Not so long ago there was a genuine debate as to whether a new Cold War was in the process of emerging. Today, there are far fewer voices denying that a new Cold War already exists. Currently, there is a global crisis in terms of diverging interests in international relations and geopolitical issues, which has witnessed an increase in political tensions around the world as a result of increased competition and conflict between countries and blocks of countries. The reasons given for the development of the current situation vary considerably. There was a prediction that a new Cold War could emerge from the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) that was declared in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, owing to the similarities with the ‘old’ Cold War.

This ‘long war’ (GWOT) is explicitly compared to the Cold War as a similar sort of zero-sum, global-scale, generational struggle against anti-Liberal ideological extremists who want to rule the world. Both have been staged as a defence of the West, or Western civilisation, against those who would seek to destroy it (Buzan, 2006: 1101).

The use of a specific story narrative seems to take place, which makes use of very specific norms and values as well as a dialectic struggle between two extremely opposed political and ideological forces. Another point of view is that the United States treated the end of the Cold War more as a victory, rather than an opportunity.

According to the author of the New York Times opinion piece, the United States sought to capitalise on its advantage offered by the Soviet collapse and impose its will upon other countries in a manner that stressed power projection, territorial control and regime change. However, many challenges have begun to emerge
in the 21st century, not least of which is the gradually rise of military and economic power in the East and its decline in Europe. Various challengers to the United States’ role as the global hegemonic power have emerged, such as radical Islam, China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. The CIA Director, Mike Pompeo, publicly stated that the main threats to US national security and national interests were: international terrorism (namely al Qaeda and ISIS); North Korea; a resurgent Iran; Russia and other state and non-state actors that use information to subvert democracies (naming Wikileaks and hostile non-state actor intelligence services).[ii] However, opinion does diverge on the issue of the assumed and perceived risks, such as the Russian threat for example, which is matched on the opposing geopolitical side.

One line of argument is that “Russian meddling” gets far more attention and credit than it deserves.[iii] A point very recently raised is that the aspect of the New Cold War with Russia is not accurate of reflecting the old Cold War with the Soviet Union as previously the rivalry involved two powers that were more or less perceived as being symmetrical in terms of military capacity whereas today it is very much asymmetric as the US is much more tangibly powerful.[iv] This is in part reflected by a military budget that is far greater than Russia’s and all of the other countries that lead in terms of military spending.[v]

Another point that has been raised, in Latvia this time, a newspaper article reminded its readers that alertness is a much more preferable state of mind to be in than paranoia. In particular, concern was expressed on the very liberal use of such labels as “agent of Russian influence” and “hybrid war” in the public sphere.[vi] In Russia a website was opened (predatel - betrayer), which named and listed a number of public figures that were accused of ‘betraying’ Russia. These mechanisms are intended to create a ‘spiral of silence’ that has the effect of gradually narrowing the public debate on the issue through the practice of character assassination.

There is also the issue of threat perception and opinion from countries other than those found in the European Union and the United States. A Pew Poll conducted across nearly 42,000 respondents from 38 different countries around the globe on perceived threats to their country during February-May in 2017 presents a different picture. The mostly widely perceived threats were from the Islamic State (62%) and global climate change (61%). Threats emanating from countries, saw a global average ranked US power and influence (35%), Russian power and influence (31%) and Chinese power and influence (31%) as the three lowest ranked threats.[vii]

In this increasing tense geopolitical environment, a number of initiatives have been launched by actors to try and discredit the negative reportage on them from foreign sources. For example, the European Union’s Eaststratcom and Disinformation Review (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/) and the corresponding initiatives in countries such as China and Russia. This has come at a time when public trust and confidence in the mainstream media has been falling.[viii] This forms part of the spectrum of the fake news narrative, which may not necessarily be fake news in its own right but reflecting a contest credibility and legitimacy among rival states that are fighting to have the winning narrative that persuades and influences the global publics. In such an increasingly toxic environment it is difficult to source reliable and accurate news at a point in time when it is needed the most.

This is evident in the times when there are accusations of a New McCarthyism being waged in the media sphere. One such episode saw the Washington Post publish a story that tarnished and smeared individuals and media outlets, along the lines that Maris Zanders of Latvia was warning about. Some media outlets reacted to the “blacklist story” in terms that included “shameful” and “disgusting.”[ix] This has led some leading academics and investigative journalists to make the accusation that mainstream media outlets are producing “fake news” on Russia and other ‘officially proclaimed’ enemies of the West.[x] A similar trend is observed in Russia and other countries that seek to create a narrative of an official national enemy in order to prime and mobilise their publics. There is a rapidly spiralling decline in relations between
Russia and the West in terms of official state to state level relations too. Observers on the different geopolitical sides are increasingly warning of the unpredictable direction of the current global crisis.

