

WEST VS. NON-WEST: A NEW COLD WAR?

There is a noticeable and growing evolution of the global geopolitical balance of power and influence in the 21st century's system of international relations. The current hegemon, the unipolar United States, and the political system of Western liberalism that supports it, is under great strain and is in a state of relative decline. The challenger is a non-Western-centric multipolar order, which consists of a wide variety of countries spanning the globe, including what is referred to as the Global South. This 'crisis' of the Western order has prompted a tangible and informational response from the U.S. and its system, to defend their privileged hegemony and to deter the rise of alternative systems of power and influence in international relations.

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Periodically, global geopolitical power and influence transform and evolve in international relations. Currently, the world is experiencing such a shift in the 21st century. This is seen in the physical realm of people, places, and events. But it is also very much seen in the information realm, where people, places, and events in geopolitics are interpreted and represented. While the United States' unipolar hegemony is waning, the Western-centric order, driven by liberal democracy and anchored on Euro-Atlantic institutions, is fighting to maintain its global dominance. The challenger is a multi-varied system of Non-Western-centric powers attempting to establish a multipolar world order, creating their systems of power and influence to support a more pragmatic and interest-oriented approach to international relations.

Information as Representation in International Relations

There are three interrelated and interacting realms of existence in the human environment: physical, information, and cognitive realms. It is the physical realm where people, places, and events exist as they are in an objective form as they occur. The information realm is where those people, places, and events are interpreted or represented by people and institutions. Hence, varying degrees of subjectivity creep in. The cognitive realm is the third and final space, where individuals process the direct and indirect experience of the outside world, and relate it to their own experiences and beliefs to shape their worldview.¹ The development and distribution of modern information communication technologies have enabled a more all-encompassing use of communicating information to influence and persuade global audiences by engineering their perception of people, places, and events.

Regarding geopolitical strategy, information power can play an active and even perhaps decisive role as the fifth dimension of strategy (the other dimensions include: land, water, air, and space).² At a time when the global geopolitical order is shifting, when numerous players are jockeying for position in preparation for either survival or growth, knowledge and information are used by policymakers and practitioners as an impact and persuasion multiplier on the informational battlefield. Information operations are supportive of the foreign and security policy of individual countries and collective blocs.

Branding and reputation management are increasingly important and prominent for countries in the 21st century. To engage in the obstructive marketing of their 'other'

¹ David S. Alberts, John J. Garstka, Richard E. Hayes & David A. Signori, *Understanding Information Age Warfare* (Washington DC: CCRP Publication Series, 2001).

² David J. Lonsdale, *Information Power: Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Fifth Dimension*, (*The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1999), 22(2-3): 137-157.

through the deployment of orthodoxy of knowledge (creating consensus on the definition of persons, places, or events), these informational tools may be utilized to accomplish more than only identify, signal, and communicate about oneself within the system of international relations.³

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Cold War as a Conceptual Framework

The relevance of this branding and reputation management paper is that they help establish and maintain cognitive shortcuts and associations.⁴ This useful informational mechanism can be used to shape audience perceptions and opinions, and therefore reactions, within the context of international relations. There needs to be a very carefully considered and constructed use of language and rhetoric to prime and mobilize those international audiences’ imaginations, hearts, and minds to support or oppose concrete actors and policies. One of the means of achieving the above is by creating and applying concepts. Concepts are not only an essential part of the academic community but also the policymaker community.

One of the concepts or ideas utilized in an operational sense and understanding is the concept of crisis, which implies extraordinary circumstances that, in turn, require special measures to mitigate the effects of the named source of risk. This is a way and means to try to justify and legitimize circumventing the established ‘rules of the game’ by an actor in a manner that benefits them and disadvantages their opponent or intended target.⁵ A ‘crisis’ is a necessary process of engineering public consent through managing perceptions and the resulting opinions. An important aspect to understand is that every physical (tangible) crisis also has an accompanying crisis of information (intangible). The intangible component of the crisis is composed

³ For an explanation of orthodoxy of knowledge and obstructive foreign policy please see <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-orthodoxy-of-knowledge/>

⁴ Stephen Brown, *Brands and Branding*, (London: Sage, 2016).

⁵ Greg Simons, *Crisis in 21st Century Political Warfare*, Russia in Global Affairs, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/crisis-in-21st-century-political-warfare/>, 27 August 2019 (accessed 24 January 2023).

of various informational flows surrounding the physical crisis that identify and describe the crisis, but also convey meaning and signify its level of risk and effect. An actor that can dominate and/or influence those flows of information that surround a physical crisis is in a position of information dominance that results in being able to impose additional restraints and constraints on their opponent, which includes operational choices and decisions.

