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Geopolitics

# **“The world situation is that of a new cold war”**

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**Gilbert Achcar was interviewed by Thierry Labica of France’s New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) on the occasion of the publication of his new book *The New Cold War: The United States, Russia, and China from Kosovo to Ukraine*, Saqi Books in Britain, and soon Haymarket in the USA. [1]**

**Thierry Labica: A first question concerns the way in which you characterize the international situation for which you give a second life to the term “Cold War”. The Cold War is supposed to have ended around 1990. So where should we place and how should we characterize this renewal?**

**Gilbert Achcar:** The book that I am publishing this year is partly based on the one I published in French in 1999, under the same title. The subtitle has changed, of course, but the main title (*The New Cold War*) remains the same. The 1999 book was subtitled “The World After Kosovo” and the one that is coming out now is subtitled “The United States, Russia and China, from Kosovo to Ukraine”. The answer to this question lies in the interval between these two books. There has been a transition to a new Cold War in the 1990s. The old one ended with the end of the Soviet Union. It had determined a certain type of international relations and had seen, in its last decades, a China-US alliance against the USSR, since Washington’s turnabout on China under Nixon and Kissinger. The collapse of the USSR changed many things, with the emergence of a very weakened post-Soviet Russia and the possibility of a new relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

The 1990s were a period of transition. Like every great historical watershed, it bore several possibilities, all of which, however, depended on a central decision, that of the country that was aware of going through a “unipolar moment”, according to the expression of the time. It was a very good expression indeed, as it signalled both the supremacy of the United States and a transitional historical moment (not the “end of history”!). During the 1990s, it was the Clinton administration that found itself confronted with this post-Cold War world, and the choices it had to make were not self-evident. There were real debates and disagreements within the American establishment on what to do about Russia and, in particular, what to do with NATO, the thorniest problem in this context.

This administration came to choose not only to maintain NATO, despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, but also to mutate the Alliance into an interventionist organisation (the Balkans, Afghanistan, etc.), as well as, and above all, to enlarge it eastward, encroaching on what used to be the Soviet sphere of domination, and even on republics of the former Soviet Union: the Baltic States initially, with a view to also include Ukraine and Georgia. These choices considerably aggravated the relations with Russia. They determined the nationalist frustration which, combined with the Weimar-like economic situation that Russia experienced in the 1990s, produced Vladimir Putin. After being co-opted by Yeltsin in 1999, Putin became president in 2000. He represents the culmination of this transitional phase during which the United States alienated Russia and, at the same time, China. For it was the same Clinton administration that embarked on arm wrestling with China, leading to the most severe tension with Beijing since the 1950s. This is how these two countries, Russia and China, were naturally pushed to collaborate, not least through Russia’s massive sale of arms, including sophisticated weapons, to China.

Ingredients were thus put in place which, along with NATO’s Kosovo war bypassing the UN and waged despite opposition from both Beijing and Moscow, tipped the world situation into a new Cold War.

**There was indeed a lot of talk about a new Cold War in recent years, more specifically between the United States and China. One thinks of the recent episode of tensions around Taiwan, of the trade war a little earlier during Trump’s term, and even before that, of Obama’s policy with its “pivot to Asia” and the display of**

**hostility to new Chinese ambitions in the whole South Asian region and beyond. Since the turning point in the 1990s that you mentioned, it seems that there were further inflections in US attitude towards China, leading to a specific US-China Cold War. Is this the case, in your opinion, and if so, how do you situate this particular development?**

The Taiwan affair bounced back in the 1990s. When the United States under Nixon recognized the People's Republic of China, it confirmed its adherence to the “One China policy”, which was also upheld by the Guomindang government in Taiwan. Thus, Washington's recognition of Beijing was accompanied by Taiwan's withdrawal from the United Nations, with American consent. The United States maintained relations with Taiwan without major complications as long as the Guomindang was ruling the island. Things changed with the rise to power of the Taiwanese independence movement, which coincided with China's economic take-off in the 1990s. It was no longer the weak China of the 1970s or even 1980s. The United States began to see China more and more as potential a principal rival after the demise of the Soviet Union and the exhaustion of Russia. It sees, or rather wants to see, China's economic rise as a growing danger because it is a way for the United States to justify maintaining under its tutelage its European and Japanese allies, and other Asian allies including South Korea. In the 1990s, Washington started presenting Russia and China as risks to the Western system, hence pushing these two countries to collaborate. This is how the conditions for a new Cold War were created.

The key moment here, a bit like 1949 for the first Cold War, is the Kosovo war, which marks a shift. Until then, the prevailing discourse was still that of the “new world order” promised by Bush senior – a “new world order” that would be based on the rules of international law. But here was the United States embarking (this time with NATO, which made matters worse) on a war in Kosovo, bypassing the Security Council and causing considerable irritation and concern to both the Russians and the Chinese.

