

EAST VS. WEST: A NEW COLD WAR?

Cold War has returned to dominate international politics. Expectations that the end of the Cold War in 1989 would lead to a more inclusive and comprehensive peace seems to be practically failed, and instead, by 2014, the centenary of the start of the First World War, Europe was once again wracked by conflict. On the one side, the U.S.-led Political West shaped by the Cold War remained the main protagonist. In contrast, on the other hand, a much-weakened Russia took the place of the former Soviet Union, now accompanied by a China intent on restoring its status as a great power. The article examines why a new cold war emerges again, and analyses how such a 'Cold War II' differs from the original.

Richard Sakwa*

*Keywords: Cold War, Political East,
Political West, Post-Western Order, Russia.*



TPQ

Winter 2022

* Richard Sakwa is the Professor Emeritus of Politics in School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent.

Anticipations of a positive peace order after the end of the Cold War in 1989 soon led to disappointment. The issues in dispute then are the ones that later generated alienation, followed by conflict and the subsequent hot conflict in 2022. A positive peace order would have overcome the logic of conflict, with all sides ready to change within the framework of creating an inclusive and mutually equitable peace order in Europe. Instead, the negative peace of the cold war was perpetuated in new forms and conditions. A negative peace entails little more than the absence of war – conflict is managed rather than transcended. The quarter century of the cold peace between 1989 and 2014, despite endless proclamations of peace and ‘strategic partnership’ between Russia and the West, failed to resolve some fundamental issues and thus gave way to the Second Cold War and renewed confrontation between Russia and the West. This, in turn, was embedded in a nascent larger East-West conflict. This paper examines the dynamic that provoked Cold War II, explores the character of the protagonists, and discusses the implications.

The Political West and the East

There is an essential continuity in the years between 1945 and 2022. The international system established in 1945 endures today, although the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war challenges it as never before. The United Nations remains the core body that shapes the normative framework of international politics. The Security Council is still the supreme body granting legitimacy to critical decisions in international affairs. The international system is the context in which international politics is conducted. Within the framework of the Charter International System, sub-orders have been established, uniting constellations of states based on similar ideologies and aspirations. These alignments contest with each other, and their conflicts shape international politics. The Soviet-led bloc has long been and gone, but the political order established by the United States, sometimes known as the ‘rules-based order,’ remains. This is the Political West, forged during the Cold War and still shaped by that conflict. Its putative victory at the end of the Cold War in 1989-91 accentuated already powerful notions of exceptionalism. This is accompanied by claims of universality, the view that the political West represents a separate and distinct form of a hegemonic and liberal internationalism. The combination of exceptionalism and universalism undermined the centrality of the UN-based norms and international law system. This does not go unchallenged. The assertion of unipolarity in the early post-Cold War era was negated by the objective development of multipolarity.

This provides an opportunity for the sovereign internationalism at the heart of the UN system to reassert itself. The Charter system is based on the formal equality of all states, which is now coming to the fore. Historical hierarchies in international

politics are increasingly challenged by the claims of the 200 states that now populate the international system. The era of formal colonialism was dismantled in the postwar years, and the new states have matured and gained enough confidence to make their weight felt in international affairs.

“The Political West, a contingent formation shaped by conflict, generates and regenerates the dynamics of the cold war and division.”

Nevertheless, the ranks of the great powers remain limited to two, the U.S. and China, giving rise to much speculation about the re-establishment of a bipolar dynamic in international politics, reminiscent of the First Cold War. India is in a category of its own, potentially a great power ready to join the other two, but by choice and necessity, forging a path of its own. Next are the legacy powers, those who once commanded empires but now find themselves diminished. Russia, France, and Great Britain’s status is bolstered by the possession of nuclear weapons and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Still, along with Japan and Germany, they are no longer at the top table of diplomacy and international affairs. Apart from Russia, they all strongly align with the U.S. and are thus part of the Political West. The next category is the middle powers, with Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Indonesia, Mexico, Turkey, Egypt, South Korea, and others with crucial regional influence but not yet asserting themselves consistently in world politics. The rest make up the constituency of the more minor powers. It should be stressed that their collective voice is essential, and they find themselves courted by the other powers as cold war-style bloc politics returns.

