

Ukraine Solidarity: A debate between Jean Vogel and Gilbert Achcar

Monday 5 December 2022, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [VOGEL Jean](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2022).

On December 2, 2022, we published Jean Vogel's text entitled "The strange change of position of Gilbert Achcar". We received a text from Gilbert Achcar: "A brief response about my puported 'change of position'," and from Jean Vogel: "A sober response to Gilbert Achcar". We are republishing this page with all three contributions, and a final note from the ESSF editors.

Contents

- [The strange change of position](#)
- [A brief response about my \(...\)](#)
- [Sober response to Gilbert \(...\)](#)
- [Final note from the editors of](#)

The strange change of position of Gilbert Achcar

A few days after the Russian invasion, Gilbert Achcar published a « Memorandum on a Radical Anti-Imperialist Position regarding the War in Ukraine » [1] which made a positive contribution to clarifying ideas on the left in the emerging movement of solidarity with the Ukraine resistance. In particular, it highlighted the following points that distinguish this movement from a purely pacifist opposition to Russian aggression:

- 1. It is not enough to call for Russia to stop its attacks and to call for "an immediate ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table"... We should demand not only the cessation of the aggression but also the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.*
- 2. The demand of Russian withdrawal applies to every inch of Ukraine's territory - including the territory invaded by Russia in 2014.*
- 3. We are in favour of the delivery of defensive weapons to the victims of aggression with no strings attached - in this case to the Ukrainian state fighting the Russian invasion of its territory. To give those who are fighting a just war the means to fight against a much more powerful aggressor is an elementary internationalist duty. Blank opposition to such deliveries is contradictory with basic solidarity with the victims.*

In a response to a critique by Stathis Kouvelakis, Gilbert Achcar supported this point: « *It is illusory to hope for a draw in the event of an invasion of one country by another. A ceasefire with an unconditional withdrawal of the invader to the borders before 24 February would be a victory for Ukraine. A ceasefire with the occupation of a large part of Ukrainian territory would be a victory for Russia. An outcome somewhere in between would be a mixed success for Moscow* ». And in an

intervention published in April [2], he underlined the necessary demarcation with the “pacifism”-alibi of some: « *The attitude consisting in expressing sorrow for the Ukrainians and claiming to care for their fate by supporting negotiations and “peace” in the abstract (which peace?) is rightly seen as hypocritical by Ukrainian socialists... It doesn't take much expertise in war history to understand that negotiations depend on the balance of forces achieved on the ground. The Chinese and Vietnamese have a long experience in this respect, summarized by the famous Maoist dictum: “Da Da Tan Tan” (Fight, fight, talk, talk) ».*

The 11-point platform (which Gilbert Achcar co-signed) adopted by the European Solidarity Network with Ukraine was fully in line with this spirit.

On 30 November, Gilbert Achcar published another memorandum « For a democratic antiwar position on the invasion of Ukraine » [3]. The metamorphosis from « radical anti-imperialist position » to « democratic antiwar position » is not just textual. As is often the case, the semantic change is an indication of a political change. This is already visible in the premises of this text, which addresses an « antiwar movement » that would have developed following the invasion of Ukraine, a movement with « very contrasting positions » but which all have in common « to claim to be for peace ». In fact, this movement covers a wide spectrum, ranging from advocates of absolute pacifism, supporters of an unconditional ceasefire and opponents of arms supplies to Ukraine, to activists for active solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance, such as members of the European Network. However, in an article published in June, Gilbert Achcar rightly noted: « *The anti-imperialist antiwar left around the world has found itself deeply divided over the war in Ukraine along rather unusual political lines... At the time of Vietnam, both wings of the antiwar movement were in full solidarity with the Vietnamese. They both supported the right of the Vietnamese to acquire arms for their defence. Their disagreement was tactical... Today, on the other hand, those who advocate “peace” while opposing the right of Ukrainians to acquire weapons for their defence are opposing this peace to combat. In other words, they want Ukraine to surrender, because what kind of “peace” could we have had if Ukrainians had not been armed and therefore could not have defended their country* » ? This deep divide is not tactical, it is about the basic position in this conflict and about principles (right to self-determination, internationalism or campism). It is futile to try to bridge it by enlisting all the protagonists under the banner of a common abstract aspiration for 'peace'.

