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Fascism

“For the Neofascists, the Law of the Jungle is the Only One That Makes Sense”

- Features -

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Where did the “global neofascist axis” come from, and where is it going? What destabilizing effects might Russia’s war in Ukraine have? Ilya Budraitskis and Gilbert Achcar discuss the current conjuncture

Ilya Budraitskis: With the beginning of Trump's second term, the world is experiencing a tremendous geopolitical shift, and I would like to start discussing it with the question of NATO's future. Today, it is obvious that the alliance is in a situation of strategic and ideological crisis. The United States, as the key country of the bloc, is openly building separate relations with Russia, which used to be seen as NATO's main opponent, while Europe is talking about rearmament and ensuring its own security in some new format. What are the preconditions of the current NATO crisis? Could it end in the actual disintegration of the bloc, and what could replace it?

Gilbert Achcar: Let us first remember that NATO was already in crisis before the present US administration. Already during Trump's previous term, French President Emmanuel Macron famously described NATO as “brain dead.” It was so indeed, because Trump has never hidden his contempt for European liberal governments and the whole so-called liberal, rules-based international order, which originated in the Atlantic alliance of World War II.

NATO was obviously revitalized by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. It gave NATO a renewed sense of purpose, at a time when a very Atlanticist president [was back in the White House] — I mean Joe Biden, of course. All the NATO folks were quite happy about the renewed relevance of their organisation. Except that, in retrospect, this appears as a swan song — the final burst of energy of the organisation before it resumes its agony.

We are in the midst of it today. As you mentioned, there is obviously a clear divorce between both sides of the Atlantic, or at least between the United States and the rest of NATO. This divorce is not geographical; it is political and ideological, in the sense that Canada belongs to the liberal cohort, whereas Orbán's Hungary belongs to the same neofascist ideological family to which Donald Trump belongs. This ideological rift is pushing European liberal governments to try to make the EU — which is the alternative organization at their disposal — into some kind of defence alliance and military force, in cooperation with the United Kingdom. Western Europe, Poland, and the Baltic states are in need of Britain as one of only two Western European nuclear powers and a major Western European armed force. And that is what is presently brewing.

The kind of pressure that Donald Trump is putting on Ukraine towards basically accepting Putin's conditions is also emptying NATO's sense of purpose because instead of defending a NATO ally, Washington is trying to impose on it what is basically a capitulation — although, as we know, Donald Trump is unpredictable and changes his mind all the time. But the signals [that he has given], at least during the first hundred days of his presidency, are very much indicative of a neofascist affinity with Vladimir Putin.

It is clear that we have entered into what I called “the age of neofascism.” This has been developing over several years in the present century. The second coming of Donald Trump to the White House completed the mutation. Thus, we have seen the emergence of a powerful global neofascist axis, which goes from Trump to Netanyahu in Israel, Milei in Argentina, Orbán in Hungary, Meloni to a point (and she has the very clearly neofascist Salvini in her government), Modi in India, Erdoğan in Turkey, etc. I described this new era in a summarized way in an article titled “[The Age of Neofascism and Its Distinctive Features.](#)”

How long it will go on is difficult to predict. One can only wish that it gets entangled in its own contradictions and failures, rather than ending with a world war — as the previous age of fascism did in the previous century. We can

see signs of that with the completely chaotic results of Donald Trump's presidency in the United States. It might lead to a powerful backlash against Trumpism. The backlash is already taking place in countries such as Canada and Australia, where local neofascists or Trump admirers have been negatively affected by Trump's deteriorating image. So, we can remain hopeful in this regard, but the situation is extremely serious.

Ilya Budraitskis: Can you describe the foreign policy prospects of this neofascist project? What kind of world conditions would they like to see? Does the ideological affinity between these various neofascist regimes in various countries also mean the possibility of an alliance, or could it combine with the rising conflicts between various countries with neofascist regimes?