Amidst much talk of ‘the West’ as a homogenous category, in conceptual terms, it can be considered an agglomeration of three distinct impulses. The Political West is not the same as the Civilisational West, which came to dominance half a millennium ago and then asserted its power globally in the overseas empires. This is the West shaped by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Its form of international society sets the standard of civilization globally.¹ Postwar anti-colonialism brought its overt dominance to an end, but ‘decolonization’ and ‘decoloniality’ remain critical discourses, even in the heartlands of the former empires. The Civilisational West represents a particular type of modernity, and it is challenged by those who argue that modernization does not necessarily equate

¹ Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of “Civilization” in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

to Westernisation. As far as critics are concerned, there can be multiple forms of modernity. Today this has spawned an enormous literature on civilization-states and civilization as a distinctive category in political analysis.² There is also a third representation of the West as a cultural formation with its roots in antiquity and still represents a particular vision of the good life and of what it means to humans. This Cultural West has always been a hybrid, with Egyptian, Greek, Mesopotamian, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Slav influences. To that extent, the Cultural West, irrespective of the political and geopolitical claims of the Political West, remains part of the patrimony of humanity.

The same threefold distinction can be made about the East as a broad conglomerate of distinctive traditions. The Cultural East draws on many of the same traditions as the Cultural West, and it is on this basis that a revived movement for peace and development, the ideas that animated the creation of the Charter international system in 1945, can be restored. The common humanity of the Cultural West and the Cultural East is the inspiration for visions of a positive peace order that would allow the genuine fulfillment of the global developmental and peace-making aspirations of the Charter International System. Contradictions between the Civilisational West and the Civilisational East remain, but this is where the various movement for a dialogue of civilizations, as called for by the former president of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, in his famous letter to the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan.³

The Political West, a contingent formation shaped by conflict, generates and regenerates the dynamics of the cold war and division. The transformation of international politics envisaged by Mikhail Gorbachev and other architects of perestroika in late 1980 was stymied. Instead, the Political West took advantage of the New Political Thinking to claim a victory in the Cold War that Moscow stubbornly believed as a joint victory for all humanity. The logical result of claiming victory is the assumption that its protagonist was defeated. If Russia was a spent power, its views could be safely ignored. While Russia was undoubtedly down in the 1990s, it was not out. Even then, it never renounced its claim to be a great power. As its economy recovered in the 2000s and some sort of order was restored to the polity under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Moscow returned, obsessively in the eyes of its critics, to rectify what it considered the failings of the post-Cold War European security order. NATO enlargement was a particularly neuralgic issue, especially since Moscow believed that in return for facilitating German reunification,

² For example, Christopher Coker, *The Rise of the Civilizational State* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

³ The appeal for a Dialogue of Civilisations was discussed by the UN's 56th General Assembly, "Dialogue among Civilizations 'Humanity's Best Answer to Humanity's Worst Enemies' Secretary-General Tells Assembly," 9 November 2001, <https://press.un.org/en/2001/ga9952.doc.htm>

it had been promised that NATO would not expand ‘one inch’ to the East.⁴ This was only the most salient issue in a growing list of grievances, including the Political West’s bombing of Serbia in 1999, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the emplacement of Ballistic Missile Defence systems in Romania and Poland, and much more. There appeared to be ‘no place’ for Russia in the European security order.⁵

“China refused to be boxed in by what was considered a stale and anachronistic (Eurocentric) category that failed to capture the enormity of China’s re-entry into world politics as a significant player.”