The tit-for-tat sanctions between the US and EU versus Russia have caused both sides to become increasingly fatigued with each other at a time when the channels of communication between them are becoming increasingly restricted and political calls for a tougher stance on the other are gaining pace.

If there is one thing that the overwhelming majority of policymakers and experts in Moscow and Washington now agree on is that the current crisis in US-Russia relations is spiralling in its character, systemic in its nature and lingering in its resolution prospects. The rest of the discourse is ripped between narratives of who’s to blame for what and interpretations on just how reasonable the US sanctions are or asymmetric Russia’s response is.

There are an increasing number of stories appearing in the media that are documenting the gradually increasing tensions in Europe, which emphasize a narrative of the Cold War. The New York Times ran a headline in August 2017 – US Troops Train in Eastern Europe to Echoes of the Cold War[xi] or in Reuters a headline Russia: Pence Balkans Comments Expose Washington’s Cold War Ideology.[xii] Warnings have begun to appear in mainstream media headlines, such as the Washington Post’s We’re on the Road to a New Cold War.[xiii] Others have resisted referring to the situation of the confrontation (in particular originating in the wake of Euromaidan and Crimea) between the West and Russia as a ‘new’ Cold War, yet still categorising Russia and the West as adversaries (Legvold, 2014). There are other voices that say there is no doubt that a ‘new’ Cold War is under way.

Henry Kissinger one of the most prominent geopolitical thinkers from the United States for the last decades states that there is a ‘new’ Cold War and that part of the blame rests with the West and its lack of willingness to take non-western actors security and national interests in to account. The result he claims has been an imbalance in international relations, which is exacerbated by the West not being “honest” with itself.[xiv] Zbigniew Brzezinski another prominent geopolitical thinker also assessed that a ‘new’ Cold War had begun, referencing the point in time in line with the events in Ukraine and Crimea in particular. Although he did not see the situation as a threat as Kissinger does, but rather a positive sign that the world was ‘standing up to’ Russia.[xv] However, what has been described here is only one relatively small part of a much larger and more complex series of events and processes in the global crisis.

In the wake of the Arab Spring there has been a lot of turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa, which has become even more complicated lately with the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This is in addition to the US-led Global War On Terrorism (GWOT) that has been ongoing since 2001, with no end in sight. The Asia Pivot initiated by President Obama has led to an increase in tensions between the US and China, which is very evident in the South China Sea currently. There has also be an increase in tensions and competition between different actors in South America, where although the Monroe Doctrine predominates the GWOT distracted US attention that permitted other actors to take hold. The recent threat of the possible use of military force by the US on Venezuela may signal a return of open geopolitical engagement in the region.

In December 2017, the Trump administration released the National Security Strategy of the United States, and firmly categorised China and Russia as being part of an ‘other’ camp in a return of openly announced geopolitical competition, [xvi] but without the rules and safeguards that evolved in the wake of the experience of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The border clashes between India and China, the changing
geopolitical alliances among India, Pakistan, Russia and the United States, plus the prospects of war with North Korea, all signal an increasing unpredictable and volatile world of increasing risks and threats. Any one of the above-mentioned tensions and conflicts can potentially transform from cold to hot at a moment’s notice. How these different processes and events are narrated and perceived by the different sides needs to be understood, not from a single perspective, but multiple perspectives, which is something that is greatly lacking today. Given that there is little to no trust between the main antagonists, couples with a distinct lack of open channels of constructive communication (mutual recriminations and name-calling does not constitute ‘constructive criticism’) between these players, plus completely new rules of the game being unilaterally imposed by the Trump administration that tends to exacerbate these antagonisms, the world is a much lesser safer and predictable place as a result. Common sense and cool heads are required to bring the situation back into a safer zone of dialogue and engagement so that the world does not end as the result of an ill placed tantrum or tweet.

One aspect that has received relatively little attention in this New Cold War discussion is the division between the various rival and competing camps. In the old Cold War, it was more or less clear with an ideological division that saw the global competition between democracies that were led by the United States facing Communism that was championed by the Soviet Union. Currently this division does not apply and is more nuanced and complex. The traditional political spectrum that went left to right to explain political affiliations and directions has lost a lot of its meaning in the contemporary political environment that has seemingly added an additional axis of “cultural liberal” to “cultural conservative”. This ideological rivalry is waged with diametrically opposing sets of norms and values. This is a self-perceived and appointed description of political culture, “liberalism” holds dear key aspects and beliefs such as multi-culturalism and globalisation and the “conservative” political forces oppose these.