This changeover thus inaugurates a Cold War situation in the sense that the United States maintained very clearly a very high level of military spending (in accordance with the main characteristic of the Cold War, which was the high level of US military spending, contrasting enormously with what had been the norm prior to the Second World War). In the face of this, Russia decided to emphasize its military technology, the only industrial sector bequeathed by the Soviet Union that was still performant. China, on the other hand, gradually embarked on expanding its arms program. It knew that it first needed to build itself economically. It therefore adopted a rather conciliatory attitude for many years, firm but not aggressive, which Beijing called “peaceful development”. China needed US and Western investments, while building up its military strength without ostentation. As for Russia, thanks to the rise in oil prices, it was able to invest massively in its military sector, which, moreover, constituted its main export industry of sophisticated manufactured products.

After the attacks of 11 September 2001, faced with the revengeful offensive led by the United States and supported by a public opinion which had been shocked, the two countries – China and Russia – took a back seat to Washington. They weathered the storm. But things soon changed with the occupation of Iraq in 2003 – the second key moment in the deterioration of international relations. This was the second military operation carried out by the United States in violation of international law and bypassing the Security Council, because of opposition from Moscow and Beijing, but also, in this case, from Paris and Berlin.

Russia willy-nilly swallowed the bitter pill of the Baltic States' accession to NATO in 2004, but designated Georgia and Ukraine as a red line. It was when the George W. Bush administration showed its determination to integrate Georgia and Ukraine that things started to get completely out of hand. The Russian military incursions into Georgia in 2008, and then into Ukraine in 2014, drew a straight line leading to the current situation.

**These explanations are a good opportunity to hear your opinion on a recurring question today: there is now a sharp debate about the characterization of China, which according to some, would have also become a**

**fully-fledged imperialist power. What do you think about this?**

It seems to me quite clearly that the characterization of the Chinese system as bureaucratic capitalism makes sense. On the other hand, I am more cautious about characterizing China as “imperialist”. I believe that it is a much more complex issue that requires a refined analysis of the nature of China’s investments abroad and their purpose. It is far from certain that China derives major benefits from what it undertakes abroad, particularly with the Belt and Road initiative. This program has so far cost China much more than it has earned. I am therefore more reserved about the characterization of China as “imperialist”, which would also imply treating its economic relations with Africa, for example, in the same way as one would treat Africa’s economic relations with France or the United States. I’m not sure that this is correct, and that if a revolutionary government were to emerge in Africa, it would have to adopt the same attitude towards all these powers.

So, I have reservations about that for the moment. There is a definite difference between characterizing a country as capitalist and characterizing it as imperialist, which would imply, according to the classical definition, that the Chinese state is dominated by big capital and is engaged in the global battle for the appropriation of the world. But it seems to me that Chinese bureaucratic capitalism does not fit such a description. It is a specific situation where a bureaucracy, originally of Stalinist type, dominates both the state and the economy. The mainspring of power lies in this singular bureaucratic assemblage. Moreover, China is a state that is emerging from the Global South, still far behind the Western countries in terms of GDP per capita. For these various reasons, putting it in the category of imperialist countries seems to me much more questionable.

I have no hesitation in calling Russia imperialist, on the other hand. Putin’s regime has evolved in a direction that can even be described as neo-fascist, in the sense that it displays some of fascism’s ideological and political features, combined with a semblance of democracy and periodic sanction by universal suffrage characteristic of today’s neo-fascism. The Russian state is dominated by large monopolistic groups such as Gazprom, in which the border between private and public is very porous, and whose relationship with the rest of the world is clearly imperialist, a relationship of exploitation and domination. This public-private porosity is characteristic of Russian capitalism today; we can even see it at work at the military level with the parastatal army known as the Wagner Group.

**After a year of the Russian invasion and carnage in Ukraine, how do you see the understanding of the conflict evolving (or not) in various sectors of the left, in light of the deep disagreements and important differences of appreciation that emerged in the early days of the war?**

As far as the debate on the left is concerned, it continues a series of debates that unfolded since the turn of the century, starting with the invasion of Iraq where things were relatively simpler. There were then wars like the intervention in Libya, or the interventions in Syria, in which the “good guys” and the “bad guys” were not necessarily as clear-cut as before. In the invasion of Iraq, the “bad guys” of the Cold War (the United States and Britain, in particular) were still involved, but we were already facing a tyrannical and criminal rule, that of Saddam Hussein. The following cases were even more complicated. This has been quite disturbing for those who were used to knee-jerk anti-Western and especially anti-US reaction. Hence a clear disarray among the radical left. But it is still very difficult for someone on the left to defend Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. To be sure, there are people who do so or even support Putin while claiming to be of the left, but these are sinister caricatures who no longer even have the excuse of defending an anticapitalist tyranny, since Putin’s Russia, unlike Stalin’s, is dominated by a type of capitalism that is even wilder and more regressive than Western countries’ capitalism. The question that has been the subject of most debate on the left is whether to oppose the arming of Ukraine. On this question, there is absolute incoherence on the part of those who say that the invasion of Ukraine is reprehensible and condemn it, demanding that Russia withdraw its troops, while opposing the arming of Ukraine! If one believes that Ukraine has been attacked by a neighbour who is, moreover, a much stronger imperialist state, it means that Ukraine’s condition is that of the oppressed who has the right to defend itself and to whom we owe our support. If this oppressed nation has the right to self-defence, this implies that it has the right to arm itself, and to arm itself from wherever it can get weapons. It is a matter of

elementary consistency.

