



Volume 4 | 1: War: Thinking the Unthinkable

<http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/14426> | ISSN: 2463-333X

FACING WW4₁

Claudia Pozzana & Alessandro Russo

A globalized war proliferates in the current "disorientation of the world," as Alain Badiou calls it,² while simultaneously reducing it to impotence, even complicity. We are witnessing the harbingers of a war of which we are just beginning to evaluate the novelty in destructiveness and extension, destined to persist and worsen for many years, even decades. To find a thread of orientation – that is, to think politically about this war – it is necessary to broaden the horizon to new intellectual references and to reconsider previous ideas on war and its inextricable relation with politics.

War in the human world has specific historicity. It arises in a crucial phase of the development of humanity, namely the Neolithic. Moreover, it has as its fundamental conditions private appropriation, including that of women in the family, and the formation of separate state apparatuses that hold the monopoly of violence. Engels' arguments on this point remain valuable. Wars have always aimed to subjugate an enemy from whom to steal a property or prevent them from extending it. That in Homeric mythology, the quintessential war holds the ownership of a wife at stake shows how intricate, yet brutally simple, the roots of warfare are.

Nevertheless, war does not derive from an alleged human nature, much less from its "animality." It has an infinitely more destructive scope and is disproportionate to all forms of aggression that have always structured the world of living beings. War,

instead, has a beginning and can have an end, provided that humanity can usher in a completely new era.

1. An Impasse of Military Thought Today

The general political disorientation increases the destructive force of today's globalized war and simultaneously constitutes the greatest obstacle to thinking about it. Even for military scholars, contemporary warfare is an enigma. "The War God's face has become indistinct," wrote Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui at the end of the last century.³

The two authors, known internationally as the "two Chinese Colonels," have developed an original perspective with the theory of "war without limits," understood as a radical novelty of the military horizon. This thesis implies two levels: a more operational one, that is, the unlimited extension of the traditional battlefield on conflicting grounds other than that of armed confrontation, and another, more essential, which concerns the "limitless" character of today's destructiveness of war as such.

The first level includes, for example, the trade war, including tariffs and sanctions; the war for the monopoly of new technologies; control of computer networks, including cyber-attacks; the financial wars waged both by the big states, the USA first, and by private financial powers, capable of subduing entire countries; in addition, the terrorist attacks carried out by small armed groups against large countries. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui argue that these new "battlefields" are beyond the reach of strictly military conflict.

While acknowledging the validity of the analysis, Italian General Fabio Mini, also an original military theorist and main interlocutor of Qiao and Wang, objected that the military confrontation in recent decades has not become secondary. Indeed, it was brutally amplified by the new circumstances of what he calls "the war after the war."⁴

On the second level of the thesis of "war without limits" (more precisely, "war beyond limits," 超限战争, *chaoxian zhanzheng*), the agreement between the three authors is more significant. However, it also shows shared anxiety, which concerns an authentic impasse. "War beyond the limits" also indicates the unlimited extension of war conflicts worldwide, without the most elaborate contemporary military thought being able to identify a stopping point of hostilities. These theoretical perspectives outline some new features of the current globalized war but fail to foresee any end.

It is significant that these thinkers do not stop to describe the novelties of the war horizon but are tormented by the problem of how to think of its limits without resigning themselves to the observation that it is interminable. Still, the "limits of war" they propose are far less incisive than their analyses. In the afterword to the Italian edition of the Chinese volume, entitled "In Search of Limits," Mini hopes that the recognition of "Man" and his fundamental values will be able to stop the global war. However, without theoretically redefining the capabilities of the human subject, the reference to Man remains much more "indistinct" than the "War God's face." How to ignore that in recent decades the worst military aggressions have been baptized "humanitarian interventions"?

Qiao Liang, in a subsequent 2016 volume, expressed hope that China can establish a "multipolar" credit system worldwide that will replace the US "unipolar" financial colonialism, thus opening up a mutually beneficial situation capable of stopping conflicts between states.⁵ Such is also the "win-win" prospect promised by Xi Jinping with the "Belt and Road Initiative," which brought out the frontal hostility between the US and China, the actual horizon of the current global war situation.

In the current radical disorientation, however, there is also something to learn from the impasse of military theories, which are a rare terrain of thought today more than ever. Moreover, the anxious "search for limits" has always been a constitutive challenge of the great military thought from Sun Zi to Clausewitz.

2. The Three World Wars of the Twentieth Century and their Limits

However, the thesis of Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui is articulated on a too-narrow periodization compared to today's situation. The starting point of the "war without limits" is, for them, the first Gulf War (1990-91). Indeed, it was a crucial war that took place on the final edge of the Cold War and the eve of the collapse of the USSR. Yet, today it is a vague reference to think about the "limitless" character of the new world war, which in recent months, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war trials between the US and China around Taiwan have ominously announced.

Instead, it is essential to rethink the ensemble of the wars of the twentieth century, the century of the globalization of war. Although we are used to talking about two world wars, they should be considered three because the Cold War was also a world war. The essential difference was that the confrontation between the USA and the USSR remained very limited on the military ground compared to the destructive power of both sides. The current narrative that the Cold War did not become hot due to mutual nuclear blackmail does not touch the essence of the situation.⁶

What should be considered the Third World War was "cooled" by a singular political factor. There were threats, blackmail, and provocations from both sides. Yet, they never reached an open military confrontation because the Cold War was much more a challenge between two models of society and state rather than a clash between armies. What opposed the "two blocks," beyond of the propaganda rhetoric of which both made extensive use, was a competition on a ground mainly civil. It focused particularly on which of the two systems was the more just in limiting inequalities. The two blocs reproached each other, one for false equality disguised as freedom, the other for false freedom disguised as equality.

