

The spirit (and the budget) of a new cold war

Gilbert Achcar

The author teaches at the University of Paris-VIII. He is the author of La Nouvelle Guerre Froide: Le Monde après le Kosovo, which appeared in English in the form of two contributions to Masters of the Universe? (Tariq Ali, ed., Verso, 2000). He contributed this article to Les États-Unis s'en vont-ils en guerre?, published jointly by GRIP-Complexe, Brussels. It was translated from the French by Mairi Yuill.

Paradoxically, for a country whose pretension to worldwide hegemony is commensurate with its formidable military power, the debate on the American presidential elections of 2000 has only marginally touched on the problems of defence. To be sure, George W. Bush has engaged in a timid overbid on the subject of the National Missile Defence network (NMD), promising to extend it to the entire territory of the United States – without, however, succeeding in sounding credible because of the absence of clear responses about the major political obstacles which hinder the project, or about its technical and financial feasibility. For his part, Al Gore pronounced himself in favour of the choice advocated by the Clinton administration, i.e. the installation of an initial system of 100 missiles deployed in Alaska, without excluding its future extension to other regions of the country. Basically, the two candidates seemed to agree on the principle when considering National Missile Defence as indispensable to the defence of the USA, all the more because the running mate chosen by Gore, Senator Joseph Lieberman, had previously distinguished himself by his active support for this project, and by a systematic attitude to defence problems which in no way yields to the hawks of the Republican party. Apart from this rather dull exchange on the anti-missile network, the only development of the defence debate during the presidential elections in 2000 was provoked by George W. Bush, when he declared on 3d August at the Republican National Convention that two entire divisions of the US Army, if they were called on by the President to intervene, would be obliged to reply: ‘Not ready for duty, sir’. This was the start at the level of the general public of what the media called the ‘readiness debate’, i.e. the polemic on the American armed forces’ state of preparation.

Bush attracted a formal denial by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General

Henry Shelton, on the subject of the two divisions. But it did not escape notice that the Republican candidate, as usual for his party, had been merely pandering to the military. For two years the Pentagon, with the active support of the diverse interests making up the famous 'military/industrial complex', had insistently called for a substantial increase in the defence budget. The desiderata of the diverse armed forces in the matter of acquiring sophisticated new equipment, and the necessity of increased pay and benefits for the military in order to allow them to recruit and to retain their recruits beyond the initial period of engagement and formation, were invoked. This latter problem had become very acute when faced with competition from the private sector in an employment market particularly strained because of the protracted economic expansion which the United States enjoyed uninterruptedly since 1991.

The Clinton administration had finished by acquiescing to the Pentagon, all the more because it was preparing a new intervention in the Balkans, in Kosovo. It had to mollify the armed forces, who were already complaining of being too much in demand for 'operations other than war', to the detriment of their strategic preparation, which was supposedly a priority. The result was that on 1st February 1999 the Defence Secretary, the Republican William Cohen – given a central role in the Democrat administration in order to bear witness to Bill Clinton's concern to be consensual in military matters – was able to present a new six year plan for military expenditure for the fiscal years 2000-2005: this plan foresaw an overall increase of 112 billion dollars, which represents, according to the terms of the Pentagon's communiqué, 'the first sustained long-term increase in defence funding since the end of the Cold War', i.e. since 1990.

The additional 112 billion consisted of the re-injection of 28 billion of actual savings with regard to previous forecasts of costs and inflation, as well as an injection of 84 billion taken from the expected surplus in the federal budget. By the end of this plan, justified in the name of 'readiness', the annual military budget would reach 319 billion dollars for the fiscal year 2005 (of which 75 billion would be for procurement), progressing by almost 20% with regard to the 267 billion required for the year 2000 (and by more than 40% for procurement, with regard to the 53 billion in 2000). Already in the 2000 budget, members of the armed forces benefited from 'the largest military pay raise in a generation', according to the same communiqué, which was rich in superlatives.

This was not enough to satisfy the Pentagon, whose pressure for new budgetary increases started again to a greater extent after the Kosovo war. It was at this point that 'alarming' reports about the state of readiness of the American armed forces were propagated, such as those referred to by George W. Bush at his party's convention. Thus the Pentagon sustained a more and more pressing campaign aimed at Congress and public opinion, in order to obtain additional credit. This campaign distanced itself from any duty of reserve from Spring 2000 on, due to the intensification of the presidential race and taking account of the fact that the Clinton administration had no more than a few months left. The military chiefs called for the addition of almost 30 billion dollars annually in the

defence budget during the first decade of the new century. These demands constituted, according to the *Washington Post*, 'an unprecedented demand for money by the uniformed services and would require a massive shift of federal resources — a boost of more than 10 percent over the current defence budget, equal to almost the entire budget for the Education Department'.

