

Interview

World Order & Russia Today: New but Still Cold

Friday 26 December 2014, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#) (Date first published: 19 December 2014).

Ilya Budraitskis interviews the Franco-Lebanese political scientist Gilbert Achcar about who is to blame for the New Cold War, and whether there are progressive ideas, which could be placed at the foundation of global order.

Ilya Budraitskis: The question I want to start with concerns your opinion about Russia's place in the global system. Today the main discourse on that subject is the discourse of the new Cold War. Do you think this is a relevant term and who has most to gain from this rhetoric?

Gilbert Achcar: I think this is a very relevant term and has been relevant for several years. Actually, I published a book called *The New Cold War*, just after the 1999 Kosovo war. For me, this New Cold War started in that period. The 1990s were years of transition between the old Cold War, bipolarity, and the Soviet Union and all that, and some new phase in international relations. During the 1990s, the US was in a situation of full global hegemony. This is what one American columnist called "the unipolar moment." It's a good formula because he understood that it's a moment—it's not going to last forever—but it's a unipolar moment. The US had the power to determine—to a large extent, not entirely, of course—the future of international relations. If you look at the official documents of US strategy in the 1990s, the formula that you find is "shaping the world." So you have a clear understanding in the US that they could change the world, which to a large extent—again, not entirely, of course—was true. And they had choices, options. This was a key debate of Clinton's first term—Clinton had two terms. The first term saw a sharp debate between those advocating a policy towards Russia similar to the US policy towards Western Germany and Japan after 1945, which is—give them funds, economic help, help them become modern economies, and integrate them into the Western camp. This point of view existed, a kind of Marshall Plan for Russia, like the Marshall plan for Western Europe after WWII.

The other option—whose guru was Zbigniew Brzezinski, acting from behind Madeleine Albright, and Antony Lake—advocated consolidating unipolar hegemony and treating Russia as a potential enemy, even though it was Yeltsin's Russia. It was as part of this policy that the decision was made to maintain NATO and expand it into Eastern Europe and even into the former Soviet Baltic republics. And of course this created in Russia—even Yeltsin's Russia—a nationalist reaction. There was the feeling that we got rid of communism and they are still treating us as if we were enemies. This in my view was an important factor in increasing nationalist sentiment in Russia. And it would also increase with the Balkan wars and especially with the decision to launch the war in Kosovo—against Russia's view and even China's at the time, but the key point was Russia. Yeltsin was prepared to

put some real pressure on Milosevic for a peaceful settlement of the Kosovo issue. But the US dismissed this option and wanted NATO to go to war. This NATO war marked the 50th anniversary of NATO, which was founded in 1949. So it was even a symbolic moment. You can see how it functions: that is, ostracizing Russia served the Americans by frightening the Western Europeans into keeping their allegiance to Washington.

Actually, the Clinton administration did the same to China. They increased the tension with China around Taiwan in 1996, which served to foster Japan's allegiance to Washington. Because the Japanese were afraid. Of course, China has not come to a postcommunist transition like Russia. So in the case of Russia it was more blatant. That is, they recreated Russia as an enemy. Although it was really no ideological challenge for Western Europe, or any systemic threat.

So the main responsibility is on the US for having recreated this New Cold War, as I called it. I called it a post-ideological Cold War. What is the Cold War? It's a term to designate an arms race, where the two countries—the USA and the USSR/Russia—were and now are again engaged in an armaments build-up without clashing directly. They couldn't go to war because there are the crazy nuclear stock piles on both sides. So this is the Cold War—a permanent war economy, as some economist called it for the US, but the term is even more applicable for the USSR/Russia. They had to maintain their military budget. So in that sense this New Cold War was launched in the 1990s through these decisions.

I wrote that piece—the main piece in the book I mentioned—just after the Kosovo war about how the West provoked, in a way, a New Cold War. So this is the immediate background to the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. This atmosphere of nationalism created a reaction in the Russian post-Soviet state and in the military to find a strong leader.

The US produced Putin through the shock therapy of IMF and fostering the economic programs that Yeltsin applied, which were a disaster. In the late 1990s—people don't realize—the entire GDP of Russia was no more than the military budget of the US. This catastrophic economic change, this ostracism of Russia, created the grounds for Putin's rise. The US needs some villain to justify its role as protector in its alliances with Japan and Western Europe. These alliances have been maintained after the Cold War. This attitude was also beneficial to Putin—here you have a dialectical relation—because the US attitude allowed him to justify his policies at home and abroad.