Indeed, for at least three decades after the Second World War, state interventions aiming at containing social inequalities multiplied in both blocks. Those state policies, far from being a natural evolution of modern governments, resulted from an exception. In half the world, alternative experiments to capitalism were active from Eastern Europe to the Far East. The existence of large communist states also imposed on capitalist states to moderate the intrinsic logic of capital valorization – that is, the unlimited extortion of surplus value from the workforce – and to allocate significant resources to the reduction of inequalities. The welfare state was the product of that tremendous ideological competition. Its decline from the 1980s to the 1990s was, in turn, the result of the global reassertion of capitalism.

The Cold War did not involve antagonisms of an economic nature because commercial relations between the two blocks were minimal. The intense, proper political confrontation between socialism and capitalism prevented significant military clashes. The singularity of that era was that a highly ideological antagonism constituted the actual "limit of the war."

From this perspective of the Third World War (called the "Cold War") and the reasons that limited its military antagonism, it is necessary to rethink the role of the existence of an organized idea of overcoming capitalism.

Despite the contemporary discrediting of twentieth-century communism, after the complete restoration of capitalism in the 1980s, it is undeniable that the Bolshevik insurrection neutralized the military interventionism of Tsarist Russia and stopped the massacre of tens of millions of people on all fronts, especially young soldiers. Lenin's thesis, "Revolution Stops War," was anything but the cunning *coup d'état* of an unprincipled bandit, as it is now commonplace to say (while Mensheviks were gentlemen of other times that could not deny the word given on the continuation of the carnage). Lenin's politics was articulated on his sharp analysis, both of the economic conditions of the First World War and the Marxist theoretical perspectives on overcoming capitalism and the state's extinction. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage*

of *Capitalism* (1916), and *The State and Revolution* (1917) are thus written in the same context.

In the Second World War, the anti-fascist resistance had multiple components (Liberals, Catholics, Communists). However, the organized existence of political ideas that sought an alternative path to capitalism was decisive in defeating the Germany-Italy-Japan Axis. The partisan war in various countries of Europe, the "Great Patriotic War" of the USSR, and the Maoist "People's War" in the resistance against the Japanese invasion were primarily political conditions that led to the war's end.

Of these conditions, the "protracted people's war" strategy is the most ignored today, despite being widely theorized in Mao's military writings. Even the two Chinese Colonels do not care, when instead they should remember it not only for its victorious outcome but also because it would give them a theoretical push in the "search for limits."

3. Mao and the Impending World War in the Mid-1960s

Mao's foreign and military politics during the Cold War are even more misunderstood today, particularly those since the 1960s.⁷ Instead, his initiatives in these fields should be rethought without concessions to the prejudicial denigration that has obscured them for decades in China more than elsewhere.

In the mid-1960s, when the Cold War threatened to become a global clash with the US military escalation in Vietnam, Mao's politics played a decisive limiting role based on two main positions. He fully supported the Vietnamese resistance in foreign policy but categorically rejected any alliance with the USSR. In domestic politics, he advocated the integration of the army into civilian life, which took up the style of the "protracted people's war" but also looked very far up to a program of extinction of the separate military apparatus, even if in the short term it ran aground in the tumultuous events of the Cultural Revolution.

The disagreement with the USSR was, in turn, articulated on two levels. One concerned the determination of the Maoists so that China was not involved in the antagonism between the two blocks. This position had already manifested itself in the mid-1950s in the diplomatic initiative of the Bandung Conference to establish a neutralist front of countries "not aligned." The other plan was the bitter ideological conflict between the CCP and the CPSU, which properly concerned the nature of the socialist state and its difference with capitalism.

Both of these terrains of political initiative constituted a limit of the war. The CCP's distancing from the antagonism between the two blocks was a major "cooling" factor of World War III. Furthermore, the Sino-Soviet dissension

accentuated the ideological nature of the opposition between socialism and capitalism, placing its civilian character in the foreground over the military one. Despite the spread in recent decades of litanies on the "damage of ideologies," it must be recognized that the ideological contrasts prevented a "war without limits" in the 1960s. Today, if anything, the "end of ideologies" is one of the factors of the war's limitlessness.

Mao's intransigence in rejecting a military alliance with the USSR in an anti-US function while maintaining full support for the Vietnamese national liberation guerrillas was, on the other hand, the subject of significant disagreements at the top of the CCP. In 1965, faced with growing US aggression in Vietnam, many senior party leaders considered a military alliance with the USSR inevitable and even desirable, putting aside ideological differences. The CPSU, for its part, made conciliatory appeals directly or indirectly through other communist parties.

