guidelines for bringing in more members. The United States and NATO had rejected Russian mediation, and bombed Serbia to force it to accept Kosovo’s becoming a NATO protectorate. Russia and China, iced out by Washington and its allies, were deepening their strategic and military cooperation.

After noting the deterioration in relations, Achcar cites two books that argued the positions of the “hawks” and the “doves” in the Clinton administration.

Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (Achcar’s Rasputin) wrote a 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard*, arguing the “hawk” position. Brzezinski was an architect of the Carter-Reagan strategy of employing Islamist fundamentalists, including Osama bin Laden, in 1980s Afghanistan to weaken the Soviet Union.

Brzezinski listed “the three grand imperatives of imperial geostrategy” as: “to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence among the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together.”

Former Defense Secretary William Perry and Assistant Defense Secretary Ashton Carter coauthored a 1999 book *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America*, arguing the “dove” position. The U.S. should have offered a Marshall Plan to revive Russia and the former Soviet space. The European Union should have embraced the Eastern European countries. NATO should have collaborated with Russia in the framework of the Partners for Peace.

The debate came to a head over Kosovo. Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic abolished Kosovo’s autonomous status within Serbia, and in summer 1998 the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) launched a large-scale offensive. The Serbian government answered with a counter-offensive, accompanied by genocidal killing and displacement of Kosovo Albanians.

Washington threatened military intervention. Alexander Vershbow, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, proposed, instead, a plan to impose a UN-approved political settlement with the cooperation of Russia. The plan would have created an international protectorate in Kosovo, policed by an international military presence.

Achcar laments: “The Kosovo war marked a decisive turning point ... towards a new era of tension and confrontation between two great international coalitions: a new Cold War... The transition from one to the other will have lasted less than ten years, and this wonderful opportunity to fashion for the twenty-first century a world more peaceful than that of the tragic century now ending will have been lost...” (120)

New Cold War Gets Quite Hot

Part II, “How the New Cold War Got Quite Hot,” begins with a section called “Transition: Moves and Countermoves on the Grand Chessboard,” which describes the reciprocal moves during the first years of the 21st century: The Bush II administration’s invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, stationing troops in Central Asia, scrapping the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and deploying missile systems on the periphery of Russia and China, the expansion of NATO by 2004 to include Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Russia carried out invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 to prevent NATO from incorporating them.

On December 17, 2021, the Russian government proposed that the US, NATO and Russia reaffirm the terms of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997:

“The Parties reaffirm that they do not consider each other as adversaries ... [They] shall not deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other States in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of 27 May 1997 ... [They] commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States.”

Simultaneously, the Russian government massed troops on the Ukrainian border. By December, it had more than 100,000 in place; by February, 175,000.

Achcar argues:

“[T]he Russian stance was no ultimatum, but a stated negotiating position in the expectation that the other side would make counterproposals. Serious negotiation was indeed possible ... But the fact is

that NATO basically rejected Russia's requests offhandedly as infringing upon its sovereignty. U.S. President Joe Biden ... preferred to set the world on a collision course by engaging in a game of chicken with Vladimir Putin.

"Worse still, Biden bizarrely engaged in prophesying, announcing day after day that Russia was about to invade Ukraine, in such a way that it is permissible to suspect him of having actually wished that it happened..." (134-5)

Achcar stresses that Washington's failures do not absolve the Putin government of its responsibility for launching the war, "no more than blaming the police for not having engaged in negotiation with hostage-takers absolves the latter from their criminal responsibility in murdering the hostages." (136)

Vladimir the Terrible: Five Acts

Chapter Three, "Vladimir the Terrible: An Opera in Five Acts," begins with a Prologue, "The Preventable Rise of Vladimir Putin." In it, Achcar makes an analogy between the consequences of the post-World War I geopolitical settlement and the post-Cold War settlement.

In both cases, the victors imposed punitive and humiliating conditions on the vanquished, and the resulting economic, social and political disintegration led to the rise of a strong leader who promised to make the country great again.

Achcar argues that "All this [Russia's embitterment, the rise of Putin, the New Cold War] could have been averted had Washington opted for the policy advocated by William Perry of generous and massive Western economic aid to Russia to help it recover from the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with a reshaping of the global order toward Russia's full integration in the concert of nations on a par with Western powers, instead of ostracizing it by expanding NATO into its former sphere of influence." (140)

The five acts of the opera are:

Andante Quasi Allegretto, 1999-2003, when Putin hoped that 9/11 and Bush's "war on terror" would be a basis for establishing mutual understanding and respect between the U.S. and Russia.