Gilbert Achcar: The first point to stress in this regard is that for far-right forces, there is no common value that supersedes nationalism. Liberals may adhere to some values that they believe should be put higher in importance than narrow nationalism, and they generally try to refrain from naked nationalism. Some of them even claim to be “internationalists” — liberal internationalism is a term very much used in the United States, for instance, to describe a fraction of the foreign policy establishment — whereas the far right is always ultra-nationalist. For them, it's always America first, Israel first, Hungary first, Russia first — whichever is their country. It's the narrow nationalist perspective.

They converge when their nationalistic interests can be reconciled, but that doesn't exclude tensions between neofascist governments because of clashing interests — for instance, economic ones. We can see that some of the neofascist governments of Eastern Europe are resenting Trump's tariff policy, which is hurting them. The same is true of other governments — Modi, Erdogan — whose governments are trying to negotiate with America, but you can see that this is taking place under economic coercion exerted by the present White House.

So, that's the limitation. Neofascists tend to coalesce against the liberals, against liberalism — their joint, their common enemies — even though today's liberals are very pale liberals. Actually, one of the reasons this neofascist wave has risen is the way Western liberals, instead of fighting head-on against the far right, have been adapting to it, adopting whole chunks of the far right's ideology and program, starting with anti-migrant and other racist measures, on a backdrop of continued neoliberal austerity, which is the very socioeconomic ground upon which neofascism was able to develop. And that's why we have seen an acceleration of the rise of neofascism in this century: the 2008 economic crisis and then the COVID economic crisis boosted the far right.

Speaking of an age of neofascism, the prospects are also very worrying. The National Rally in France is very much [within striking distance of] winning power in the next presidential election in 2027. The UK Reform Party, which is the UK's far right, is growing at a worrying pace — at the expense of both the Conservatives and the very pale and very neoliberal Labour Party.

There is a general rise of far-right forces, which is deeply connected to the failure of Western liberals to confront them.

China is a common target of many of the neofascist forces. It is targeted by the Trump administration, but more generally by the United States as a major rival power that has been rising steadily. The United States is trying to push the European far right in that direction [of opposing China]. The issue here is that China is obviously regarded by the United States today as somewhat an equivalent of what the Soviet Union was yesterday — that is, its main global contender — with the difference that China is rising economically at amazing speed, unlike the Soviet Union, which stagnated since the 1970s.

China is not a neofascist government. It is a dictatorial, authoritarian government of Stalinist-Maoist origin, a

single-party dictatorship, but it is not based on the permanent reactionary ideological mobilisation of a mass base, as you can see with Trumpism or Putinism. Thanks to China's sustained development pace, there is presently no mass popular threat to the Chinese government. It has been thriving on increased economic growth and welfare. That's why Beijing has been adopting over the last decades a rather peaceful profile, internally and externally, because its main legitimisation — its main source of legitimacy — is economic development. And we shouldn't forget that China is still a developing country. It has a huge GDP, but compared to the size of its population, it remains a middle-income country.

At the same time, of course, for Vladimir Putin, it's a game of triangular relations globally. Faced with the United States — under Biden, especially — he cultivated “eternal friendship” with Beijing.

The Trump administration would clearly like to turn Moscow against Beijing, as the Nixon administration allied with Beijing against Moscow in the 1970s.

But Vladimir Putin is not that stupid: as long as he cannot rely on the neofascists remaining in power in Washington, he will not jeopardise his relationship with China.

If Washington were to become a dictatorship, like the one you have in Moscow, that could change, because obviously the natural inclination of Russia is to prefer a Western ideological ally over China. There is racism in Russia against the Chinese, a resentment of depending on China, a neighbouring country with which there have even been border conflicts. None of this exists with the United States. And it still is, of course, more powerful than China technologically and economically, let alone militarily.

That's part of the game. Putin will certainly not jeopardise his relations with Beijing as long as he sees how chaotic the Trump administration is. He knows that it would not be not a safe bet, and he is not going to change anything fundamental in his international alliances just on the basis of Donald Trump's promises.