As the 21st century began, it was a triumphant era in the wake of the Cold War when the U.S.-led West emerged as the hegemonic unipolar global order after the Soviet and Eastern Bloc collapse, which was marked by slogans and catchphrases as “the end of history.” With this overconfidence, considering there was no equivalent power of the bipolar world order as a check and balance on each other, imbalance in international relations occurred, and from this, U.S. foreign and security policy over stretched. Concepts in international relations began early in the 21st century with such branded events and processes as the Colour Revolutions, the Global War On Terrorism, and the Arab Spring. This concerned the messianic-like mission of the West to spread an image of itself through its political ideology and geopolitics globally (the end of history). The period of uncontested unipolarity was high in terms of its negative effects and the costs of endless wars⁶ imposed on people, economies, and political and geopolitical systems.

Although the concept was initially slow to take hold in the imagination of scholars and others, in the wake of the 2008 Georgian-Russian War and especially after the events following Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2014, the New Cold War has gradually gained more significant intellectual currency. The concept of the New Cold War relies upon brand associations with the original bipolar-era Cold War as a means of reputation management (in terms of cognitively shaping a sense of commonly perceived legitimacy and urgency) in shaping the notion of a crisis and the need to rally and unite against a commonly understood threat. Furthermore, the invocation of the risks and dangers of a New Cold War signals the intention of the U.S.-led West to actively contest⁷ its relative decline from those powers in the international system that position themselves as challenging Western-centric hegemony.

The concept of the New Cold War is ideologically convenient for the intended

⁶ For example, see Brown University’s ‘Costs of War’ project website for a thorough analysis of the different costs and effects at <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>.

⁷ There are numerous works that engage with the theme of the New Cold War and seek the rally audiences to contest the relative decline of the West: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3111118/a-new-cold-war-for-the-developing-world-understanding-and-responding-to-the-bel/>; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/new-cold-war-nato-summit-united-states-russia-ukraine-china/>; <https://www.cfr.org/blog/new-cold-war-0/>; <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-three-challenges-for-the-west-in-the-new-cold-war/>. These are a mere narrow selection, to give the reader an overview of the ideological and geopolitical aspects of the New Cold War.

geopolitical task of contesting the relative decline of the Western order. It is not without its problems, though, owing to its nature as a subjective informational representation (one may even say, a projection) of the realities of the physical realm in contemporary geopolitics. Even though the brand name New Cold War suggests equivalence with the old Cold War, there are definite and significant differences⁸ that make these events objectively very different from each other. For example, the old Cold War was a bipolar global order of two relatively equal-strength military superpowers with a definite clash of their competing ideological preferences. Whereas the New Cold War features a multipolar order consisting of a wide variety of capabilities and capacities among small, medium, and large powers, the Western order tends to follow a more ideologically-informed agenda as opposed to the more pragmatic and national one-interest-based approach of the non-Western order.

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Transition of the Global Political and Geopolitical Landscape

The political and geopolitical landscape is in transition, seemingly evolving away from a Western liberal United States-led unipolar global order towards a more conservative (politically and culturally) Non-Western multipolar international order.⁹ The transformation is creating a lot of cause for concern and conjecture in policymakers, practitioners, and academic circles. This, in turn, creates an informational demand for prognoses and forecasting¹⁰ of the different possible

⁸ Please see the following links for various discussions on the differences between the old Cold War and the New Cold War: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-difference-between-americas-2-cold-wars/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/business/a-new-cold-war-would-differ-from-the-old.html>; <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/a-tale-of-two-cold-wars/>.

⁹ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit From Hegemony: The Unravelling of the American Global Order*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ For example, see the CSIS forecasts of different potential futures here: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/four-scenarios-geopolitical-order-2025-2030-what-will-great-power-competition-look>.

geopolitical constellations in the future. In the relatively declining Western order, the political system of Western liberalism is tied to and mutually supports U.S. geopolitical hegemony. The system of U.S. geopolitical hegemony and the hegemony of Western liberalism are mutually supportive and dependent on keeping the system of the Western order in place.¹¹ There is a clear and definite crisis of U.S. geopolitical hegemony and Western liberalism's legitimacy. The challenge to these is both internal as well as external, where the sources of internal decay may actually be more influential than the relative decline of the West.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, writing in an era of unchallenged American unipolar dominance, detailed the geostrategic imperatives of the U.S. to develop and retain its hegemony, drawing on the historical experience of the rise and fall of empires and civilizations. Three geostrategic imperatives were identified as being crucial to establish and maintain successfully: to keep vassal states dependent and pliant, to keep tributary states protected and pliant, to prevent competing orders from being established.¹² To preserve power and influence over other actors, whether from Western or Non-Western regions, the geostrategic imperative remains the same, and that is the maintenance of U.S. global hegemony that is preferably absolute. Although, the strategy of creating relative hegemony is also an option within the context of diminishing resources that affects their capability and capacity to challenge an increasing number of challengers.