Mao's opposition was categorical but far from shared by the party's leadership. In the spring of 1965, to Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin, who proposed forming a military alliance and putting aside ideological differences, Mao replied that those differences could "last 9,000 years".⁸ Instead, a few months later, in a meeting with an Italian Communist Party delegation passing through Beijing on their way back from Hanoi, Deng Xiaoping heartily assured the "Italian comrades" that the situation would soon change. He said that with further American military escalation, China and the Soviet Union were ready for a military alliance that would "annihilate American imperialism."⁹

In February 1966, Mao personally intervened to block a joint declaration that Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were about to sign with the Japanese Communist Party (pro-Soviet) for a "united anti-imperialist front" led by the USSR and China.¹⁰ It was a great fortune for the whole world that Mao stubbornly opposed that adventurist design.

Those differences were intertwined with the political clashes of the Cultural Revolution that exploded in the summer. Under the pressure of the mass movements, Liu and Deng lost their leading positions in the party. A decade of great political experimentations began, which also entailed fatal destructive and, above all, self-destructive impasses, attempts at rectification, and revival but ended with the "thorough negation" of all their value with Deng Xiaoping's return to the scene. The controversies over the evaluation of the Cultural Revolution are destined to last decades, if not centuries, as for the French Revolution and the October Revolution. It is not possible here even to touch the terms.¹¹ We will limit ourselves to citing an initiative by Mao on the eve of the revolutionary events, which concerns the problem of war and the army precisely.

In a famous "Letter to Lin Biao" of May 7, 1966,¹² Mao accentuates a profoundly non-militarist conception of the army, rooted in the guerrilla strategy of the 1930s and 1940s. Of course, the situation was different, and the threat of a destructive global military confrontation was indeed on the horizon. Those circumstances fueled the pro-Soviet positions at the top of the party and the military leaders' demand for an intense "professionalization" of the army.

Therefore, Mao's initiative in May 1966 was very much against the tide. "Even in the event of a world war," he wrote to Lin Biao, the People's Liberation Army should have been a "great school." This statement continues to be misunderstood in China more than anywhere else as if he aimed at the militarization of Chinese society. On the contrary, that was a political program of civilization of the army, namely the reduction of the separation of the state's military apparatus from society.

That program was even more far-sighted since it was articulated with very detailed objectives of reducing the division of labor. The army was to be a "great school" in promoting the disruption of the barriers between the different types of work in society, particularly between manual and intellectual. The soldiers, wrote Mao, should also have devoted themselves partly to agriculture, industry, and theoretical study. Conversely, the peasants should also have been partly workers, students, and soldiers; the workers should also have been partly peasants, students, and soldiers; students and all those engaged in intellectual labor, including all state officials, were also to be partly soldiers, peasants, and workers.

This alternation of social roles was consistent with the communist perspective elaborated by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, according to which the abolition of class inequalities could only be achieved with the abolition of the division of labor.

The originality of Mao's position consisted not only in looking at the very long times of this perspective but also in grasping the original root of the intertwining between the stabilization of the social division of labor and the establishment of military and bureaucratic apparatuses of the state separated from the society. This vision was the rationale for treating the civilization of the army as the fulcrum for reducing the division of labor, and it was also the hardest stake.

That political program of Mao, far from being "utopian," as everything he did from the mid-fifties onwards is usually labeled, was instead meticulously articulated. Its most extraordinary, and ultimately most realistic, aspect was that it was formulated in those circumstances of the greatest danger of a world war, with US military intervention on China's southern borders. Mao promoted a series of communist political experiments, despite the possibility of an impending war, and precisely for this reason, he took the only path to limit its scope. A few years later, it

will be to the Mao of the Cultural Revolution that Nixon and Kissinger turned to as their primary interlocutor to find a way out of the Vietnam War.

4. The Death Drive of Capital

To argue that the existence of political ideas organized to overcome capitalism constituted the limit of the twentieth century's world wars requires a fundamental clarification. Why is capitalism incapable of finding a limit to war, and is it indeed the condition of its limitlessness? Let us try to outline four aspects of the question: (i) the resources that states can devote to war; (ii) their mutual antagonisms; (iii) the unique form of authority exercised by the capitalist command; (iv) the exorbitant destructive power of today's military technologies.

(i) When States enter the war, they pour out immense resources for destructive purposes, which certainly do not come from heaven, but come from the product of human labor, extorted by the owners of the means of production. In today's capitalist regime, these resources come from surplus value extorted from wage earners. It is evident that the greater the extorted surplus value, the greater the availability of resources that states can direct towards destruction, and the greater the chances that they will go to war. In globalized capitalism, the extortion of surplus value tends to be unlimited.

(ii) Lenin had already clarified the irreducible warfare intrinsic to inter-capitalist relations over a century ago. Today, analogies and differences with the geopolitical circumstances of the First World War certainly need to be examined. However, today's globalized war dispels illusions about the peaceful evolution of capitalism, as in the version of "win-win" relations propagated by the Chinese government. It shows also the inadequacy of the vision of a single world "empire" made up of networks of economic and political interconnections, which some twenty years ago had some influence among radical political thinkers in Europe and the USA.¹³ The ongoing war displays the violence of the antagonisms between capitalist potentates organized around large states and alliances between states. Capitalism, far from being governed by the chivalrous competition between honest businessmen, is driven by the greed of Dante's "she-wolf" that "after food is hungrier than before."

(iii) The singular nature of capitalist authority is to command an abstract entity, the labor force. The capitalist command is exercised by *abstracting* from everything, in mankind, that is not reducible to a particular commodity, the labor force, which can, in principle, be annexed to all production systems. This interchangeability is a fundamental condition for achieving maximum capital valorization. This process of

abstraction, this act of abstracting the workforce from every other possibility of the human subject, is the logical antecedent of the extortion of surplus value.