By 2014 Russian patience had run out, and it was ready to resist the expansion of the Political West. As far as Moscow was concerned, the European Union had failed to live up to its self-description as a peace project and a normative power. Instead, it becomes little more than an outrider of NATO enlargement – the soft edge of the advance of the Political West as a whole.⁶ Russia took the lead in resisting the normative and geopolitical expansion of the Political West. Moscow sought to shape a Greater Eurasia, encompassing the Eurasian Economic Union in harness with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. More broadly, a ‘Political East’ began to take shape, offering an alternative model of modernity appealing to the universality of the Charter International System against the perceived usurpation of its norms and institutions by the Political West. The practices of the cold war were restored, although not necessarily applied in the same way as in Cold War I.

Is This a New Cold War?

But is ‘cold war’ the most appropriate way of describing international politics today? Like the game of chess, every cold war follows the same rules, but every encounter is different. The drift towards entrenched and enduring conflict is apparent, but many other terms have been deployed, including the notion of ‘hybrid war’ and the struggle between authoritarianism and democracy. But a cold war is distinctive, helping to identify the differences and similarities with earlier conflicts. Robert Legvold

⁴ Mary Elise Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁵ William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁶ An argument made by John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014): p. 77-89.

identifies five characteristics of a cold war that are relevant to the situation today. First, ideological division, with starkly different representations of the desirable political and economic order. Second, each side holds the other responsible for the conflict, with no scope for introspection or reflection about how one's own actions contribute to stoking division. Third, both sides assume that the conflict is driven not out of the interaction of two countries but by the other side's character: 'The essence of the problem [is] the essence of the adversary.' The struggle is less over interests than purpose and values. Fourth, as a result, change can only come about if the other side somehow or the other becomes something different, or at least is ready fundamentally to rethink its foreign policy. Finally, there is cooperation, but it can only be 'limited and transactional, not cumulative and transformative.'⁷ This well describes the situation today.

The context of Cold War II, of course, is very different from the earlier conflict. There is no longer such a stark ideological division between communism and capitalism, and instead, the ideological lines are blurred – although no less salient. The struggle is portrayed as one of law against anarchy, the rule of justice against the exercise of arbitrary power, and, ultimately, a struggle between the democratic world and a host of illiberal and authoritarian states. The struggle takes place in the context of the long-term shift in the balance of power away from the West towards the rising powers of Asia and Eurasia. As genuine multipolarity takes hold no single hegemonic power can shape international politics, provoking resentment and fear in the declining party and exaggerated ambitions in those who see themselves as rising. The overall context is of a more mature postwar state system. The powers described above demand parity of esteem, but their economic and military resources are unequal.

The struggle can equally be described as one against hegemonism – the view that no state or power constellation should enjoy exclusive rights to define how international affairs should be conducted. The struggle thus becomes one against the appropriation of universalism by a partial power system, generated by its sense of an exceptional destiny. In this case, the norms of the Political West are deeply embedded in the Charter International System and, in terms of human rights and democracy, more closely aligned with its norms than most countries in the Political East. However, the claim that their model of the good life should enjoy certain privileges is considered a usurpation of the genuine universalism represented by the Charter System. It is resisted not only at the political but also at the civilizational and cultural levels. Above all, the universalism and exceptionalism of the Political West

⁷ Robert Legvold, "Ending the Cold War with Russia," *The National Interest*, 2 February 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ending-new-cold-war-russia-199997>

are expressions of geopolitical ambitions that undermine Charter-based sovereign internationalism.

Resistance to hegemonism can often act as a cover for all sorts of authoritarian and illiberal practices. Still, to the degree that anti-hegemonism is accompanied by an appeal to the impartiality of international law and the universal jurisdiction of Charter principles, anti-hegemonism can be presented as the true reflection of Charter norms. There is nevertheless an intrinsic contradiction within anti-hegemonism, appealing to universal norms but couched in the language of particularism. At its best, anti-hegemonism is more than an appeal to value relativism and the diversity of civilizations, but a more substantive call for respect for the foundational principle of the Charter international system, not only sovereign internationalism but also the values of human dignity embedded in the Charter. Normative anti-hegemonism does not deny democracy but rejects democratic internationalism when a comprehensive geopolitical power system hosts it.

