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War and peace

In support of “synchronized global disarmament”

- Features -

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At a time when everything is spiralling out of control in the East, when alliances as evil as the Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin duo are being forged, and when our leaders are advocating rearmament, we wanted to take some time to think about it. With Gilbert Achcar, a specialist in international relations and professor at the University of London, we discussed ways of supporting Ukraine while rejecting a generalized war.[Gaëlle Desnos-CQFD]

The United States, under President Trump, is threatening to withdraw from the Old Continent. Russia has no shortage of imperialist ambitions. The war in Ukraine has been going on for over three years. And Europeans are under pressure. How do you analyse the situation?

Indeed, it's a major upheaval. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had initially given NATO a new lease of life. But this revival can now be interpreted as the swan song of an organization that has been in decline for a decade. It does, however, cruelly underline dependence on the United States in this conflict. And this concerns Europeans and Ukrainians alike.

On Russia's side, for the past three years, this immense country with its considerable military resources inherited from the Soviet Union - the only area where the USSR really rivalled the West - has still not managed to seize all the territories annexed in Ukraine. This is not a defeat, as Russian troops continue to advance at a snail's pace, but it is clearly not a victory.

As for the Russian threat to Europe, let's just remember that the European Union (EU) has more than three times the population, more than ten times the economy and three times the military spending (including the UK) - despite the fact that Russia is directly engaged in a large-scale war, and therefore at full capacity, unlike Europe. Under these conditions, it would be absurd to seriously consider a Russian invasion of Europe.

And yet, according to Emmanuel Macron, there is an “existential Russian threat”.

Emmanuel Macron's idea is more a political manoeuvre aimed at positioning France as the strategic leader and exclusive protector of Europe. This positioning flatters his presidential role while directly benefiting the French military industry. But this rhetoric is dangerous, as it brings us closer to precisely the perils it claims to prevent.

But it's true that Putin's authoritarian Russia is multiplying its interference: cyber-attacks, attempts to influence the elections of European states... And on the other side of Europe, the Baltic states fear for their borders.

Moscow is waging psychological warfare and a disinformation campaign. But the best option would be a symmetric riposte: a campaign to set the record straight, aimed at the Russian population. As an imperialist power, Russia certainly has ambitions for the Baltic states. But Putin got his fingers burnt in Ukraine. Even in the event of US disengagement, he knows that he does not have sufficient means to confront Europe on the ground.

Another argument put forward to justify European rearmament is that it would reduce our dependence on the United States.

That's true. And when you put it that way, it sounds positive. All the more so as the US administration is taking an increasingly worrying political turn, multiplying its interference by openly supporting Europe's far right.

But the argument is hypocritical. Firstly, because those who talk most about relocating production to Europe are the countries that already have an advanced arms industry, like France. For them, this is a godsend! Secondly, the investments announced will not replace US weapons with European equipment. In reality, it takes more than a snap of the fingers to do without US components. These funds will therefore be used primarily to increase production!

Finally, the term “rearmament” is itself problematic. It falsely suggests that Europe is disarmed, which is far from the case: each country already spends an average of 2% of its GDP on defence - Poland and the Baltic States quite more.

A truly progressive approach would be to work towards synchronized global disarmament, as advocated by some fifty Nobel Prize winners in the natural sciences [\[1\]](#), in order to invest in the fight against global warming and poverty.

Is Europe crossing a red line that could lead to a more direct confrontation with Russia?

Rhetorical escalation and the arms race increase tensions and the risk of incidents at one border or another. A missile trajectory error or an accidental airspace violation could quickly escalate.

But, more than an invasion, it's the possibility of a nuclear confrontation that worries me. Faced with his difficulties in Ukraine, Putin has already threatened several times to use his nuclear arsenal. He knows that his country is the world's leading nuclear power. On the other hand, Europe's nuclear power is limited to the arsenals of France and Great Britain. No match for him. Putin could use tactical nuclear weapons (with more limited impact), believing that none of his adversaries would dare a strategic riposte (capable of destroying huge areas). When it comes to nuclear deterrence, it's Russia that does the deterring!

You have called for a referendum in the annexed Ukrainian territories so that the people can decide their own destiny. Can you tell us more?

International law prohibits the acquisition of territory by force, which Russia nevertheless did in Crimea in 2014 and in eastern Ukraine in 2022. But on the ground, the situation is complex. In these regions, Russian speakers and Russians sometimes have a stronger sense of belonging to Russia than to Ukraine. In Crimea, for example, there was no significant popular resistance to the entry of Russian forces. To avoid further bloodshed, I am therefore in favour of a referendum on self-determination, organized under the aegis of the United Nations, with guarantees and based on the electoral register of the populations present before the invasion.

In concrete terms, Russian troops would have to withdraw to their barracks for the duration of the process, to be replaced by UN troops. It would be unrealistic to demand their prior return to the borders prior to 2022 or 2014: such a scenario would be unacceptable to Russia and would prevent a long-term political settlement of the conflict. Finally, the deployment of international observers would guarantee the transparency of the ballot. In my view, this is the only way to avoid the rancour that can lead to long-term irredentism. This approach is democratic and complies with international law.

How can we maintain a critical stance towards NATO while at the same time showing active solidarity with Ukrainian victims of the bombardments?

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I think the first step is to recognize and support the legitimacy of the Ukrainians in defending their country. Recognize and support their right to arm themselves. Not oppose the delivery of defensive weapons. And I stress the word “defensive”: this means all “anti” weapons - anti-missile, anti-tank, anti-aircraft. Finally, to engage in international pressure for the organization of a referendum on self-determination for the regions of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

I would add that it’s time to stop ignoring the elephant in the room: China. China was quick to express its support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. But Washington preferred to ignore this outstretched hand and immediately accuse China of being in league with Russia. Today, negotiations are taking place in Saudi Arabia between Russia, the United States and Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky is isolated, under pressure to accept far worse peace terms than those I have mentioned. But China, as a major importer of hydrocarbons, has no interest in seeing this conflict prolonged, and could be a major ally in encouraging the players to return to the UN table.

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Translated from [CQFD](#).

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[1] See the appeal of the campaign [Global Peace Dividend](#) on the site demilitarize.org.