Crescendo, 2004-2007, when Washington's unipolar ambitions and behavior, including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and NATO expansion, disillusioned Putin and led him to seek an alliance with China, rather than the United States.

Forte Poi Decrescendo Assai, 2008-2010, when Russia fought Georgia in the closing months of the Bush administration to counter NATO's approach to its borders, and the Obama administration reduced tensions by promising to "reset" U.S. relations with Russia.

Crescendo di Nuovo Fino a Fortissimo, 2011-2014, when continued tensions between the U.S. and Russia led Putin, by then an autocrat, to attack Ukraine and annex Crimea.

Ancora Più Forte Fino a Furioso, 2015-2022, when Russia intervened in Syria, consolidated its alliance with China, and invaded Ukraine.

In an Epilogue to the chapter, Achcar returns to the historical perspective. Putin's decision to invade Ukraine "stands at the intersection of two different processes."

"On the one hand, the United States had quickly shattered the [post-Cold War] promise of a rules-

based 'new world order' ... The US-led Western policy toward post-Soviet Russia was, as we have seen, calamitous in its early years — as was the decision to enlarge NATO ... As a result, Russia and NATO entered a vicious spiral of actions and counteractions." (232)

"On the other hand, the Weimar-like conditions that prevailed in 1990s Russia fostered the rise of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule.... He embarked on a course combining imperial revanchism with imperialist aggrandizement, culminating in the invasion of Ukraine." (233)

China: End of the Peaceful Rise?

Chapter IV, "China: End of the Peaceful Rise?" begins with some empirical observations. In absolute terms, China's military spending rose steeply in the 21st century. As a proportion of gross dogmatic product (GDP), it remained steady at less than two percent, half the figure for the U.S. China's rapid growth allowed it to sharply increase military spending without increasing its share of GDP.

Furthermore, "of the three great powers of the strategic triad along with NATO, China has hitherto been the least belligerent in both words and deeds." Achcar hastens to add that this "is a factual judgment, not a normative one — an observation that is corroborated by the nature of the material interests of the Chinese state and government." (243, 244)

In the period since the suppression of the Tiananmen protests in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these material interests have been to promote China's growth and development, both to raise living standards and thereby maintain the loyalty of the population, and to raise China to great-power status.

Peaceful relations with the United States and its allies allowed China access to the world economy, including foreign investment and technology, and saved it the expense of an arms race.

The coming to power of Xi Jinping in 2012 coincided with a souring of relations between China and the United States. The Obama administration finally grasped that China could be a threat to U.S. hegemony, economically and, at least potentially, militarily. It made its famous "pivot to Asia" to try to counter the threat. The Trump and Biden administrations continued the pivot — Trump with bluster, Biden more shrewdly and dangerously.

"Up to the time of writing — that is, under Joe Biden as well — Washington has followed a highly provocative course toward Beijing in all respects: Taiwan; the East and South China Seas and South Pacific; anti-China military alliances, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as Quad) with Australia, India and Japan, and AUKUS, with Australia and the UK; and trade and financial war." (265)

At home China's growth slowed after 2008, leading to renewed discontent over inequality, corruption, and lack of democracy. China's bureaucratic-capitalist class needed to expand beyond China's borders to obtain raw materials, markets and spheres of investment, and for national prestige.

Economically, this meant the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and related ventures. Militarily, it meant continuing to expand and modernize China's armed forces, more forcefully asserting its claim to Taiwan and the South China Sea, and moving closer to Russia.

The chapter then asks, "China and Russia: Love or Convenience?" It answers, "The obvious conclusion from all this is that collaboration between China and Russia is based on convenience, not

love. What has brought the two countries together is basically their common opposition to US 'hegemonism.'" (276)

In a postscript to the chapter, Achcar observes that Xi's addresses to the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022 omitted the usual references to "peace and development" and instead warned of "dangerous storms" on the horizon.

Conclusion: Where To Go from Here?

The Conclusion, "Where Do We Go from Here?" begins with a quotation from J. A. Hobson's 1902 book *Imperialism: A Study*. The quotation is striking, because Achcar's book contains few references to the Marxist tradition, and this one is to Hobson and not to Lenin, who praised Hobson in his far more influential 1916 book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

The quotation presumably expresses Achcar's views: "The power of the imperialist forces within the nation to use the national resources for their private gain, by operating the instrument of the State, can only be overthrown by the establishment of a genuine democracy, the direction of public policy by the people for the people through representatives over whom they exercise a real control." (289)

Achcar describes NATO's somber mood at its 70th anniversary summit in 1919, when pro-NATO Emmanuel Macron of France lamented that the alliance was "brain-dead" and anti-NATO Trump declared it "obsolete." The mood was no better at its 2021 summit, just after the fall of Kabul capped its defeat in the Afghanistan war.