A New Cold War It Is

As the cold peace gave way to renewed confrontation, the protagonists themselves increasingly applied the notion of the cold war. In an interview in April 2020, former president Dmitry Medvedev warned that American threats turned competition into confrontation and a renewal of cold war.⁸ China was initially reticent, believing the concept to be excessively Eurocentric and historically short-sighted. Regarding ideological rivalry, China was ‘anxious not to frame relations with the West as a new cold war,’ fearing that Soviet-style ideological expansionism could trigger a backlash.⁹ Chinese scholars opposed the use of the term because it misrepresented the current state of international politics and (this was only intimated) it reduced China to the status of the USSR. Even worse, it equated mighty China with struggling Russia. China refused to be boxed in by what was considered a stale and anachronistic (Eurocentric) category that failed to capture the enormity of China’s re-entry into world politics as a significant player. Wang Jisi, the head of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, stressed the distinctive character of the conflict. He argued that the U.S. and China are ‘embroiled in a contest that might prove more enduring, more wide-ranging, and more intense than any other international competition in modern history, including the Cold War.’¹⁰ Despite these caveats and reservations, the struggle between U.S. and China was

⁸ Dmitrii Medvedev, “Nevyuchennye uroki istorii,” [‘Unlearned Lessons of History’] *RIA Novosti*, 23 April 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210423/diplomatiya-1729522868.html>

⁹ Yan Xuetong, “Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (July-Aug. 2021): p. 40-47, especially at p. 42.

¹⁰ Wang Jisi, “The Plot Against China? How China Sees the New Washington Consensus,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (July-Aug. 2021): p. 48.

increasingly recognized by both sides as a cold war.¹¹ John Mearsheimer argues that the U.S. had been misguided in facilitating China's rise for the half-century from the 1970s, and the two were now locked 'in what can only be called a new Cold War – an intense security competition that touches on every dimension of their relationship'.¹²

The narrative of Cold War II does indeed restore Russia to centrality in international politics, giving perhaps too much credence to Russia's claimed power and status in world politics. At the same time, it privileges European affairs and commensurately once again reduces the Global South to a periphery in which the proxy struggles of the Northern powers are conducted. When it became clear to Beijing that the U.S. 'pivot to Asia' launched by Barack Obama and later reinforced by trade and investment restrictions in the Trump years represented an enduring policy shift towards long-term containment, the term became relevant for the Asian theatre as well. Chinese commentators were forced to embrace the notion of the cold war. It meant, if nothing else, managing a conflict and ensuring that the struggle did not become a direct confrontation. Although escalation management is often dismissed today as appeasement, the threat of nuclear confrontation is higher now than even during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The guardrails put in place since then have been systematically dismantled.

The second Cold War differs from the earlier one just as World War II differs from the first. In both cases, the follow-on conflict was provoked by unresolved contradictions in the way that the first ended and by long-term structural changes in international affairs and the global balance of power. The new conflict is structured by different ideologies, actors, and regions than the first, but the fundamental quality of the 'cold war' is reproduced. In such a 'Cold War II,' the struggle is no longer between socialism and capitalism and not even between democracy and autocracy, but between models of world order and paths to modernity. Today it is China rather than the Soviet Union that is the leading antagonist, but the U.S. and the Political West endures as the relevant counterpart. While Europe remains the core of one axis of conflict, East Asia plays no less of a role this time round.

The Global South and the Political East

In the earlier conflict there was a stable confrontation between what became the two superpowers, the U.S. and the USSR, whereas in Cold War II the conflict is rather more diffuse. Cold War I focused on Europe with global ramifications, while the

¹¹ As argued by Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2021): p. 10-20.

