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A different kind of battle

Why we are wrong to apply a Cold War prism to the current global power struggle

Read this article in German or Russian.

The past is not the present. Applying historical terms to present-day situations can muddy rather than clarify a situation.

Yet no-one wants to leave the 'Cold War' term where it belongs – in the past. Americans especially find it difficult to let the term go. Political scientist Robert Legvold writes about a 'Return to Cold War', while Eugene Rumer, a former U.S. national intelligence officer for Russia, has discerned a 'Cold War, Twenty-First-Century Style'. Michael McFaul even pushed the analogy further in a recently published account of his time as US ambassador in Moscow, titled 'From Cold War to Hot Peace'.

The term Cold War was coined after the Second World War to describe the ideological and global conflict between the Soviet Union and its communist allies on the one hand, and the US, western European nations and their allies on the other. The use of nuclear weapons by the US or Russia was a constant threat.

Historically speaking, the term encapsulates the period between 1947, when then US President Harry S. Truman promised to defend countries against Soviet aggression, up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.

Today's global powers are engaged neither in an ideological nor economic conflict. At a surface glance, we seem to have Russia in one corner and the US, EU member countries, and Georgia and Ukraine in the other. The rest of the world is on the sidelines, observing what is going on with irritation, worry, or in the case of China, quiet glee.

New players, new rules

In reality, the current power struggle has many more players. As the pillars of the long-standing global security order have started to crumble, appreciation of a multipolar world order based on values, norms and cooperative security has dwindled in tandem. So too has appreciation for the institutions that make such peace possible, such as the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). And military conflicts are no longer off the table under the current US security doctrine.

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Today's strong nations are preparing for a new international order, although the term 'order' is misleading as it is primarily fuelled by competing power interests. The US wants to retain its dominance, while China and Russia want to see a multipolar world.

In 1989, US political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the 'end of history', or the end of competition between liberal and authoritarian ideologies. This end of history lasted but a mere quarter of a century because the balance of power between the US, China, Russia, the EU and other countries has shifted enormously.

Under the Trump administration, the US has decided to go it alone. As a country that has dominated the global order until now, it ought to realise that sharing its former leadership role is the only viable solution in this changed world.

China today wields significant economic power across the world, not least through its 'One Belt, One Road Initiative' initiative to build new trade routes from East to West. Although the country also values global trade, it will want to expand its sphere of influence.

Russia, another authoritarian state, wants to regain the leadership role it occupied during the second half of the 20th century – not just because of its size but also because of its military strength.

The EU feels economically strong but is undergoing a period of upheaval as it faces key challenges, placing it in a weak position in this type of security policy tug of war. The EU lacks the qualities to be a power player, even though it ought to play a key role in any pursuit of a multilateral world order.

Uncertain goals

John Lewis Gaddis, a distinguished analyst of the 'Cold War' listed the prerequisites for a peaceful rapprochement between the US and the Soviet Union in a 1983 *Foreign Affairs*article. They included 'parity in the strategic arms race, a downplaying of ideological differences, a mutual willingness to refrain from challenging the interests of rivals,' and finally, decisive leadership in the face of obstacles such as warped communication, stubborn bureaucracy or public outrage.

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At present, these conditions are not being met. Worse still, instead of an easing of friction, there is an almost daily further build-up of tension on all sides.

Trust in the statements of the other side was already lost during the past quarter century. Ever since the Iraq war, the Yugoslav war, NATO's eastward expansion, the Russian-Georgian war, the annexation of Crimea and the military conflicts in the Donbass region of Ukraine, no one believes public proclamations anymore.

One of the main reasons for this is that the goal ahead is unclear. Peace alone does not seem to be enough. Germany's *Ostpolitik* was driven by a desire for the reunification of Germany and reconciliation with eastern European countries. The US and the Soviet Union began difficult disarmament negotiations to avoid waging a nuclear war. A vision of peaceful Europe fuelled the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, which concluded with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the OSCE's founding document, and the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe.

What is our goal today? On what should the negotiations centre? What are the sought-after win-win issues?

At a superficial level, this looks like a conflict between East and West. In actual fact, the world's major powers are increasingly pursuing a policy of national egoism. They want to be able to defend their sovereignty in a highly volatile international system and safeguard stable conditions for their national economic and political development.

Terms such as 'Cold War' or 'Hot Peace' are not fitting against this background. They do not capture the real conflict. Because what we are seeing is a global competitive struggle where the normal rules of engagement do not apply.
Only in Europe has this battle played out as a seemingly familiar conflict.

At its core, however, it is altogether different.



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