From now on, Gilbert Achcar rejects both the position of the real or simulated pacifists, who advocate an unconditional ceasefire, and that of the « antiwarists » who are « setting the bar for peace too high » by making the withdrawal of troops from all parts of internationally recognised Ukrainian territory a necessary condition. The latter position, he says, risks being confused with that of the « ultra-nationalist Ukrainian hardliners ». And so it is the same position that Gilbert Achcar advocated in his February memorandum, which he now describes as a « hard line ».

Instead of these two « deviations », an authentic « anti-imperialist democratic antiwar position » (nice synthesis!) should consist in claiming :

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.*

Gilbert Achcar does not only propose his position to the « antiwar movement ». He also believes that « the Ukrainian left should also determine its position on the terms for ending the war » and thereby distance itself from that of its own government.

In any case, this position lacks clarity and remains ambiguous. Do the conditions for a ceasefire include all three points or only the first ? And if so, should the withdrawal of Russian troops take effect immediately or be linked to the progress of further negotiations ? Does point 2 imply as a precondition the annulment of the annexation to the Russian Federation of the four Ukrainian oblasts of Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk and Zaporija by 30 September 2022 or does it depend on the outcome of the referenda proposed in point 3 ? Wouldn't "negotiations under the aegis of the UN" mean under the aegis of the UN Security Council, which amounts to subordinating the fate of Ukraine to negotiations between the great powers ?

The second flaw of this proposal is even more serious. Gilbert Achcar himself recognises that the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territories conquered this year « is a very difficult objective to achieve » or that it « supposes a major amplification of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, with quantitatively and qualitatively increased support from NATO countries ». The path to peace that he proposes should therefore follow the very path of the hardliners to which he wanted to turn his back. Far from being a way out, it is rather a dead end.

Gilbert Achcar gets out of it, as in bad theatre, by the intervention of a *deus ex machina* : we must call on China! This is a much quicker solution and one that is « at much less human and material cost » than war ! Doesn't this China, which claims to respect the principles of international law and which « has a decisive influence on Moscow's position », have all the keys to a happy solution to the conflict ? And since the Ukrainians have not yet thought of this, let the antiwar movement do it for them and « should exert pressure on China to do » in the sense of the Achcar proposal ! Of course, in this world where you get nothing for nothing, the antiwar movement will also have to pay China back, « while criticizing belligerent attitudes towards Beijing » of Washington and London.

Reading this astonishing conclusion to his memorandum, one thinks that perhaps we should first remind Gilbert Achcar that the Beijing government's commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states has, in this case, remained exclusively generic, that it has never publicly expressed the slightest condemnation or criticism of Russian aggression and that it has imperturbably attributed exclusive responsibility for this war to the United States alone. Let us also remind him that China is a great power whose leader Xi Jinping has clearly stated that it aims to achieve global dominance over the next thirty years. Neither China's rivalry with the United States nor its « unlimited » alliance with Russia is driven by concern for international law, but by the logic of its interests in a context of imperialist confrontation. The distancing, disavowals or pressures that China may show towards Putin are above all the product of his military and political failures. All other considerations aside, it has no desire to be chained to a sinking ship.

The practicality of his conclusion is laughable, not to say ridiculous. The « antiwar movement » should put pressure on China to « join in this effort » ! It is not entirely clear whether Gilbert Achcar imagines this pressure in the form of demonstrations denouncing Chinese passivity, a bit like what happened in relation to the non-intervention policy of France and Great Britain during the Spanish Civil War, or whether it is a proposal of alliance made to China by the « antiwar movement », which would also commit itself to defending its cause against the « belligerent attitudes » of Washington and London. Perhaps is Gilbert Achcar dreaming of overcoming the deep rift that the war in Ukraine has caused in the radical left by bringing it together under the protective umbrella of Beijing ?

For my part, I continue to believe that solidarity with Ukraine must continue to follow the two simple lines of action adopted from the outset :

- the decisive factor is the resistance - armed and unarmed - of the Ukrainian people. It was this resistance that first of all blocked the Russian invasion and then inflicted the first defeats and started to push it back.

- The Ukrainian resistance and the solidarity movement with it must preserve at all costs their political independence from all powers, whether enemy, neutral or ally. In particular, the modalities and conduct of negotiations and the terms of a peace agreement must remain in Ukrainian hands and not be left to the benevolence of the great powers.

1 December 2022

Jean Vogel

A brief response about my purported “change of position”

Gilbert Achcar

Jean Vogel has written a critique of my recent short text more than three times longer than the text itself. He sees changes in position where there are none and practices a distorting reading of what he criticizes, to the point of completely inventing a quotation.