The military and their friends and allies had no difficulty in making themselves heard: at the threshold of this new century, they had a good market, one could say. The two presidential candidates have thus sworn in unison that they were going to increase the defence budget even more, and by a considerable amount. The Bush team has promised to add 45 billion dollars over the decade, of which 20 billion is for research and development and 10 billion for raising pay, without prejudging the additional cost of deploying National Missile Defence, which the governor of Texas has declared himself in favour of, nor the extra effort for modernisation of armaments which he advocates. As for the team of the Vice-President — who has not personally missed an opportunity to outbid his rival in the matter of militaristic patriotism — it has promised to add a global sum of 127 billion dollars in the same decade, letting it be understood that this figure can be revised upwards according to the disposable budgetary surplus!

With regard to the volume of military expenditure, the two candidates are indeed six or one and half a dozen of the other. As for the divergence between them on the priority use of defence funds, it is real, but relatively limited. The different strategic options envisageable from the point of view of the various tendencies at the heart of the American establishment have been reduced to four coherent visions, well set out in a study produced by the Council on Foreign Relations, the principal think-tank of American foreign policy and grand strategy.

Following this *vade mecum*, we can clearly place the Republican candidate on the side of the 'enhanced defence' option, which aims to increase military forces, to reduce selectively American participation in so-called peacekeeping operations, to give priority to preparation for war and to invest in future technologies, including National Missile Defence. In contrast, we could not attribute to the Democratic candidate the option of 'prudent defence' which would have consisted essentially in maintaining things as they are on the budgetary level as well as on the level of use of military forces over the full spectrum of operations, even if it entailed making some reductions. Gore is, in fact, placed in a logic of budgetary prodigality which responds positively to the demands of the Pentagon: maintaining the level of engagement and strategic choices of the 1990s and consequently increasing expenditure in a way to allow the Pentagon to ensure both the full spectrum of intervention and the famous 'preparation for war'.

The fundamental common denominator of the two candidates, around which there is a bipartisan consensus in American defence policy, is actually what determines the content attributed to the notion of strategic 'preparation'. The principal question in this regard is that of the objectives in light of which the state of readiness of the American armed forces is measured, as opportunely

underlined in a recent article by the ex-Supreme Allied Commander of the NATO forces, Wesley Clark. Since the Bush administration and the Base Force Review of 1991, the scenario fixed as standard for the US armed forces in the post-Cold War era is that of 'two major regional conflicts', objectives confirmed under William Clinton by the Bottom Up Review of 1993 and the Quadrennial Defence Review of 1997, where they were re-baptised 'major theatre wars'.

Officially, the targets taken as a model for this strategic threshold have always been two 'nearly simultaneous' wars, according to the official formula, against Iraq and North Korea, the two 'rogue states' *par excellence*. It was already possible to doubt, straight away, the plausibility of this official interpretation of the scenario, notably with regard to the manifest disproportion between the level of financing and preparation of the American armed forces maintained in the post-Cold War era and the obvious debility of the two targets designated for military prosecution. One of the effects of growing tensions, since the Kosovo war, between Washington on the one hand and Moscow and Beijing on the other, is that the official American discourse has partly freed itself from the diplomatic inhibition which consisted in concealing the fact that Russia and China are the two actual targets of the 'two major theatre wars' fixed as the standard for the Pentagon's strategy of paroxysmal dissuasion, corollary of the US claim to world hegemony.

The development of the debate about 'readiness' in the 2000 presidential elections is eloquent on this subject. On 21st August, Governor Bush reiterated his accusation against the Clinton administration on the subject of a supposed 'decline' in American armed forces, at the inaugural session of the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention. Vice President Gore replied the next day, before the same assembly, in these terms: 'As the United States Army reported just this month, all 10 of its divisions are combat-ready and able to answer the nation's call. Our Navy has more than twice as many surface ships as China, more than three times as many as Russia, and our Air Force is by far the largest and most modern in the entire world. (...) Our military is the strongest and the best in the entire world'.

The Republican vice presidential candidate, Richard Cheney – who, it will be remembered, had been Defence Secretary in Bush senior's administration and one of the protagonists in the Gulf War before recycling himself profitably in the oil industry – quite naturally took over from his running mate. In a resounding speech given in Atlanta on 30th August, he again bemoaned the state of the American armed forces 'overused and under-resourced', taking a malicious pleasure in quoting Joseph Lieberman in support of his allegations. Using figures in a way which could deceive only naïve people, Cheney emphasised the contrast between the fact that American military expenditure is at its lowest ebb today as a percentage of the GNP since 1940, and the increase in foreign commitments by American forces during the last decade.