NATO was spectacularly resuscitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Its members rushed to provide arms to Ukraine and pledged to raise their military spending to at least two percent of GDP. Finland and Sweden applied to join.

Claiming a mission to provide global security, NATO invited Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan to attend its 2022 summit as "partners." It adopted a new "strategic concept" for the organization, which described China as well as Russia in hostile terms.

Having described the problem, Achcar presents his solution: "To this course, leading inexorably toward the precipice, the only alternative is the return to what humanity achieved in the wake of what remains to this day the biggest catastrophe in history: the Second World War. The United Nations is that achievement, and its Charter a major civilizational gain — in Norbert Elias's sense of a 'civilizing process,' whereby humankind learns to pacify its relationships." (305)

Reflections

Gilbert Achcar has credibility. His books have challenged the U.S. "war on terror," Zionism, Arab bourgeois nationalism, and now the New Cold War. He takes positions that aren't always popular on the left.

In 1980, when a majority of the Fourth International leadership thought that a victory of the Soviet Union and its allies in Afghanistan might forestall an otherwise inevitable wave of Islamic reaction, he co-authored a minority resolution that presciently warned:

"A prolonged presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan can only fuel the following tendencies:

"The tendency that the Afghan rebellion will increase in strength and popularity, profiting from the national Afghan resentment against Soviet intervention and from imperialist support using this intervention as a pretext. The Kremlin is in the process of getting bogged down in a war that it can

never complete, inasmuch as it is completely illusory to wipe out guerrilla forces in a mountainous country when they have in addition two bases of support at their disposal — Pakistan and Iran.”

In 2011, he took flak for not opposing the U.S.-NATO no-fly zone over Libya, which he thought was necessary to prevent a massacre by Gaddafi’s army in Benghazi. He changed to opposing the intervention when it became a broader air war that brought down the Gaddafi government and handed the country to feuding warlords.

In the early days of the Syrian uprising, he denounced the U.S.-NATO failure to supply the popular forces with anti-aircraft weapons that he thought might have prevented the Assad regime’s murderous bombing of the civilian population.

In 2021, he took flak for being insufficiently critical of U.S. imperialism in his article “How to Avoid the Anti-Imperialism of Fools” in the left-liberal magazine *The Nation*. In 2022, he took flak again for not opposing U.S. sanctions against Russia, and for demanding that Russia withdraw from “every inch” of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea and Donbas.

For Achcar to blame the United States for the New Cold War to the extent he does in this book is an important political fact.

It’s also a caution against oversimplifying the positions of others in the antiwar movement. His denunciation of the United States and NATO is close to that of CodePink and other militant pacifists, with a crucial and fundamental difference — Achcar supports Ukraine’s self-defense and the right of its government to obtain arms wherever it can. [Editor’s note: Gilbert Achcar maintains an informational blog of his own and other writings on Syria. To get on his list contact g.achcar@gmail.com.]

His denunciation of Putin is close to that of pro-U.S. supporters of Ukraine, with the crucial difference that he blames the United States for initiating the New Cold War and for refusing to give Russia the assurances on arms and NATO expansion that might have forestalled the invasion and prevented a globally catastrophic war. Other supporters of Ukraine tend to deny or downplay these facts, lest adding their balance let Putin off the hook.

Nonetheless, Achcar’s argument invites questions. In the 1990s, was there really a “wonderful opportunity” to fashion a more peaceful world? Today, is it really possible to return to the principles of the United Nations and its 1945 Charter? Was there really anything to return to?

From an analytic standpoint, I prefer traditional Marxism. The New Cold War is a classic example of rising imperialist powers (Russia, China) challenging established imperialist powers (the United States, Japan, Germany, etc.).

Of *course*, the United States tried to ensure that Russia and China would never be able to challenge it. Of *course*, Russia and China persisted, biding their time until they were strong enough to act. Imperialism does imperialism.

The only way to get beyond that is for the working class to take the making of history into its own hands. International law, which under capitalism is always the law of the strongest, won’t solve the problem. Workers’ power is the only way out.

Achcar might well agree. But his target audience for this book, like I.F. Stone’s during the Korean war, is the public congregation, not the hard-left choir. For radicals, *The New Cold War* is a useful historical review. For a broader milieu caught in the “U.S.-NATO good, Russia-China bad” narrative of the Ukraine war, *The New Cold War* could be eye-opening.

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P.S.

- Against the Current No. 225. July-August 2023:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc225/hidden-history-of-the-new-cold-war/>