I wouldn't normally respond to this sort of critique, but as my name appears in the headline with the accusation of having made a “strange change of position” and since it is therefore likely to be found by anyone who might seek to inquire about my positions online, I find myself compelled to establish briefly that his assertion is erroneous.

Jean Vogel begins with a comment on the difference between the title of my February 27 Memorandum “on the radical anti-imperialist position” regarding the war in Ukraine and that of my November 30 text “for a democratic antiwar position.” He sees it as a “semantic change” that is, according to him, an “indication of a political change” — a sentence that he repeats later on. It did not occur to him that the titles correspond to the different themes treated: the general positioning on the war at the very beginning of it, in the first case; the position with regard to the demand for “peace” brandished since then by opposing sections of the antiwar movement and concrete discussion of the conditions for a just peaceful settlement, in the second. Moreover, the author himself quotes the phrase “democratic anti-imperialist antiwar position” used twice in my latest text. Unless one thinks that “radical” anti-imperialism cannot be “democratic,” there is no “political change” except in my critic's understanding.

He then asserts that my new text contradicts my Memorandum. To this end, he produces truncated quotations from the latter, without even indicating by means of ellipses that they have been truncated. However, it suffices to read the quoted passages in their entirety to see that my position has not changed.

February Memorandum:

“It is not enough to call for Russia to stop its attacks and to call for ‘an immediate ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table.’ We did not use such UN-like language when the United States invaded Iraq but demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the aggressors, as we

have done in every instance of invasion of one country by another. Likewise, we should demand not only the cessation of the aggression but also the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.”

Text of 11/30: “Ceasefire with withdrawal of Russian troops to their positions of February 23, 2022.” February Memorandum: “The demand of Russian withdrawal applies to every inch of Ukraine’s territory – including the territory invaded by Russia in 2014. When there is a dispute on the belonging of any territory anywhere in the world – such as Crimea or provinces in Eastern Ukraine, in this instance – we never accept that it be solved by naked force and the law of might, but always only through the free exercise by the people concerned of their right to democratic self-determination.”

Text of 11/30: “Reaffirmation of the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.” and “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 Donbass and in Crimea, and organization by the UN of free and democratic referendums including the vote of refugees and displaced persons from these territories.”

The readers will thus be able to judge how real is my semantic-political “strange change of position.” I hope too that they can appreciate the difference between conditions for a ceasefire, opening the way to negotiations, and conditions for a lasting peace. I will not discuss the author’s comments on my above three points, as I believe that questions such as “Do the conditions for a ceasefire include all three points or only the first? And if so, should the withdrawal of Russian troops take effect immediately or be linked to the progress of further negotiations?” border on the ridiculous.

“Ridiculous” is what the author accuses me of by attributing to me the idea that “The ‘antiwar movement’ should put pressure on China to ‘join in this effort!’” (in “its” effort in the French original). This would indeed have been a ridiculous, and even grotesque, idea, except that I did not write this phrase, and that what the author presents between quote marks as if it were a quotation is only an invention on his part, from a standpoint for which putting “pressure on China” means cozying up to the Chinese government! He then lectures me about the latter, believing to have detected in me the pro-Beijing enthusiasm that once animated him. I reassure him right away: I have no sympathy at all for Xi Jinping, but that does not prevent me from denouncing the bellicose attitude of Washington and London towards China. The political tradition to which I belong never confused opposition to Washington’s bellicose attitude toward the Soviet Union with support for the Stalinist bureaucracy.

4 December 2022

Gilbert Achcar

Sober response to Gilbert Achcar

Jean Vogel

Let’s start with pettiness. Gilbert Achcar seems to reproach me for having written a critique three times as long as his memorandum. He exaggerates a little, but the length of my text is due to the

fact that, out of intellectual scruples, I quoted at length from no less than five different articles that he had published. Without his quotations, my text is hardly longer than his.

Much more seriously, he accuses me twice of “inventing a quotation”. Obviously he can’t read what he himself has written.

Here is the sentence he is accusing: The “antiwar movement” should put pressure on China to “join in this effort”!

And this is what he wrote: “This objective could be achieved much more quickly and at much less human and material cost if China, the only state with a decisive influence on Moscow’s position, joined in this effort... The antiwar movement should exert pressure on China to do so...”