The New Cold War in the Physical and Informational Domains

There is a distinct continuity in the West's ideological catchphrases and slogans that were used in the Cold War, which are now continuing to be used in the New Cold War. These revolve around specific sets of core norms and values, which are rhetorically being signaled as forming their 'benevolent' intention towards the internal and external worlds of the West. Some examples include vaguely defined and commonly used terms and concepts: democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and freedom of speech and expression. They are assumed and held as being ethically and morally superior to alternative and competing civilizational models. Still, those top policymakers and practitioners in the West are often completely out of touch with the life goals and priorities outside of their immediate political and ideological space. Hence the recent comments of the head of the European Union's External Action Service, Josep Borrell, when he referred to Europe as a garden, implying the rest of the world was a jungle in a diametrically opposed representation of civilization

¹¹ For example, see the following article that claims the Western system is not in decline, while mentioning the relationship between Western liberalism and US hegemony: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/usa/united-states/why-american-power-endures-us-led-order-isnt-in-decline-g-john-ikenberry>.

¹² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

and barbarianism. This was certainly not a one-off occasion, when Borrell later implored to a meeting with Latin American representatives, like the Conquistadores we must build a new world, a profoundly insensitive and out-of-touch interpretation of the legacy of Spanish colonialism in the region.¹³ Thus the informational domain interpretations and representations of the West being communicated to domestic and foreign audiences are apparent in the New Cold War: the West is a superior civilizational model, which needs to be preserved and emulated. However, this is coming at a time of an increasingly strained international relations system where competition and conflict are on the increase.

Significant parts of the world living beyond the so-called international community or rules-based order live a somewhat different physical and informational reality. The Western hegemony was not built upon benevolence, kind values, and norms. Still, a rather brutal and repressive system of colonialism in the Non-Western world, and this is not something that is forgotten in the present day.¹⁴ There are two separate and yet interrelated parts to the Western decline and the rise of the Non-West within the context of the New Cold War concept. One aspect is the clash of cultures (cultural warfare) that has grown from the leftist-liberal base, including the messianic and intolerant features of cancel culture and wokeism. This is destroying the various value and normative aspects that enabled centuries of Western hegemony, it is also an anathema to the more socially and culturally conservative countries of Central and Eastern Europe that were incorporated into the Western order after the Soviet collapse. Furthermore, the ideologically tenets of wokeism and cancel culture are repugnant to large swathes of the Non-Western world, making the Western model even less attractive. In short, it is killing Western civilization¹⁵ by undermining its sources and institutions of power and influence that served its hegemony for so long.

The other aspect of conflict in the New Cold War concept is the geopolitical competition and conflict that is being increasingly waged more aggressively, between the Western and Non-Western orders. The U.S.-led West largely waged it by vicarious warfare, which is often an indirect and covert means of warfare on the cheap against an opponent/target country that is neither transparent nor accountable. Vicarious warfare is a short-term tactic with long-term negative strategic consequences.¹⁶ A

¹³ See his speech (in Spanish) here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSfTuedXusE>.

¹⁴ For example, read the article in the following link for a perspective on how the Non-Western world views the historical legacy of the Western world and how this affects their perspectives on contemporary events and trends in international relations: <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/emerging-world-order-post-western-and-pre-plural>.

¹⁵ For an overview of the arguments why, please see: <https://www.cis.org.au/commentary/opinion/cancel-culture-is-destroying-our-society/> and <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1079/role-of-social-media-in-amplifying-neo-liberal-cancel-culture>.

