

## **ARE WE ON THE EVE OF A NEW COLD WAR?**

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### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen many examples of rising geopolitical tensions among key global players. Many pundits have rushed to the conclusion that a new Cold War has now been in the making with the United States, the existing global hegemon, facing the challenges posed by China, the aspirant hegemon, and Russia, the former superpower. The strategic challenges posed to the foundational logic of the post-Cold War era security order by Russia's military assertiveness in Ukraine and in the wider Middle East on the one hand China's growing strategic and territorial claims in its neighborhood on the other appear to have pushed many analysts to ask whether we are now getting back to the future. The recent escalation of the crisis in U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relations during the Covid-19 pandemic seem also to have offered further ammunition to the argument that we are now really on the brink of a new Cold War. There is now a bipartisan consensus in Washington that China and Russia are the most existential threats to American security interest and anti-western/anti-American views have grown spectacularly in Moscow and Beijing. To what extent are the emerging conventional geopolitical confrontations among the United States, Russia and China reminiscent of the original Cold War between Washington and Moscow?

Many pundits argue that the United States, as the existing hegemon, would not accommodate China's continuing rise as well as Russia's growing assertiveness, for both promise to dent American primacy across the globe. To this reasoning, as China's material power capabilities grow, Chinese leaders will feel more emboldened than ever to pursue more assertive policies abroad and claim more hegemonic clout across their region and globe. Step by step, China will question the American primacy in East Asia and do its best to help weaken the United States' ability to contain China's rise. To do this, China will both improve its economic, military and technological power capabilities and forge interdependent relations with many countries, in particular traditional American allies, to make sure that they see their future in closer relations with Beijing rather than Washington.

On the other hand, the United States will gradually adopt a strategic outlook whereby the number one American goal will be to help contain China's growing influence across the globe as well as strengthening security cooperation with traditional American allies in Europe and Asia. Indeed, starting with the second Obama term and continuing with Trump's presidency, American efforts

to contain China's growing clout in international politics have notably increased. It is likely that such American policies will continue during Biden's presidency.

Another argument is that ideological/normative differences between China and Russia on the one hand and the United States on the other will make it difficult for a long-term strategic reconciliation to take place in trilateral relations. The growing ascendancy of the authoritarian China in global politics will likely be interpreted as an existential challenge by the liberal United States. The ideological differences between today's Russia and liberal-democratic western actors will prevent them from developing sustainable cooperation among each other.

Despite the growing appeal of such reasoning, I argue that the dynamics of today's tension in great power relations are somehow different from the dynamics of the original Cold War between Washington and Moscow.

### **The Original Cold War**

First, during the Cold War years, there was a strategic-military confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union across the globe. The two super powers adopted a strategic-military approach not only towards one another but also other actors within the system. Non-military issues were either relegated to secondary importance or gained significance as far as they mattered to material power calculations of key players. The prevailing perspective during the Cold War era was that high politic issues, such military and strategic questions, constituted the real stuff of statecraft. It was also believed that the Cold War had been built on the idea of mutually assured destruction, according to which so long as the superpowers possessed the second strike capability, the use of nuclear weapons would result in the Armageddon. The Cold War era stability was grounded on the deterrence value of weapons of mass destruction. This was after all a negative peace whereby the lack of any direct military confrontation between the two superpowers had been guaranteed by the existence of nuclear weapons.

Second, the global strategic map was drawn in such a way to underline that whereas United States was the hegemonic power within the First World, the Soviet Union was the hegemonic actor in the Second. That the United States acted as the benign hegemon to provide global public goods did not mean that the countries outside the First World viewed Washington as the undisputed and unrivalled global sheriff. The challenges posed to the global primacy of the United States by the communist camp and vice versa were quite unequivocal and palpable.

Third, the original Cold War was strictly bipolar with Washington and Moscow being located at the top of power hierarchy within their camps. Their leadership within their camps mainly remained uncontested despite some occasional outburst arising from their European allies. For example, the German efforts to help develop more cooperative relations with the Soviet Union, as well as the French policies to help bring into existence a strategically independent European Third



Force, could not come to fruition due to the strong American commitment to containing the Soviet menace at all costs. Americans were vehemently against any attempt that might potentially eat away at the United States' strategic primacy within the western camp. Similarly, Moscow was quite successful in suffocating internal challenges within the communist camp, as the brutal repression of protests in Hungary and Czechoslovakia unavoidably demonstrated. That is to say that the degree of alliance cohesion within the capitalist and communist camps was quite strong during the Cold War era.