Drawing on the information propagated by the Pentagon after the Kosovo war and spread by the Armed Services Committee of the House of Representatives, he bemoaned the fact that at the end of this campaign of very high density bombardment (38,000 air sorties in 78 days) 'the Navy had only enough cruise

missiles to satisfy a little over half of what is required for two major theatre wars', whilst the Air Force had at its disposal only one tenth of its requirements of the same kind of missiles. The logic of such a calculation is clear. If, at the close of a bombardment as intensive as in Kosovo, against a Yugoslavia in the same category of power as Iraq or North Korea, the American armed forces are still required to be ready to be in the front line in 'two major theatre wars', it is clear that the wars in question do not concern such adversaries, but rather states with a much higher level of power.

This same logic is to be found in the Pentagon's Quarterly Readiness Report to the Congress. The most recent, which covers the second quarter of 2000, states, halfway between the two rivals for the presidency, that the army's state of preparation is making perceptible progress, thanks to the increase in the defence budget, but that further efforts would certainly be needed. According to this report, switching from operations like the aerial campaign in Kosovo to a major theatre war would not pose any problem, but undertaking a second major war would involve risks. Not that America would risk defeat, which is unthinkable according to the Pentagon, but simply that it could suffer higher casualties during deployment for the second major war to be waged simultaneously!

The same assessment had already been drawn up in the Pentagon's Report to Congress on the Kosovo war: 'Concerns have been raised about how Operation Allied Force affected the (Defence) Department's ability to carry out the most stressing requirement associated with its defence strategy: to fight and win two nearly simultaneous major theatre wars. Had one such war broken out while the United States was involved in Kosovo, the Department is confident that the challenge could have been met, albeit at a higher level of risk than would have been the case if U.S. forces had not been conducting operations in Kosovo. The Department was cognizant of these risks at the time and made various adjustments in our posture and plans to address those risks. Consistent with U.S. defence strategy, if we had faced the threat of two major theatre wars, we would have withdrawn our forces from other activities, including Operation Allied Force, but we are confident that we would have ultimately prevailed.'

Let us finally quote the quite recent report of the Congressional Budget Office on the cost of maintaining the American armed forces at the level required by the strategy of 'two major theatre wars'. The report is clear about the real balance of forces and the true adversaries against which to measure the state of military readiness. 'The U.S. military today has no peer. In number, certain Russian and Chinese conventional (mostly non-nuclear) weapons and forces may equal and, in a few cases, exceed those of the United States. But the capabilities of the U.S. military far surpass those of other nations once such factors as training, readiness for combat, sophistication of weapons, and availability of linked communications and intelligence networks are taken into account. Nevertheless, certain regional powers around the world are antagonistic to U.S. interests and pose threats that are the focus of much of today's defence planning. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are the nations of most concern, although they have

substantially fewer forces than either Russia or China, let alone the United States. Their forces are also no match for U.S. troops and equipment in many of the other dimensions of combat capability noted above.’

Consequently, the Congressional Budget Office estimates the budget necessary for sustaining the state of preparation of American forces at a constant level in relation to current military policy, at 327 billion dollars, i.e. 50 billion more than the current level of military expenditure! If this were not the case, it would be necessary, according to the CBO, either to reduce the participation of American forces in operations other than war, or to reduce their state of strategic readiness with regard to two major theatre wars. This estimate is certainly grist to the mill of the Pentagon, by making its claim for an increase of 30 billion annually seem moderate, all things considered.

This staggering overbid, which indicates a return to the militaristic spirit of the Cold War, could not happen in reality unless to the detriment of social and environmental expenditure, or even economic equilibrium, without even having the very relative rationality of the expenditure during the Reagan era – as much from the point of view of the boost given to a declining economy as from that of the exhaustion of the Soviet adversary. Beyond the prosaic interests which it satisfies – unable to explain it by themselves in the United States of today, given the very diminished relative weight of the specifically military industry – such an overbid testifies to the kind of megalomania and paranoia by which the country seems to be affected and which has its expression and its source in the considerably increased impact of the hysterical political currents of the hard right, in a way similar to the experience of the early years of the Cold War.

Against this worrying drift, minority – but not minor – voices have risen from the very heart of the American power elite. For example, there are those big names from the first period of the Clinton administration, when he reduced military expenditure to the advantage of social issues and the reduction in the budgetary deficit: people like William Perry, the predecessor of William Cohen at the Defence Department, and John Shalikashvili, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1993-1997; also those of Lawrence Korb, the Director of Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and Assistant Secretary of Defence under Ronald Reagan, and of the Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities, an association of almost 500 business leaders and former military officials. The former voices argue for maintaining military expenditure at its present level; the latter for a substantial reduction in this expenditure for the benefit of the education and health of their fellow citizens, emphasising the irrationality of the costly choices of the Pentagon with regard to very high technology equipment.

Lawrence Korb sums up well the opinion of these ‘sensible’ people: ‘We do not need to waste billions of dollars arming ourselves to fight a war we’ve already won’. The insatiable appetite for domination which can motivate certain people is, however, beyond sense, as it is beyond clear-sightedness.

References available on request.