So both sides bear direct responsibility for this New Cold War. The Russian military budget is growing very fast. The American military budget instead of being reduced radically is still at Cold-War levels—although it doesn't match the Reagan-era level in percentage of GDP, which was a "peacetime" peak—but still quite high. We remain in a war economy, with military budgets of war, in a Cold War kind of framework.

Budraitskis: One of the main themes in the international rhetoric of Putin and his diplomacy is the idea of double standards. He believes that double standards shouldn't be the monopoly of the US, that Russia should be able to use the same kind of international cynicism. Do you think that in this situation there could be some principle, some alternatives based on a vision of international order other than the double standards used by Russia and the US?

Achcar: Yes! I think that the most progressive moment—moment, that is, a brief point in time—in contemporary international relations was the immediate post-WWII period, when they formed the UN, when you had Soviet and American co-operation on this. Of course, the UN is not perfect. Perfection is not of this world. But compared to all the history of international relations it was a most progressive moment, the Charter of the UN and all that. The idea of having international relations

based on law and principles, not the law of the jungle, the law of force, but on the global rule of law is a progressive idea, which one should defend, against the cynicism of the great powers, Moscow and Washington or whoever. The great powers are all very cynical, all Machiavellian in a pejorative sense. We are far from this post-1945 project. At the beginning, under Roosevelt, the prospect was still a progressive one. It shifted very quickly to a Cold War outlook under Truman. But this vision of 1944, 1945, Yalta, Potsdam, and all these conferences, this kind of co-existence—although there was division of empires, division of the world—was, among other things, an attempt to say, let us establish rules of the game, if you will, let us establish principles. And those principles—which are expressed in the UN Charter—these were progressive principles.

If you read the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—it's a very progressive document. Even today this 1948 document is progressive for all states. Because there you have not only democracy, freedom, equality, antiracism, antisexism, but you have even the right to work, which is a very progressive thing. The Declaration represented a mixture of American liberalism and, from the Soviet side, so-called socialist principles as part of their ideology.

The initial documents of the post-1945 period constituted the elements of a progressive kind of world order without being utopian. We are not speaking of the universal federation of socialist republics: we are speaking of something that you can point to, that exists—this is supposed to be international law. I think progressives should use international law against the powers that be. This is always the case because historical progress gets codified in laws. Now these laws codify the relation of forces in society. At some points in history, the relation of forces can deteriorate at the expense of the progressive. But then the law is a kind of conservative-progressive game. Then the right wing will try to attack and change the law. But it's very difficult to change the UN Charter. It is there. It codifies a balance of forces that's different from today's world: in the world of 1945 the working class was much stronger than it is today; European social democracy was much to the left of what it is today; it was a world in which there were sweeping nationalizations, social security, and all that. There was competition between the Soviet bloc and the West on social gains. It was a very different world. Now the competition is who's going to be more neoliberal than the other. It was a very different situation. There you have something that progressives should be upholding as an alternative—non-utopian—you can have utopian alternatives—that's very nice, but if you want to be concrete, addressing politics and not only dreams, this is a very much existing, very much there, progressive alternative.

Budraitskis: Do you think this progressive meaning of it was not so much based on the idea of the balance of forces, the idea of a multipolar world, which is one of Putin's favorite rhetorical figures, but on the collective responsibility of humanity in the aftermath of the most terrible war in history?

Achcar: Absolutely. This progressive moment of international relations was also based on the fight against Nazism and fascism. And you had this convergence between liberalism and Stalinism. As we know, Stalinism is a more complex issue—it's a mixture of totalitarian features and socialist rhetoric. In order to legitimize Stalinism we had this mixture of socialist rhetoric and nationalism. Although nationalism increased a lot in this combination during the war, nevertheless, in the global confrontation nationalism was not useful. Moscow couldn't convince even communist parties with Russian nationalism. So they needed the socialist rhetoric. And that's where you find this kind of convergence in the fight against Nazism. In the Soviet Union itself the war was the Great Patriotic War. Outside of the USSR, within the communist movement, this war would be presented as the Great Victory of Communism over Fascism. Very different presentation of the same war, by the same regime. One was for domestic consumption—Russian and other Soviet consumption—and the other was for non-Soviet foreign consumption. And that's it.

P.S.

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