Fourth, the world was sharply bifurcated during the Cold War years not only because the United States and the Soviet Union faced each other as strategic and military rivals but also their confrontation was decisively colored by ideological and economic differences. The American message to the world was entirely different from the Soviet message in that the former had been grounded on the primacy of liberal democracy and free market economy whereas the latter promulgated the expansion of communism as the only cure to the social, political and economic diseases of capitalism. The Cold War was a tug of war between rival ideologies and narratives.

Fifth, the contacts between the people of these two rival blocks remained quite limited during the Cold War era. The limited degree and scope of transnational activities between western and eastern worlds did not allow for the emergence of strong civilian initiatives in favor of sustainable détente, let alone a collective identity under which a truly global society could flourish. The globalization process was at its early stages, thereby making the emergence of global identity and consciousness a distant possibility. The degree of economic interdependence between western and eastern blocks was also quite limited. There were two different worlds separated from each other through impenetrable walls. The parties wanted to survive and weather challenges posed to their well-being without having to touch each other.

Finally, the two blocks were engaged in a strategic rivalry in the so-called Third World. The countries which preferred to remain outside the liberal and communist blocks tried to pursue as much non-aligned policies as possible and took utmost care to make sure that their newly gained independence remain unchallenged by the forces of neo-colonialism. Many countries in Asia, South America and Africa constituted the so-called Third World. The majority of Third World countries, including China, had not been integrated into the global centers of political and economic power in such a way to suggest that their economic future was decisively dependent on the economic conditions in the First or Second Worlds. That is to say that all three worlds had been worlds onto themselves.

### **Today's world**

Against the picture depicted above, one can argue that today's world is radically different. First, there is no longer a strategic competition between the West and Russian Federation encompassing

the entire globe. Today, the United States and Russia are in a strategic rivalry in the wider Black Sea region concerning NATO's enlargement and Russia's counter-reactions in the wider Middle East. Russia is now seen in the West as a power in decline, if not a regional power in its neighborhood.

Second, we are no longer living in a bipolar environment and the unipolar moment of the 1990s is already gone. Nor is the United States and the Russian Federation are the unrivalled leaders of any particular group of countries coalesced around common strategic rationale and uniform ideational/ideological purposes. Even the American primacy within the so-called western international community cannot be taken for granted. Neither the members of NATO share a one-size-fits-all strategic outlook with respect to emergent threats nor has the European Union been willing to play a secondary role to the unquestionable American primacy in Europe. The idea that we do now have two distinctive Wests has strengthened over the last three decades. Looking to Russia, one could equally argue that neither the Eurasian Economic Union nor other Russian-led regional initiatives have been on par with the defunct Warsaw Pact which once symbolized the taken-for-granted Russian dominance over a large group of countries.

Indeed, we are now living in a multipolar environment in which not only actors of global reach multiplied but also they have become increasingly interdependent with each other on myriad issues. It is no longer conceivable to draw clear-cut lines among alternative 'worlds'. The emergence of cross-cutting, crisscrossing, overlapping, multidimensional and multidirectional linkages has transformed the globe into a much smaller and interconnected place than ever recorded in world history. Today's world is not as polarized as it was during the Cold War era. This is also to say that many actors in today's multipolar environment do experience different kinds of relationships with each other simultaneously. While they cooperate on some issues, they face each other as rivals or potential enemies on some others. A frenemy like relationship taking place in an ever compartmentalized structure is the new norm.

Third, global powers today are not enmeshed in ideological competitions as they were in the past. Despite the challenges posed to the liberal world order by China's 'digital authoritarianism and state-led capitalism' and Russia's 'sovereign democracy', both of these countries are now deeply integrated into the capitalist world system and owe their economic rise and continuing development to the close linkages they have thus far developed with capitalist countries. One can even argue that China and Russia evince different models of capitalism compared to western countries. This is neither to underestimate the emergent value gap between western powers on the one hand and rising non-western powers on the other nor to argue that history came to an end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Instead, this is to suggest that ideological differences will not be so decisive as to shape great power relations in the years to come.



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Finally, today we are experiencing the rise of multiple regionalisms across the globe. Despite indigenous factors determining the pace and scope of different regionalisms in different parts of the world, what is notable is that such regional experiences do extensively borrow from each other and the borders between them are as permeable as one could imagine. The growing connectedness among national economies and the increasing pace of transnational interactions will likely have a ‘moderation’ impact insofar as the solution of strategic rivalries and competitions around the globe are concerned.

The failure of defeating Covid-19, Brexit, the rise of populist and anti-globalization movements in the larger transatlantic area and the erosion of liberal democracy might have weakened the western world via-a-vis China and other non-western countries. The rise of its material power capabilities might have on the other hand emboldened China to increasingly question the western primacy in global politics. Yet, it is not a foreordained conclusion that we are fast moving to the Second Cold War.