It is also the core of the unlimited destructiveness of capitalism. This abstraction involves not simply the separation but properly the destruction of every other possibility of humanity. What is not reducible to the workforce is inexistent. Only as an alleged "owner" who sells his labor power on the "free market" does the wage earner have existential value; in formal and juridical terms, s/he has the highest existential value, like any other owner of commodities. In the bourgeois right, the one who sells labor power and the one who buys it has equal value.

However, selling and buying labor power, although "exchanged at equal value," are far from equivalent. In the "labor market," a term that claims the utmost neutrality, the subjective annihilation of every wage earner is achieved. Any other possibility of subjective existence is null in being recognized exclusively as a seller of such commodity. Therefore, apart from the obligation to provide workforce (valued and exchanged as any other commodity), every other existential surplus of the human subject – infinite in itself – is destined to be annihilated.

(iv) Freud argued that the great technological inventions of civilization fulfill human desires. The existence of technologies for annihilating the world, far from being the mere result of the development of science and technology, is also the fulfillment of a desire, a powerful death wish. Of course, producing atomic weapons requires enormous technical know-how and immense scientific knowledge. However, their ability to annihilate every form of life on the planet numerous times is, first and foremost, rooted in the destructiveness of capitalist authority.¹⁴

The death drive of capital has two complementary objectives: to eliminate competitors in the process of valorization and to annihilate what of humanity cannot be reduced to mere labor power. Lacan makes the equation between the surplus value and the surplus enjoyment: capitalist enjoyment is the unlimited compulsion to repeat the appropriation of surplus value. The fundamental rule of capitalism is its law of death. Marx and Engels wrote that capitalism is capable of formidable creations, but everything it creates is doomed to destruction before it even consolidates. Now that capitalism has conquered the whole world, what else can it want but destroy it?

5. US Capitalism in *the* WW4

The clash between the US and the PRC is today the horizon determining the development of conflicts and possible alliances between states worldwide. Open hostilities began in 2018 with Trump's trade war, with tariffs and sanctions blocking

Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. They intensified with the hostage-taking of Meng Wanzhou, the top executive of Huawei, the largest Chinese IT company. They reached their most critical point so far with the visit to Taiwan of the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. The anti-Chinese hostility of the US government is bipartisan.¹⁵

Even though the Belt and Road Initiative was initially welcomed with promises of collaboration by many states, including Europeans, Trump intervened without hesitation to block what the US power elite considers a severe threat to its economic, financial, technological, and, finally, military hegemony. The US bluntly imposed on the vassal countries, especially European ones, to cut off the agreements and assume increasingly hostile attitudes toward the Chinese government.

Why did an initiative that presented itself as highly peaceful, "multilateral," and aligned with the "laws of the global market" provoke such a strong reaction from the US? First, the capitalist market has no other "law" than the capital valorization process, which does not trust promises of mutual benefit. The expansion of the sphere of action of new capitalist power, that is to say of its capacities of appropriation of surplus value, inevitably entails the reduction of those of other already existing powers.

To confirm the supremacy of its capacities of appropriation, American capitalism, together with its vassals, continues to be the main factor of war in the world. Fabio Mini writes that military interventionism is a "geopolitical constant" of the US government.¹⁶ However, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, the strategic imperative of world military supremacy took on even more destructive characteristics. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui have good reason to date the beginning of the "war without limits" with the first Gulf War, which must be considered as the premise of the second, the invasion of Iraq.

However, the essence of this limitlessness consists not so much in expanding the war to new extra-military "battlefields." All American interventions in the last three decades – besides Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, etc. – aimed not only at defeating enemy armies but, above all, at destroying the civil systems of the vanquished states.¹⁷ Today, this is the goal of "regime change" in Russia, openly declared by Biden. Also, this can only be the goal of the threatened military confrontation with China, albeit still implicit. The adventurism of this hegemonic strategy today drags the US into a destructive and self-destructive spiral destined to involve the entire planet.

Henry Kissinger, now almost 100 years old, argues that "the evaluation test of a politics is how a war ends and not how it begins."¹⁸ Nevertheless, the American government has been committed for decades to starting wars without knowing how to end them.¹⁹ Kissinger takes credit for helping to end the disastrous Vietnam war.

Yet, he succeeded not because he changed the "geopolitical constant" of US foreign policy from within but because he relied on the existence of that significant factor limiting the war that was Maoist politics in those years.

Though unscrupulous and geopolitically cunning, Kissinger and Nixon were perceptive in grasping the opportunity offered them by that radical experimentation of going beyond capitalism. Of course, they did not share anything, but they understood that that experimentation was heterogeneous to the world extension of a war the US had caused, which they knew could not win, and from which they had no other way out. Today, however, for the US, the insurmountable difficulty of moderating their inherent military interventionism is that in the world, there is nothing but capitalism in various forms. So not even Kissinger can indicate a way out of the warfare of the United States, and he cannot go beyond the disconsolate realization that a global conflict is upon us. His repeated appeals to American governments to avoid a catastrophic confrontation with China go unheeded.