Not all “conservative” forces are equal, let alone allied, displaying diversity in terms of social and political programmes and identity. This could be the conservatism found in the extremist forms of the Sunni branch of Islam, such as al Qaeda or Islamic State, Russia, China, the various populist political movements in Europe (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic or Austria for example), Iran and conservative Shia Islam or the events in the United States that have been awakened since Trump’s election as President. There is no one single clear leader among them to lead the movement, but many different political interests and priorities that not only clash with liberalism, but with other conservative projects as well.

Liberalism as the current global political hegemony is under grave pressure to maintain this position. It is an ideology that is certainly more united than the conservative counterparts. Up until the election of Trump, it was led by the United States and symbolically ended when the outgoing President Obama handed the leadership of global liberalism from the United States to Germany’s Angela Merkel.[xviii] Liberal democracy, in spite of its rhetorical adherence to the values of democracy and tolerance, has been one of the leading exponents of military power in order to “export” democracy. A trend that has increased with the end of the old Cold War owing to the demise of its military and political counterbalance the Soviet Union, giving the impression that the US-led liberal world could do as it pleased. The focus was on the short-term vision of its tangible military superiority and the reserve of soft power that had been accumulated during the Cold War. The excesses, however, have revealed that the unwise and unconsidered (especially in terms of long-term perspectives) application of military power has decimated the soft power potential, significantly weakened the capacity of its hard power.[six] compromised the credibility of the liberal system and created a plethora of enemy and rival actors. In relative terms, something now acknowledged in both the US and United Kingdom, military power and political influence is in decline and the rivals are seemingly in the ascendency. Historically many hegemons did not fall primarily because of the pressure of external hostile forces (they finished them off), but rather an internal decay that adversely affected the ability for clear, rational decision-making that built national security and
interests. The mind sets of its decision-makers became entrenched and corrupted, incapable of change in
the face of self-created risks and vulnerabilities. It will be interesting to see how history judges this
moment in our time, hundreds of years from now.

References

Legvold, R. (July/August 2014), Managing the New Cold War: What Moscow and Washington Can Learn
From the Last One, Foreign Affairs 93(4), 74-84

End Notes


[iii] Director Pompeo Delivers Remarks at INSA, News & Information, Central Intelligence Agency,

[iii] Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A., Russia’s Meddling Gets More Credit Than it Deserves, New Eastern

[iv] Tsygankov, A., Russia and the West: A New Cold War?, Sustainable Security,
https://sustainablesecurity.org/2017/12/22/russia-and-the-west-a-new-cold-war/, 22 December 2017
(accessed 27 December 2017)

[v] Breene, K., Which Countries Spend the Most on Their Military?, World Economic Forum,
https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/the-us-spends-more-on-defence-than-all-of-these-countries-combined/, 2 March 2017 (accessed 27 December 2017)

[vii] Zanders, M., Alertness not Same as Paranoia, Latvijas Avize, 19 January 2017 in Johnson’s Russia

[vii] Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats, Pew Research

[viii] Harrison, A., Can you Trust the Mainstream Media?, The Guardian,
https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/aug/06/can-you-trust-mainstream-media, 6 August 2017
(accessed 8 August 2017)


[x] Herman, E. S., Fake News on Russia and Other Official Enemies, Monthly Review,
, 1 July 2017 (accessed 17 August 2017)


[xix] This is clearly seen in the falling moral of the armed forces and significantly in the number of suicides among current and former members of the armed forces: in 2016 some 20 veterans were committing suicide each day - https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2016/07/07/new-va-study-finds-20-veterans-commit-suicide-each-day/; suicide killed more US troops than enemy action (a similar result for the British Army in Afghanistan too) - https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2016/12/29/suicide-kills-more-us-troops-than-isil-middle-east/95961038/

---

About the Author

---
Greg Simons

Associate Professor Greg Simons is a senior researcher based at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University in Sweden and a Lecturer at the Department of Communication Sciences at Turiba University in Latvia. One of his primary research interests is the study of the interaction of politics and information on the conduct of contemporary armed conflicts.


Links:
[7] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/the-us-spends-more-on-defence-than-all-of-these-countries-combined/
[22] http://smallwarsjournal.com/comment/reply/82844#comment-form