For all that, one must not fall into adopting the discourse that presents the current war as that of “democracies” against “authoritarian” countries. I have just characterized Putin’s regime as neo-fascist, but this is no reason to support, against Russia, the rival imperialist powers that the United States and NATO are. They are using the situation created by Putin for their own interests, which have absolutely nothing to do with the “defence of democracy”. This is a big hypocrisy. It is easy to recognize the antidemocratic governments with which Washington, London, Paris, or Berlin get along very well.

In the end, there is a new Cold War context of military investments and strategies that justify the use of this expression. But what about the ideological discourses and justifications, in the rather banal instrumental and propagandist sense? One immediately thinks of the uses of the “war against terrorism” (without, of course, disputing that terrorism can indeed exist), of the question of Islamophobia, but also of a certain discourse on “China” with a recent and, to say the least, lazy equation between Russia-Ukraine and continental China-Taiwan, as if all these “Orientals” were destined to act in the same way, whereas the differences in history, situations and stakes are considerable. Even if a conflict were to arise between China and Taiwan, it could not be a simple repetition of the scenario of the Russian invasion of Ukraine...

This is another reason for reservations about the characterization of China as imperialist, which induces a series of parallels of this type that can be confusing. The historical and legal context of China’s relationship with Taiwan is quite different from that of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine. This does not mean that China would be within its rights to invade the island, of course, but that this issue should be handled with much more caution and tact by the United States, whose attitude is increasingly provocative, acting more like a pyromaniac than like a firefighter. Unfortunately, Washington’s partners in NATO and other military alliances are being drawn into this confrontation. Europe, in particular, is showing tail-endism and a lack of real sovereignty in the face of the United States, exacerbated since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For Washington, in the end, as one could have said about Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, if Vladimir Putin did not exist, they would have had to invent him. He is one of Washington’s useful enemies, those who serve its strategy of world domination.

**We live in a moment where many liberal democracies are drifting towards what is called authoritarian liberalism, or towards the far right or the extreme right. This evolution occurs in a climate marked by propagandistic outbreaks against “wokeism”, feminism, antiracism, etc., which are in fact an extremely aggressive attack against what a good part of the current left represents. I wonder what you would identify as the New Cold War’s rhetoric and strategies. We know “anti-terrorism”, “Chinese threat”, Islamophobic panics. But would you include the fight against “wokeism”, which is genuinely epidemic now, in the framework of the discourse of the New Cold War, in the same way as the demonization of communism or socialism during the first Cold War? Or is it something else again?**

I rather believe that this question of “wokeism” is the result of a malaise within capitalism itself, within bourgeois domination. You don’t need to belong to the radical left to defend transgender people, to be feminist or antiracist. Between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, for example, there is after all still a great distance on the ideological level. We are rather witnessing the development of a discourse that is part of the global far-right surge, a surge that has amplified and accelerated since the Great Recession of 2007-2009.

The origin of this goes back to the neoliberal turn, which led to a destabilization of social relations on a global scale that translated, at first, into a rise in fundamentalism in all religions, and certainly not in Islam alone, a rise in identity-based retrenchments, racism, xenophobia, and the far right. All this went along with the neoliberal mutation. And then there was a strong trigger with the crisis of 2008, which precipitated things and pushed these shifts even further to the right throughout the world. Against this backdrop of disintegration of progressive ideologies, of

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identity-based tensions caused by neoliberal social destabilization, a terrain was created that allowed far-right forces to rise. It is these forces above all that propagate discourses of a type that is xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, anti-LGBTQ, etc. As usual, the so-called “centrist” right is adopting part of this reactionary discourse, believing that it can thus slow down its own decline in the face of social radicalization. This is why I believe that this is an ideological crisis at the very heart of capitalist domination.

It is not primarily a weapon against the left like yesteryear’s Cold War discourse. This is primarily because the left, unfortunately, is too weak at the global level to constitute the main danger facing capitalism. The rise of fascism in the 1930s occurred against the background of the existence of the Soviet Union and of a communist movement that was much stronger than today’s radical left. Similarly, the existence of the USSR offering a counterweight to the United States, along with a strong communist movement and a surge of left-wing anticolonial movements in the decades following World War II, created a situation very different from what there is today. The current upsurge of the far right is not, therefore, a roadblock to communism (or anything that might resemble it) as it was in the 1930s, and capital is not looking for an antileft discourse to replace the Cold War one. Rather, it is primarily a quarrel within capitalism itself against a background of crisis. We are obviously concerned as leftists because they are mortal enemies for us. But we are in another historical configuration. That said, we can note that the so-called centrist right espouses whole parts of the far right’s discourse all the more willingly that the left is stronger in a particular country, as is the case in France today.

*Translated from French by Fred Leplat for [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#).*

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[1] The New Cold War: The US, Russia and China from Kosovo to Ukraine by Gilbert Achcar, [Saqi Books](#), London, 2023