6. Chinese Capitalism in *the* WW4

In the current war situation, the leading new player is Chinese capitalism. When China was the site of extraordinary political experimentation of a way beyond capitalism, why was it possible to open peaceful relations with the USA (Mao was the first to want and pursue them)? Why today, with a capitalist regime in China, is a global war looming between the two countries? There is nothing predestined in this conflict, nothing to do with a "clash of civilizations" or a "Thucydides trap."²⁰ The antagonism stems primarily from the global reaffirmation of capitalism since the 1980s and from the Chinese government's role after the defeat of the Cultural Revolution.

In order to examine the vectors pushing Chinese capitalism into this spiral of war, the issue must be considered starting from the "reforms," i.e., the establishment of the capitalist economy in China in the late seventies. There are two main aspects: the characteristics of Chinese capitalism and the expansion of the military apparatus separated from society.

The Dual Authority

Chinese capitalism is founded on a singular system of dual authority.²¹ First, there is a classically capitalist prescriptive authority based on the "free market" of a highly flexible, precarious, and low-cost workforce. Its fundamental component

comprises hundreds of millions of internal migrants from the countryside with contracts of a few months, who constantly move from one place to another in search of work. Over them is exercised above all the authority that prescribes the ways and times for providing the workforce.

Alongside there is the interdicting authority of the Communist Party, which prohibits any independent political organization. The CCP is by statute the only "vanguard of the working class," an expression which, far from being empty rhetoric, must be understood as the strict prohibition of the autonomous political existence of wage earners. In China, there is not even the right to strike, sanctioned with arrest and imprisonment for at least three years.

This dual authority has made the fortunes of capitals worldwide, which for decades have been eagerly attracted to China, where the relocation of production makes it possible to hire cheap workforce subject to stringent regulation. This fact has undoubtedly also made the fortune of Chinese capitalism, which has also acquired cutting-edge technologies thanks to delocalization. Whether foreign or Chinese, intransigent capitalism demands the utmost precariousness and subordination.

One of the best-known examples is the Foxconn dormitory-factory complex, with over one million employees in various parts of China. This enterprise is a tangle of relations between American capitalism (the largest producer of Apple devices), Taiwanese capitalism (that of the owner, Terry Gou), and the interdicting authority of the CCP. The latter guarantees the "harmonious stability" of capital relations- work, providing also logistical support and organizing the rapid mobility of hundreds of thousands of workers based on changes in production plans.²² Remarkably, Apple in China has stayed out of the US sanctions mechanism.

The dual authority system is an element of internal strength but also a factor of external weakness. This system is not exportable, not even in territories that belong to China geo-culturally. In Hong Kong, it failed to maintain stability except by enforcing the National Security Law, which is, in fact, martial law. Peaceful unification with Taiwan is even more illusory. Even if the PRC could occupy it militarily, which is anything but easy, it could not govern it without drastic repressive measures. It should bring hundreds of thousands of soldiers and officials from the Continent and neutralize just as many on the island. The fundamental backbone of dual authority can only exist in China because it can count on one hundred million members of the Communist Party. So far, the guarantee of the stability and expansion of Chinese capitalism.

The growing separateness of the military apparatus

The other significant factor dragging China into global war is the separation of the military from society. Mao founded the PLA in 1927 and led it during the "protracted people's war," with a firm root in society, especially in the lower strata of the rural population. The victory in the anti-Japanese war of resistance and the subsequent civil war against the Guomindang was the result not only of an original military strategy but, above all, of the army's political integration into social life. Mao's decision in May 1966 to make the army a "great school," as mentioned above, re-evaluated this political tradition and even aimed to reduce the separation between army and society as the lever of the communist project to reduce the social division of labor until it is overcome.

That purpose met a decisive obstacle less than two years later, with the first tragic self-defeat of the Cultural Revolution, the degeneration of independent political organizations into paramilitary gangs in 1967-68. What had been the great novelty of the first year of the Revolution mutually annihilated each other, except for Shanghai, in a senseless armed struggle for an imaginary "seizure of power." As an automatic response of the military apparatus, the result was a repressive intervention of the PLA, which prevented further destruction. However, it also affected both the definitive closure of those experimental organizations and the reaffirmation of the army as a separate apparatus, in a very different direction from the "big school" dreamed of by Mao.²³

After the defeat of the Cultural Revolution and the restoration of Deng Xiaoping, the expansion of the separateness of the military has become a constant in Chinese government policies. The first stage was the war against Vietnam in 1978, the opposite of any "people's war", and addressed against a country that had been closely allied until recently. Deng motivated it as an act of mere supremacy: to "teach [Vietnam] a lesson" (上一课 *shang yi ke*).

The real point of no return of the separation from society was the repression of the 1989 movement in Beijing and in dozens of other Chinese cities, where the army brutally attacked initially peaceful masses who claimed to be involved in the great state decisions. That military intervention in internal warfare, with several hundred deaths, marked the end of any "popular" character of the PLA. Over the past decades, the vaunted "modernization" and professionalization of the Chinese military has been tantamount to its expansion as a separate state apparatus.

Karl Kautsky in Beijing

A possible objection to our arguments on capitalism in the current globalized war, and on the Chinese one, in particular, is that they are "ideological" and based on references to an era that has already ended. We do indeed attach great importance to ideas and their material consequences. Mao said that "the spirit does transform into the matter, the matter transforms into the spirit." We also recognize that part of our references (not all) are elaborate theoretical positions – very counter-current, we emphasize – in the era of twentieth-century communism. Can they shed some light on Chinese capitalism today? Some even called upon a great English economist of the eighteenth century to analyze contemporary China.²⁴ We will limit ourselves to a controversy between European Marxists of the early twentieth century. After all, the Chinese government today is strenuously "Marxist."