Ilya Budraitskis: Another extremely frightening global process is [that countries are beginning to revise their relationship to] nuclear weapons. At the forefront of this revision is Putin's Russia, which modified its nuclear doctrine last year. Now, nuclear weapons can be used in response to various forms of conventional threats. And Russian propagandists in recent years have generally spoken of the possibility of a pre-emptive nuclear strike to avert a broadly understood threat to national security. Thus, nuclear weapons are transformed from an instrument of war prevention into a decisive element of a possible global war. To what extent is this approach to nuclear weapons spreading globally?

Gilbert Achcar: This is not difficult to understand — it is a really elementary question of strategy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 revealed that what was thought to be a military giant actually had feet of clay. Until then, Vladimir Putin believed that Russia was an almighty military power. He invaded Crimea and entered eastern Ukraine in 2014 without any difficulty. The Obama administration's reaction was very subdued and limited. Then Putin sent his troops into Syria in September 2015, first cautiously trying to see what the Western response would be — to the point that he announced very few weeks into his intervention that the mission was accomplished and was to end.

And then, in the absence of any significant pressure from the United States, he carried on and started expanding through either official forces or the [Wagner Group](#) into other countries of the Middle East, Libya and Sudan in particular, and increasingly into sub-Saharan Africa. We have seen the vast military expansion abroad of Putin's Russia, in contrast with the very limited expansion of the Soviet Union outside its post-1945 sphere of domination.

The first and only time that the Soviet Union went out of that sphere was the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Before that, it limited its military interventions to Eastern Europe: Hungary, East Germany, Poland, all within the Yalta divide.

Ilya Budraitskis: But the Soviet influence was also present in Africa.

Gilbert Achcar: True, but the Soviet influence was represented there by advisors and the delivery of weapons but not combat troops. Moscow would facilitate the intervention of Cuban troops as a substitute to sending Soviet troops. There was a big misunderstanding about the Soviet Union that it was an aggressive country, as portrayed by Western propaganda. In fact, the post-Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy was fundamentally conservative because of its fear of creating chaotic conditions that could turn against it domestically. That's the root of bureaucratic conservatism. They couldn't afford to be predatory at the global level in the way Putin is.

Putin has gone far beyond the Soviet Union in foreign intervention. One reason for that is the conjunction between Russia's reduced size and the importance of fossil-fuel income in fuelling the Russian economy, giving it an important margin of action without worrying too much about the economy. As we could see since the invasion of Ukraine, despite all the Western sanctions, the Russian economy was much more resilient than Western analysts were expecting.

Putin is taking advantage of this — and of the other pillar inherited from the Soviet Union, which is the military-industrial complex, the only industrial sector in which the former Soviet Union really rivalled the West, developing the whole range of military forces and technologies from conventional to nuclear and space. That was part of the reason why the Soviet Union got economically exhausted — having to compete with much richer Western economies.

When Putin went into Ukraine in February 2022, he was expecting his troops to get to Kyiv, bring down the government like US troops did in Baghdad in 2003. That was his argument: “You did regime change in Iraq, I will do regime change in Ukraine. I actually have more rights over Ukraine than you had over Iraq.” But he failed miserably. He has now been at war for three years and has not even been able to fully invade those “oblasts” that he formally annexed. His army is still progressing, but at snail's pace. That shows the limitation of his military power.

When a major military power like Russia resorts to bringing in North Korean soldiers, that tells you also a lot about its limitations.

So, what remains for Putin? All this automatically enhances the importance of the other field in which he has a superior force — actually, the most important in the world, more than that of the United States itself — which is nuclear force. The weakness of its conventional war in Ukraine immediately enhances therefore the strategic value of its non-conventional force. That's a very classical strategic equation. Hence the change of doctrine that you pointed to, as if he were saying, “Look, you have seen me weakened in conventional war, but don't try to take advantage of it, because I won't hesitate to use tactical nuclear weapons if you try. I know that if I use tactical nuclear weapons, you won't dare to retaliate, let alone escalate, because I have many more strategic nuclear weapons than any of you.”