¹² John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2021): p. 48-58, and especially p. 48.

second is global by its very essence. It is far more entrenched and reflects not just a temporary power shift but the culmination of a historical epoch. China is a far more formidable and enduring protagonist than the Soviet Union ever was. At the same time, the logic of cold war entails domestic controls and repression. This proved fatal for the USSR, and its fate is instructive for China and the U.S. The USSR failed to adapt to the challenges of complex modernization, the ‘Leninist trap’ into which China could well fall. The Leninist attempt to maintain control through mechanical means, the exercise of coercion, and the dominance of a single party, hinders the development of more organic forms of stability management. The market left to its own devices, is far from self-correcting, but the opposite extreme – statist controls and political authoritarianism, can be equally destabilizing.

In the U.S. and much of the Political West, increasingly illiberal approaches to domestic critics of renewed cold war practices restrict some of the freedoms in whose name the struggle is conducted. Cold war liberalism has returned, in which liberal values are suborned in defense of the core values that are ostensibly being defended. The politics of emergency, in which normal legal and other procedures are suspended, characterizes a cold war. At the same time, the UN system is also being questioned as never before. Instead of acting as a forum for adjudicating conflicts, it has become another arena in which cold war struggles are conducted. This then spills out in attempts by the Political West to force the Global South to join the struggle against its opponents. Classic cold war stratagems are deployed, including political and economic inducements, with the threat of coercive regime change measures held in reserve.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 inaugurated a new era in international politics. Russia’s action was denounced in several UN General Assembly votes, but much of the Global South and non-aligned countries refused to be drawn into a conflict that was perceived not to be their concern. A total of 131 states voted for the 2 March 2022 General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion, with only 5 voting against it and 35 abstaining. The resolution called for the complete withdrawal of Russian forces and a reversal of its decision to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk. China and India abstained and avoided openly condemning Russia. The 7 April General Assembly vote on membership of the UN Human Rights Council saw 93 support Russia’s suspension, while 24 voted against and 58 abstained. Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Vietnam were among those who voted against, while those abstaining included India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Cambodia. A significant part of the Global South refused to be drawn as proxies in a cold war that was generated by

the Global North's endemic inability to resolve its internal conflicts.

The world has changed. The Charter international system has now matured. Comprised of some 200 states, the old hierarchies of international power are being challenged, and cold war practices contested. A range of international organizations is coming together to constitute a nascent Political East. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the BRICS (Brazil Russia, India, China and South Africa), as well as institutions that are based in the Political East but with global reach, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS' New Development Bank, as well as a plethora of regional associations. They are analogous to bodies established by the Political West but not necessarily the direct counterparts. The AIIB certainly complies with the highest standards of probity and sustainability, but the dynamic is different. The goal is not to ensure bloc cohesion and alignment with the concerns of a particular center, but to reinforce the principle of sovereign internationalism. The Political East is taking shape not just to fight the Second Cold War, but to transcend the logic on which cold wars are fought.

Conclusions

Despite deeply entwined economies and increasingly connected societies, Europe in 1914 drifted into an almost unimaginable war.¹³ In the interwar period, neither Nazi Germany nor imperial Japan was ready to abide by the rules of the international system of the time, and the rise of two revisionist powers once again led to war.¹⁴ Today all sides claim allegiance to the rules of the Charter order created after 1945; hence none are avowed revisionists, yet these competing claims to legitimacy have become a ground for contestation. Cold War II has become a genuinely global cold war, with various fronts in Asia, the Arctic, Africa, and the high seas, with a jagged 'iron curtain' in Europe. The cold war as a style of politics is back.

However, unlike Cold War I, more profound structural shifts in the balance of economic and military power to the East means that the Political West is challenged as never before. The struggle has an ideological component, but it is more ambiguous than the original conflict. The Political West is challenged by a more forthright appeal to the principles underpinning the Charter International System, and above all, by the so-called idea of sovereign internationalism. The Second Cold War is more dangerous than the first, and the outcome is far more uncertain.

¹³ For the earlier occasion, see Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books, 2014).

¹⁴ For a classic study, see A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1961]).