In the well-known controversy with Kautsky, Lenin's central problem was how to think politically about the First World War and end it by implementing a communist revolutionary project. Lenin criticized two related positions of Kautsky on the nature of imperialism and the Marxist theory of the state. Both of these positions converged, Lenin argued, in producing radical disorientation among the social democratic parties of the time and ultimately fueled the "patriotic" opportunism with which those parties voted for "war credits," thus giving the green light to the massacre of millions of Europeans.


First, Lenin criticized Kautsky's theory of "ultra-imperialism," an agreement between the imperialist powers for the division of the world, which would not lead to an armed conflict. Lenin called it "ultrastupidity" and showed that imperialism, the "highest stage of capitalism," led to war, as it inevitably was. Furthermore, Lenin argued that Kautsky, considered one of the greatest connoisseurs of Marxist theories, had "forgotten" something essential. The core of the communist political project of Marx and Engels was not so much the class struggle but the extinction of the state, that is, of separate military and bureaucratic apparatuses.²⁵

Of course, times have changed, and the opponents are no longer the same. Colonial expansion is no longer at stake. Moreover, there is no communist revolutionary project on the horizon. However, the ongoing clash again concerns the supremacy in the appropriation of surplus value. The theory of a "multipolar" peaceful capitalism governed by a "win-win" dynamic is today's version of "ultra-imperialism."

At the same time, the super-Marxist CCP, from Deng onwards, aims to strengthen the state apparatuses, both bureaucratic and military. It also "forgets" that the main objective of the communist project – indeed, even the most problematic and controversial node – was, since Marx, the drastic reduction of the separation of the state from society. Lenin argued that the hypertrophy of the military apparatuses

of the European states in the previous decades had been one of the main vectors of the First World War. In today's situation, the primary trend is once again the state's military capabilities growth, with China at the top.

7. The Initial Scenario of *the War*

Broadening the perspective on the world horizon is indispensable for thinking politically about this war and looking ahead to its developments. The European war scenario appears indecipherable without considering the global antagonisms overdetermining it. 

Europe, USA

The internal causes that make Europe a dangerous factor of war must also be considered. First, there is the intrinsic weakness of the celebrated "European unity," disguised as bureaucratic excellence and a race for rearmament. In reality, it has become increasingly dominated by the financial and military supremacy of the USA. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, proclaimed with fierce satisfaction that "Ukrainians are ready to die for the dream of Europe."²⁷ We are witnessing, instead, not only the death of the Ukrainians and Russians but also of the "European dream."

In the aftermath of the Second World War, at the roots of this "dream," there was the deeply felt desire that Europe was no longer the scene of the devastating war that had plagued it for three decades. That project of peaceful unification between the countries of Europe even included positions aimed at possible independence from the clashes between the superpowers. For example, De Gaulle in France, who left NATO (Sarkozy has returned), Aldo Moro in Italy, who sought an independent foreign policy, and the mass movements of the 1960s in Europe chanted the slogan "outside NATO."

The failure of the "European dream" precisely begins the day after the fall of the USSR. European unification has been definitely constrained by financial oligarchies, with a hypertrophic growth of bureaucratic and military apparatuses separated from society. This process is parallel, or rather consequent, to the exhaustion of the parliamentary parties. They had exercised in various countries, despite thousands of ambiguities, an element of moderation of the separation of the state.

The establishment of the euro, much more than a common currency, is the constitution of a super-government of Europe, managed by bureaucratic-financial

bodies that impose – autocratically, it should be said – the economic policies of individual countries, in total contempt of the will of the governed. The case of Greece is exemplary. The strict "austerity" policies were imposed by the "troika" (European Commission, ECB, and IMF) despite a popular referendum that rejected them by a large majority.

Equally massive is the growth of the military apparatuses of Europe unified in NATO, whose separateness is sealed by the fact that the decision-making center is located outside Europe, in the US government. Military subordination is, moreover, complementary to the economic-financial one. The US has poured out the consequences of its 2008 crisis on Europe, and today it imposes on European states both the increase in military spending and the economic and social costs of the sanctions imposed on Russia.

The goal of the United States is to destabilize Russia radically and simultaneously subordinate the European states to the next war with China. Kissinger criticizes the decision to simultaneously open two fronts of hostility, Russia and China, which he believes weaken the global power of the US. However, the US seems to be aiming for both objectives, but in succession. A confrontation with China after having subjugated Russia and having conquered complete military and diplomatic control of Europe. We are just beginning to see what this adventure design can lead to. The NATO-Russia confrontation had been carefully prepared for years. Although seemingly unexpected, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a move made within this framework of hostility.

Ukraine, Russia

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is the darkest terrain of the situation. However, one can glimpse the intertwining of at least three components in this darkness: the entanglement of a global and a local stake, the destructiveness of identity narcissism, and the political disorientation about an assessment of the USSR.

1. As for the global/local tangle of the conflict, on the one hand, the US government has promptly incorporated the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine into the framework of its long-term goals. On the other hand, both Russian and Ukrainian strategies are confined to a localized conflict: it is a classic military confrontation to redefine the borders between two states. However, both sides were drawn into the conflict by superior strategic choices, one as an ally and the other as an opponent of US power. None of them can decide the outcome of the clash with respect to the global contradiction that overdetermines it.