No one will take the risk of a nuclear escalation. So that's basically the logic we are in, which is very dangerous, very worrying. Think also of the impact of this on the rest of the world now that you have India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers, on the cusp of a military confrontation, which we all hope won't happen because it would lead to a terrible nightmare.

That shows you how increasingly dangerous the world is. There is no question and no doubt that Vladimir Putin has been a major factor in the deterioration of global peace and international relations. I'm not one who ever excused NATO. But whatever responsibility lies with NATO and the West, it is no excuse for what Putin did: the way he got

Russia bogged down in this absurd war in eastern Ukraine, which has cost Russia and the Russian people — not to mention the Ukrainians — much more than the economic or even ideological value of those territories that he is fighting for. There is no great enthusiasm in Russia for those oblasts in Eastern Ukraine. It is a major strategic error of miscalculation leading to failure by Putin.

Ilya Budraitskis: Trump argued that Ukraine was to blame for the war because it should have fulfilled all the conditions of the stronger side [i.e. Russia] to prevent the invasion. This coincides well with Moscow's position. Those without nuclear weapons and comparable resources cannot reject ultimatums from one of the world's key military powers. Can we imagine this principle being extended to other Eastern European countries — for example, to the Baltic states or Moldova? And to what extent might the European Union and NATO agree to this in order to prevent a larger conflict?

Gilbert Achcar: Well, that's a key characteristic of neofascism, which it shares with old fascism: the view that “might makes right,” which you summarized well. “We are the strongest, and you have to abide by what we decide.” And that's, again, the difference between them and what followed the defeat of the fascist axis in 1945: it gave way to what we mentioned as the liberal international order based on rules that also translated into the creation of the United Nations, its Charter, and a set of principles supposed to regulate international relations. To be sure, the United States was the first and foremost violator of this very world order of which it had been the key architect.

However, for the neofascists — for the ultranationalists — the law of the jungle is the only one that makes sense: the most powerful should impose its will.

This logic, of course, is extremely dangerous in international relations, because it is a recipe for permanent wars. Russia has been increasingly involved in wars over the last years. At the international level, we can see a very worrying surge in wars. We have all witnessed the ongoing Israeli genocidal war in Gaza, which is the first genocidal war waged by a technologically advanced state backed by the West since 1945. You have had several genocides after 1945, but they were mostly in the Global South — except the so-called Bosnian genocide, although this characterization was hotly disputed in its case. None of these genocides, however, was perpetrated by an industrially advanced state so closely linked to the West as Israel is.

It is no coincidence that this is happening under the watch of a coalition of neofascists and neo-Nazis ruling Israel. The fact is that before Vladimir Putin, the key pioneer of neofascism — who was even a role model for a whole range of neofascist forces, including Putin himself — was Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu, who came to power for the second time in 2009 and has remained in power most of the time since then, with a very brief interruption, became a beacon of neofascism early on. One difference between neofascism and old fascism is the pretence of respecting democratic rule. As long as it is possible for the neofascists to remain in power through a relatively open electoral system, they carry on — and they do everything they can to adapt this electoral system to their needs.

Of course, the situation changes when a government is afraid of a major rise of mass opposition — like the Putin government became afraid, after 2012, of seeing a mass opposition arising and even losing elections, and then turned to completely coercive policy and the fundamental cancellation of electoral democracy. But basically, as long as the neofascist can win through relatively credible elections, they prefer that, because political legitimization in modern times requires a semblance of democracy at the very least — unlike what you had in the 1930s, where the idea of naked dictatorship could be popular. In countries such as Germany or Italy, there's no doubt that Mussolini and Hitler enjoyed real popularity, in spite of being declared enemies of democracy.

Netanyahu has been a pioneer of the neofascist “democratic” trend and a major ally of most neofascists, one common ideological basis of most of them being anti-Muslim racism. There is an obvious parallel between Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli far-right government's reinvasion of Gaza.

It made Western hypocrisy and double standards become more blatant than any time before. At the same time, it is striking to see how the Israeli government never took sides against Russia and remained on good terms with Putin.