Gilbert Achcar also criticised me for not quoting his February memorandum in extenso. Indeed, I have only quoted the three points that are relevant to his current change of position. The omitted passages relate to other things (direct military intervention by NATO, sanctions, the reception of refugees) and are not relevant to the present discussion.

Let’s get to the heart of the matter. Gilbert Achcar takes offence at the fact that I dared to talk about his “change of position” but he does not provide any evidence to refute my claim.

What does this change of position consist of ?

1. Following the invasion of 24 February, Gilbert Achcar, with his memorandum and other texts, made a positive contribution to the constitution of a solidarity movement with Ukraine or, more precisely, of its left wing. From now on, Gilbert Achcar evokes and addresses an “anti-war movement”, with “very contrasting positions”, which “had in common that they all claim to be for peace”. And in his reply to me, he speaks of “opposing sides of the anti-war movement”. For my part, I affirm that there is not today, nor can there be, anything like an “anti-war movement”, however contrasted it might be. The activists who are trying to establish links of concrete solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance, for example by organising trade union convoys, and those who are demonstrating in Madrid on the occasion of the anti-NATO counter-summit, where Ukrainian socialists are being denied the floor, are not part of a common so-called “anti-war movement”. Gilbert Achcar has not moved, as he claims, from a “general position on the war” to a “concrete discussion of the conditions for a just peaceful settlement”, no, he has changed the addressee.

2. Gilbert Achcar claims that there is no substantive difference between his February memorandum and his current text and that “it is enough to read the passages quoted in their entirety to see that I have not changed my position”. I maintain that this is not true. For example, his memorandum said: “The demand for Russian withdrawal applies to every inch of Ukrainian territory - including the territory invaded by Russia in 2014”, whereas in the 30 November text this same demand is presented as specific to those who are “setting the bar for peace too high”: “peace is defined as having as a necessary condition the withdrawal of Russian troops from all parts of internationally recognized Ukrainian territory, which include not only the entire Donbas, but also Crimea annexed in 2014”. Here we are talking about the conditions for peace, not the conditions for a ceasefire. But Gilbert Achcar prefers to find it “border on the ridiculous” that I asked him about the need to differentiate between the two.

3. It never occurred to me to accuse Gilbert Achcar of sympathy for Xi Jinping, but I did wonder how he was going to put him under “pressure”: by demonstrations in front of Chinese embassies, by an offer of alliance from the anti-war movement based on his three points, or otherwise. Until he explains the method, I find it difficult to take him seriously on this point. The fact remains that,

serious or not, this invocation of the Chinese card also reflects a change of position. In June Gilbert Achcar posed a very simple alternative : “[Negotiations] will only lead to a peace treaty under one of two conditions. The first would be that Ukraine cannot continue to fight and must capitulate and accept Moscow’s diktat... The other condition would be that Russia is no longer able to continue fighting, either for military reasons because of the moral exhaustion of its troops, or for economic reasons because of the widespread discontent of the Russian population... True internationalists, anti-war and anti-imperialist activists can only wholeheartedly hope for the second scenario”. Why not recognise that the idea of resorting to a Chinese card “at much less human and material cost” than a prolonged war of resistance expresses a change of position?

5 December 2022

Jean Vogel

Final note from the editors of ESSF

This exchange of articles has clarified some points of disagreement between the two comrades regarding the crucial question of how to secure a just and stable peace for the people of Ukraine. Both authors support the armed and unarmed resistance of Ukrainians against Russian imperialist aggression. Unfortunately, this exchange has been characterised by misinterpretation and by personal attacks, which inevitably distract us from the fundamental issues.

We find Gilbert Achcar’s formulation of the role of China not sufficiently clear and not fully convincing. At the same time, in the original French version (but not the English version on this site), Jean Vogel incorrectly cites Achcar as inviting the anti-war movement to put pressure on China to “join with it” in the struggle for a just and stable peace. Rather, Achcar talks about pressuring China to act responsibly, by putting pressure on its Russian ally.

We consider this particular exchange closed, but continue to welcome constructive contributions on the underlying issues relating to this conflict.

For ESSF

Adam Novak and **Pierre Rousset**

11 December 2022

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 61309), [A memorandum on the radical anti-imperialist position regarding the war in Ukraine](#).

[2] <https://newpol.org/coherence-and-incoherence-about-the-war-in-ukraine/>

[3] ESSF (article 64887), [For a democratic antiwar position on the invasion of Ukraine](#).