2. The strictly local character is exasperated and blocked by the identity drift that directs the mutual hostility between the two governments. The destructive automatism of narcissism, the unconditional affirmation of the self-image, is amplified by the proximity between the contenders. The fact that the two identities of Russia and Ukraine have profound similarities and interconnections, in the current circumstances, feeds hatred.

The paradox of the conflict between two very similar "self-images" was defined by Freud as "narcissism of small differences." In the intolerance between very close populations, he saw the manifestation of a primary hostility towards one's self-image, which is the core of identity.²⁸ The mutual similarity is an obstacle to identity, producing an attachment to "small differences," which thus become the even more imaginary foundation of their respective identities. It also involves the negation of the many elements in common they possess.

Hostility is ultimately intolerance towards the "other" always present within the "same." The pure ego does not exist, or rather it represents an ideal that can only be pursued by purifying the ego of all otherness, that is, by destroying it. In the case of "small differences" – be it individuals or communities – hostility externalizes an even more radical internal enemy to be eliminated to affirm the fullness of identity. The latter is constantly threatened from within due to its constitutive weakness, the incompleteness of the self-image in the human subject. It is heartbreaking to see the automatism of narcissistic hostility at work in the relationship between the governments of two countries, whose modern history is so intertwined on material and spiritual level: culture, language, art, history and politics, personal and family ties among people.

3. To foment mutual hostility, indeed what makes the tangle inextricable today, there is, above all, a factor of political similarity (or rather the absence of politics) between the two "identities." Russia and Ukraine are two separate pieces of the former USSR, which have much more in common than their respective war propaganda implies. They share an economic organization that arose from the collapse of the socialist state and the privatization of the state economy. In each of them, oligarchic factions dominate that are, for the moment, allied around a supreme leader. In both countries, the desperate inability to take stock of the history of the USSR is made up by the propaganda of a national identity whose purity must be restored.

The USSR is held responsible for denying the national identity of both Russia and Ukraine. In Putin's speech on February 21, which was the declaration

of war, the main controversial object is Lenin, much more than NATO and the "West."²⁹ It was Lenin, Putin says, who laid the foundations for the autonomy of Ukraine, in league with the "power-hungry Bolsheviks" (said by one who knows about it). Conversely, for the Ukrainian government, the USSR had imposed a fictitious unification from which Ukraine must now purify itself to restore trampled national pride.

An episode from the war's first weeks condenses the tragedy of such failure. In Ukraine, a colossal statue in which two Russian and Ukrainian workers held together the symbol of unity between the two peoples was demolished with great media clamor. Both figures were beheaded, obviously starting with the Russian one. The destruction goes far beyond the contrast between the two countries. That beheading symbolically zeroes the most intricate and controversial issue of state communism, the promise of the political existence of the workers as the foundation of peaceful internationalism. The promise was that to abolish and overcome the inexistence of workers in capitalism, it was necessary to include the "working class" within the socialist state. Today, three decades after that promise was undone, and in the bleak absence of any thought about what it had been and why it had failed, Russian and Ukrainian workers are enlisted to kill each other.

The local/global tangle, the identity hostility, and the absence of a political assessment of the twentieth century make the clash between Russia and Ukraine increasingly fierce. Both contenders are equally unable to decide on the developments. At the time of the invasion, Putin may have overestimated the local character of the confrontation and underestimated the US global strategy. He probably counted on the US being too busy preparing for the conflict with China, so they would leave the European front uncovered, allowing, or at least not effectively countering, his "special military operation." The US provocations on Taiwan's independence suggested that East Asia would be the prime scenario of the global war.

Yet, the US immediately seized the opportunity, which it had been waiting for some time, and helped create the conditions. They have launched a military response "by proxy," directing both NATO and Ukraine at a distance and ultimately also determining Russia's moves. It is a war in which, for now, they do not seem to intend to participate directly but aim to make it last as long as possible.

The US works to ensure that this local war remains open indefinitely, preventing any negotiated solution. However, in the short term, the goal of a "regime change" in Russia, although initially boldly declared by Biden, would

involve direct American military intervention, with uncontrollable catastrophic results. The US aims to foment a war of attrition that simultaneously weakens Russia and Europe, in addition to the ruin of Ukraine. This option is no less adventurist and ultimately devastating because it aims to create the conditions for American superiority in the Fourth World War.

8. Can There be a Limit to *this* War?

The global developments of this European war are unpredictable in detail, but their fundamental trend is seen. An era has opened in which war is imposing itself as the effective government of the world.

In the current situation, it is necessary to face a radical dilemma to trace the political tasks of initiatives that can divert the course of this deadly trend. We cannot get out of the war of globalized capitalism without getting out of capitalism. In the present circumstances, no intrinsic limit can stop the ongoing war. However, there is also no organized idea capable of experiencing political paths beyond the capital, with the aggravating circumstance that the previous experiments have failed, and their assessment remains unsolved.

The world must be reinvented politically, a long-term undertaking that will involve several generations, and must defend itself from the growing threat of unlimited destructiveness. That humanity can find ways for this reinvention before its destruction is the riskiest undertaking it has encountered in its history.