Ilya Budraitskis: Putin also was quite ambivalent about Gaza.

Gilbert Achcar: Lavrov even said, “We are doing the same — the Israelis are fighting Nazis in Gaza, and we are fighting Nazis in Ukraine.”

Ilya Budraitskis: Yes, [and both governments call their wars] a “special military operation.” So, my next question is: almost a decade ago, Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war to save the Assad regime. At that point, in [our conversation 10 years ago](#), you argued that this happened as a result of the failure of US policy in the region and was a success for Iran and Russia, with both expanding their influence regionally. How has Assad’s collapse changed the balance of forces? To what extent can Turkey be seen as its main beneficiary? And what, in your opinion, are the possible scenarios for the development of events in Syria?

Gilbert Achcar: The Assad regime survived during the last 10 years on two pillars: Iranian support and Russian support. The regime was on the brink of defeat in 2013 when the Iranians intervened, mostly through the Lebanese Hezbollah, but also through forces sent directly from Iran into Syria. Even that was not enough to save the regime, especially given that Iran does not have an air force. In this regard, Iran is a very weak country because it’s been under embargo, an international embargo, for a very long time. It had a few old US planes. That’s why Russia intervened in 2015. Its rescue of the regime was much more decisive. There were Iranian troops but no planes; then you had Russian planes, but no troops involved in fighting — and those Russian planes and missiles made a huge difference. They allowed the regime to remain in place.

Now, with the war unfolding in Ukraine since 2022, Russia got bogged down in a quagmire in eastern Ukraine and removed most of its planes from Syria. According to Israeli sources, there were only 15 Russian planes left in Syria at the time of the collapse of the Assad regime. Iran was then dealt a very heavy blow from Israel as a result of its onslaught on Hezbollah in Lebanon last autumn. This weakened Hezbollah to the point that it was no longer able to intervene in Syria.

So, the two key forces that were backing the Syrian regime were practically out, and that’s when Syrian Islamic forces linked to Turkey chose to go on the offensive. They were probably very much surprised themselves to see how quickly the regime collapsed. Even though we know that puppet regimes resting on foreign support collapse very quickly when this foreign support is withdrawn. The latest major example of this prior to Syria was the Kabul regime in 2021, when Biden decided to remove US forces from Afghanistan: we saw how fast the puppet regime collapsed.

Now, of course, Turkey is taking advantage of this, but there’s a big “but” here. Those Islamic forces that existed within Syria are not closely comparable to the Assad regime in military strength. They consist of a few tens of thousands of fighters, with limited military means. Until the Syrian regime collapsed, Israel had always seen Assad as “the devil we know,” and regarded him as no threat since he never let anyone launch attacks against the Israeli occupation of Syrian territory in the Golan. That was the quietest occupied border of Israel. On top of that, Israel had confidence in Russia controlling Syria and had a Russian green light to strike at Iran’s forces inside Syria. Syria was full of S300 and S400 Russian anti-aircraft missiles. They were never shot at any Israeli plane.

There was very clearly a coordination between Israel and Moscow for these actions because, even though Iran and Russia were both supporting the Assad regime, they were at the same time rivals in the control of Syria. So, when the Assad regime collapsed, Israel immediately destroyed all of Assad’s military potential. Whatever air force the regime had, its missile stocks and even the navy: all this was destroyed a very few days after the regime’s collapse.

This increased the weakness of the new self-proclaimed Syrian government in Damascus, which only controls a limited part of the territory, much less than what the Assad regime controlled with Iran's and Russia's support. This regime is even militarily weaker than the Kurdish forces in the northeast of the country alone. There are thus forces in the south of the country and northeast, some of them backed by the United States, which do not see themselves represented by the new government in Damascus. So Syria is an arena of struggle between regional forces. Turkey and Qatar are old supporters of the Islamic forces that prevailed. On the other hand, the Saudi kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Jordan, which are regarded as pro-Western, but maintain warm relations with Putin's Russia at the same time, form a regional alliance, in ideological and political rivalry with the Turkish-Qatari axis. There is a competition between the two alliances to win the new Syrian government's allegiance. And the new Syrian government is very opportunistically playing on these rivalries to try to get some margin of manoeuvre. The situation in Syria has become extremely volatile. It is very difficult to make any prognosis other than protracted instability.