¹⁶ Thomas Waldman, *Vicarious Warfare: American Strategy and the Illusion of War on the Cheap*, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

fundamental decision point in geopolitics occurs, when a hegemon is in a state of relative decline and other powers are growing at its expense. The critical question and point arise when the declining hegemon either manages its decline or contests that decline. In the period 2019-2020, this decision was made by the U.S. The U.S. decision-makers, practitioners, and policymakers (President Biden and RAND, for example) have undertaken the path of contesting its decline, based upon the principles outlined in Brzezinski's geostrategic imperatives.¹⁷ Currently, the operational focus and effort are on the information and cognitive realm, even though deadly events are playing out in the physical realm as the Russia-Ukraine War. The reason for this focus is a constraint and restraint of a relatively declining hegemon's operational capability and capacity. It is also motivated by the fact that there is a tendency for military operations to support information operations at the current geopolitical stage as a means of projecting a force multiplier effect – to make them look militarily stronger than they actually are as a means to intimidate and deter foe and to ensure compliance from vassal and client states.

The defense of Western hegemony has been in the making, at times subtly through the use of rebranding, for some time. One such subtle cue came when the so-called International Community (consisting of NATO, EU, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea) rebranded itself as being an order based upon the principles of international law to a 'rules-based' order.¹⁸ Information Operations¹⁹ have been at the forefront of the hegemonic defense and obstructive foreign policy against Non-Western actors. This was seen just before the start of the Russia-Ukraine War (and continues intensely) and in attempts to create a representative equivalence in a projected war between Taiwan and China, using many similar narratives and frames intended to engineer public consent.²⁰ These tactics are designed as cost-inducing measures²¹ against what are perceived as being the leading actors of the rising Non-Western multipolar order.

There have also been significant events occurring in the physical realm that were and are seen in events such as the trade war launched by the U.S. against China under President Trump and the current Russia-Ukraine War. However, the expected and demanded support for the U.S. proxy Ukraine has garnered very little support

¹⁷ Greg Simons, *Brzezinski's Geostrategic Imperatives in a Transforming Global Order*, (Geostrategic Pulse, December 2022), no. 287: 25-27.

¹⁸ For an analysis of this change and the effects, please see: <https://gpil.jura.uni-bonn.de/2019/01/rules-based-order-v-international-law/>.

¹⁹ To see a definition and explanation of Information Operations refer to: https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-13/3-13-AFDP-INFO-OPS.pdf.

²⁰ Greg Simons, 'Inevitable' and 'Imminent' Invasions: The Logic Behind Western Media War Stories, (*Journal of International Analytics*, 2022) 13, no. 2: 43–58.

²¹ For an example of US thinking on imposing cost inducing measures, see the 2019 RAND report here: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10014.html.

beyond the West and its rules-based order, which is seen in United Nations voting patterns²² on matters pertaining to Ukraine and the war. This lack of ability of the U.S. and the West to rally and build coalitions against Russia has made them appear weak, ineffectual, and out of touch with the sentiment and interests of the Non-Western world. The system of U.S. vassal and client states remains pliant at the elite political level for now, even though their interests and security are being eroded by U.S. demands to support Ukraine in the war. Attempts to force neutral or non-aligned states from the Non-Western world, such as India and Türkiye, have been largely unsuccessful owing to the pragmatic pursuit of their interests and security. Creating the proxy war, using Ukraine as its proxy (as another example of vicarious warfare) was a risky move. It may, in fact have the effect of accelerating the Western order's decline rather than saving it.

Concluding Remarks

The New Cold War began as a geopolitical representation of international relations in the beginning of the 21st century. This was intended as a clear signal to the world the identity and intentions of the U.S. and its system of vassal and client states that constitute the Western order. A motivation for invoking the New Cold War concept was done from a position of weakness and desperation of the relatively declining state of U.S. global hegemony. By engineering the perception of a crisis of the West and U.S. hegemony, it was hoped to prime and mobilize global audiences in support of its preservation and against the relatively strengthening Non-Western order. Disequilibrium in the international system creates ripples of chaos, disorder and recklessness.

U.S. and Western ability to effectively understand and manage this disequilibrium has been influenced by the radical ideology of wokeism and cancel culture that has enforced groupthink along with the fundamental pillars that support and uphold the system of U.S.-led Western hegemony. This has been compounded by rash and ill-advised foreign and security policies in the uncontested unipolar era. Attempts to shore up the cracks in Western hegemony have failed miserably, such as the U.S. rout from Afghanistan in 2021, the failed trade war with China, and the unpredictability of the war in Ukraine. Words must be backed and supported by actions, otherwise, there is no credibility. The conceptual construct of the New Cold War is now a reality, but rather than saving Western hegemony, it may accelerate its demise.

²² See for example: <https://time.com/6222005/un-vote-russia-ukraine-allies/> and <https://www.stimson.org/2022/red-cell-2-is-the-west-losing-the-global-south/>.