Notes

¹ This is one of two texts on the war written in the summer of 2022. The other, entitled "Can this war be thought politically?", has been published in the current issue of *Crisis and Critique* dedicated to "Is politics possible today?"

² Alain Badiou, *Remarques sur la désorientation du monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2022.

³ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Guerra senza limiti*, edited by Fabio Mini, Gorizia, Libreria editrice goriziana, 2001.

⁴ Fabio Mini, *La guerra dopo la guerra*, Turin, Einaudi, 2003.

⁵ Qiao Liang, *L'arco dell'impero*, Gorizia, Led editions, 2016.

⁶ See, among the many, Federico Romero, *Storia della Guerra fredda*, Turin, Einaudi, 2009, Chapter 3, "Un antagonismo globale. 1957-1963".

⁷ A separate chapter was the Korean War (1950-53), which was blamed more on the consequences of the Second World War in Asia, rather than on the dynamics of the Cold War. Much contemporary historiography attributes the causes to the mutual "misperception", between the US which underestimated the Chinese military response capabilities, and China which overestimated the

possibility of the American invasion on its territory. In reality, the American moves were very aggressive from the start. The Chinese intervention, alongside the internationalist motivation in support of the Korean Communists, was motivated by self-defensive concerns, after the American troops crossed the 38th parallel that marked the border between the two Korean states. American General McArthur even planned to bomb that border with nuclear weapons. The threat of a US military invasion of Northeast China with support from Taiwanese bases was very real. In fact, the Chinese intervention in Korea repelled the advance of American troops. A review of past years' studies in Donggil Kim, "China's Intervention in the Korean War Revisited," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 40, Issue 5, November 2016, pp. 1002-1026.

⁸ Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69," *The China Quarterly*, No. 142 (Jun., 1995), pp. 356-387.

⁹ The episode is remembered in the Memoirs of Achille Occhetto, then secretary of the young Communists, who participated in the Italian delegation. See *Secondo me*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme editions, 2000, pp. 152-53. We thank Giacomo Ferrarello for locating the reference.

¹⁰ Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69," art cit.

¹¹ Two recent volumes examine the set of political processes: Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020; Cécile Winter, *La Grande Eclaircie de la Révolution culturelle chinoise. Overture à la politique communiste comme urgence et possible*, postfacé par Alain Badiou, Paris, Delga 2021.

¹² For the text of this letter, known as the "May 7 Directive", see <https://china.usc.edu/mao-zedong-notes-report-further-improving-army-s-agricultural-work-rear-service-department-military>.

¹³ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2000.

¹⁴ Great scientists can even introject this death wish and enslave themselves to it. Even before the discovery of nuclear fission, Enrico Fermi had been the author of other significant discoveries in physics that had earned him the Nobel. After making the atomic bomb in the US, he strongly recommended its use against civilian targets in Japan. Among the new battlefields of today's war without limits are the research laboratories on biological warfare and climate warfare, in addition to the cyber warfare front. Indeed, great scientists are involved in it.

¹⁵ Former Speaker of the House, Republican hawk Newt Gingrich, who had visited Taiwan a few years ago, warmly greeted Pelosi's journey. Gingrich is also the author of an authentic war manifesto against China, in which he repeatedly states that the "democratic" mission of the US obeys the will of "Almighty God." See *Trump Versus China. Facing America's Greatest Threat*, New York, Hachette, 2019.

¹⁶ Fabio Mini, "Preface" to Qiao Liang, *L'arco dell'impero*, cit., p. 22.

¹⁷ We have discussed this topic in our text "After the Invasion of Iraq" in the special issue of *positions*, "Against the Preemptive War," vol. 13, 2005, pp. 205-215.

¹⁸ Henry Kissinger, "To settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2014.

¹⁹ "Kissinger and the search for equilibrium," interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2022.

²⁰ The reference to Thucydides is only valid as a reminder that the Peloponnesian War was the destruction of the political civilization of classical Greece. Washington is not Athens, and Beijing is not Sparta, but their warfare can destroy modern political civilization.

²¹ Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo, "Hong Kong, 'due sistemi' e una guerra incombente?", In *Sinosfere*, 26/7/2020, <https://sinosfere.com/2020/07/26/claudia-pozzana-e-alessandro-russo-hong-kong-due-sistemi-una-guerra-incombente/>

²² Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai, *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2020.

²³ An analysis of this involution in Alessandro Russo *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, Duke University Press, 2020.

²⁴ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, London, Verso Books, 2009.

²⁵ V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1918) <https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lenin/state-and-revolution.pdf>. See also *Marxism on the State. Preparatory Material for the Book "The State and Revolution"*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1972.

²⁶ Judith Balso has written an excellent analysis in the weeks immediately following the outbreak of war. "La guerre ne doit pas devenir le maître du monde. Il faut se soucier de ce que pourraient être les conditions d'un état de paix", 15 March 2022..

²⁷ Ursula Von Der Leyen, June 17, 2022. https://stream24.ilsole24ore.com/video/mondo/von-der-leyen-gli-ucraini-pronti-morire-il-sogno-europeo/AEcFnggB?refresh_ce=1

²⁸ Lacan has amply demonstrated that this automatism is at work from early childhood, in his theory of the "mirror stage" where one is confronted by their own inevitable misrecognition.

²⁹ <https://www.rainews.it/video/2022/02/discorso-putin-21-february-2022-2668d9bd-9573-4695-94de-c8499cda886a.html>