Ilya Budraitskis: In your recent texts, you have said that the United Nations could play a decisive role in a peace settlement in Ukraine. How realistic is that, given that most of the UN General Assembly's resolutions on Ukraine have been ignored by Russia, while any recognition of Russia's right to the occupied territories would violate the foundations of international law on which the UN relies? In general, what significance can the UN have in the present situation of the rapid degradation of international law and division into military-political blocs?

Gilbert Achcar: You're right to point to the very limited impact of the United Nations on what has been happening in Ukraine since 2022. But that's because the UN Security Council has been paralyzed. And what we got are resolutions of the United Nations' General Assembly. They have no constraining power. Russia can easily ignore them with the support of very few allies. Stuningly, we have seen in recent times the United States and Israel vote with Russia and its very few traditional allies on Ukraine.

But that's not what I meant when I mentioned the United Nations as a potential key actor in what's happening in Ukraine. I meant the Security Council, of course, which is the executive branch of the United Nations. For that, the elephant in the room is China. Since the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, China has stated its official position. It clearly articulated support for the territorial integrity — that's exactly the phrase they used — and sovereignty of all countries, “including Ukraine,” as they specifically added.

That was a powerful statement, as was the 12-point [“China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”](#) marking the invasion's first anniversary. Had the United States and its Western allies seized these opportunities to try to work with Beijing at the Security Council to push for an immediate end to this aggression and some kind of negotiated settlement within the boundaries of international law, we [would not be where we are today](#). What happened is that the Biden administration, despite reversing some other policies, continued the first Trump administration's approach in two major respects. One is hostility to China. And here you have a continuity between Trump-I, Biden, and Trump-II, which contrasts with Obama's relatively peaceful and friendly relationship with Beijing. And the other is Israel, of course, on which the Biden administration embodied a complete continuity with Trump. Whatever small differences there may be between Trump and Biden regarding China and Israel, their policies have much more in common. This attitude led the Biden administration from the start to accuse Beijing of supporting the Russian invasion without a shred of evidence.

And that's where a major opportunity was squandered. I remain convinced that if Western countries were to turn and ask Beijing to cooperate for a negotiated settlement within the framework of international law and the United Nations, which is a constant stated goal of Beijing's foreign policy, things could turn different. Beijing's foreign policy is to play by international law while sticking to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. China doesn't like any country interfering in its own affairs, but for relations between states, it has consistently been advocating the United Nations, international institutions, multilateralism, and international law. And, as we know, Russia would not have been able to stand against both the West and China.

China holds decisive influence in this regard. Zelensky was smarter; at some point, he tried to cozy up to Beijing. In recent days, however, in trying to please Trump, he's been making anti-Chinese statements. But basically, it is Washington that prevented a negotiated settlement with China's participation, and that's where Washington bears a key responsibility in the continuation of the war in Ukraine.

You can't restore a peaceful global setting without cooperating with China.

Ostracizing China is a recipe for world chaos, as we are seeing. Western pundits like to completely ignore this and indulge in the demonization of China. Today, however, with the rise of neofascism, we are witnessing the beginning of a Western European revision of stance towards China. Western Europeans had been pushed by the United States, by both Biden and Trump, into adopting an increasingly anti-Beijing attitude, including the extension of NATO's area of interest to China, beyond the territorial limitations of the North Atlantic Treaty. Now the Western Europeans are having second thoughts, because of the US attitude, both for economic and political/military reasons. There is some reconsideration going on, with an inclination to reestablish friendly relations with China, at a time of tense relationship with the Trump administration. That goes for France, the UK, even more so for Germany, which has strong economic ties with China. They now tend to give precedence to their own economic interests instead of always tailing Washington.

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