

Notes on the New Cold War?

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The term 'Cold War' (old or new) hides rather than describes; also, a profound difference between the former era and the present one.

1. The older era---A *Systemic Confrontation*

(a) This was criss-crossed by various nationalist rivalries within the Communist bloc---Asia, Indochina, Balkans.

(b) Unjustified post-WWII Soviet political-military domination over East European bloc countries---not the reason but the excuse for US-led NATO containment policy against the USSR.

(c) There were no serious capitalist inter-imperialist rivalries because of a US super-imperialism creating European imperialisms subordinate or complementary to its own ambitions---whether British, French, Spanish or Portuguese.

(d) There were US-led actual or proxy wars against National Liberation movements of 50s, 60s and 70s in the Third World that were looking for, or getting support from, USSR, China or Cuba.

(e) Western support for dictatorial regimes faced with socialist-led struggles internally.

The principal features of this systemic rivalry/hostility are not fundamentally explainable by standard Realist 'balance of power' thinking although a Realist dimension of behaviour can be said to exist e.g., Sino-US entente vis-à-vis USSR; US-China-Kampuchea line-up against Vietnam.

2. After collapse of the Communist bloc and break-up of USSR and the internal transitions to capitalism, above all in the two biggest nuclear-armed countries of Russia and China, a new era is established. The old era witnessed 'victory' on one side and 'defeat' on the other, i.e., the end of systemic conflict and the compulsions emerging from that foundational socio-economic-political difference. The characteristics of this era are the following:

(a) In this era, Russia and China have been basically reactive powers to the US. Neither has wanted the US to see it as a strategic opponent let alone as a strategic enemy but were and are determined to be independent (not subordinate to the US like the major West European countries) and to expand as imperialist powers in their own right.

(b) It is US behaviour and initiatives that has basically determined the unfolding trajectory of the respective Russian and Chinese relationships with the US. This is not to deny the role played by their own respective ambitions in influencing their bilateral relationship with the US; but the main strategic driver has always been what the US thinks and does.

(c) The emergence of Russia and China as major capitalist powers is historically and sociologically fundamentally different from that of the major European and Japanese imperialisms. The ruling classes of Russia and China have emerged completely independently of the US dominated world

order of post-WWI or WWII, and indeed in basic opposition to the US and Western Europe. Today, Russia and especially China are bureaucratic capitalisms having a basic imbrication of the ruling class and the state which is quite different from the relationship between ruling class and state in the advanced capitalisms of the West and even in Japan. They will do their best not to become politically subordinate to the US, hence the relatively durability of tensions between the US, China, Russia.

(d) The US is still the super-imperialist power vis-a-vis Europe (West and East) and Japan as well as with regard to other emerging/aspiring regional imperialisms (or sub-imperialisms) like Brazil, Turkey, India, South Africa, possibly Indonesia, certainly Israel.

However, unlike the past when the key fault-line of the world order was the systemic divide; in today's *capitalist world order* (one can safely ignore Cuba and North Korea as outliers) the dominant characteristic is the US informal empire project---a super-imperialism co-existing with serious inter-imperialist tensions given the challenges posed to it by Russia and China.

3. This is, and will remain, a contest between one truly global power and two regional ones.

(a) The US for a prolonged period after 1991 prepared on two fronts vis-a-vis China. It made preparations both to treat China as a potential strategic opponent (even a possible enemy) and also to treat as not such an opponent given the strength of the economic relationships established between the two economies which has no parallel with the economic relationships with either Russia or China in the period of a systemic divide, despite the Sino-US political entente of those times. The US foreign policy consensus has now finally arrived at the view that China is a strategic opponent with some voices in Washington portraying it as even a strategic enemy.

(b) Given this new reality, both countries are seeking in their different ways to economically and politically outflank the other and to strengthen themselves militarily. On the military and nuclear front, the US remains the principal instigator of the ongoing arms race with both Russia and China, not least through the militarisation-nuclearisation of outer space. The US pursues this effort at political-military containment through NATO and its Asia-Pacific security alliances of various kinds. It seeks economic pressurising through its much stronger influence within the WB/IMF/WTO and through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). China pursues its effort to economically counter the US and widen its sphere of economic-political influence through its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) which includes transcontinental maritime security arrangements, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Asia Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB).

(c) The US has assets that will enable it to retain No. 1 position even as economically it will experience relative but not absolute economic decline even as China surpasses it in total GDP calculations. But China will never reach the per capita GDP levels of a prosperous Western European country or that of US or Japan. As the perceptive observer Perry Anderson has outlined, these US assets are (i) it is the *largest advanced capitalist country* (Russia is not an advanced capitalist country) in the world constantly nourished by the immigration of the young and talented, including from China itself. (ii) It is the *strongest* capitalist country in the world not just militarily (which is obvious) but technologically (given its unmatched university-research structure it is ahead in most though not all hi-tech frontier areas). (iii) It is, unlike China or Russia, the most *politically unified* country with no internal political-territorial challenges of any kind contrasting with Russia (Crimea, Chechnya) or China (Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan). (iv) It is the *safest capitalist country* in the world. Where would the wealthiest people and members of all ruling classes want to park some of their money to ensure its enduring safety if not in Wall Street and the US! In China or Russia? The US dollar will remain the most important international currency whatever advances the Yuan or

Euro may make. Moreover, the relationship of forces between capital and labour in the US is so heavily weighted in favour of the former. There is certainly going to be stronger socio-political challenges in the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China than in the US, whose relatively more democratic and federated structure creates multiple nodes of authority that serve to fragment the focus of various mobilisations and demands by the public. (v) Finally, the US is the *purest capitalist country* in the world and therefore not only are its distinctive managerial and accounting procedures so modular and transportable to other countries; but that this very much also characterises its output of the most modern forms of mass culture---music, dance, films, TV shows, sports, internet freedom and social media platforms (zoom, facebook, What's app are all headquartered in the US), etc,. All this helps to disproportionately shape the values and aspirations of the public of other countries. Where Chinese exceptionalism belongs to the past as do the exceptionalisms of Russia, India and Europe, American exceptionalism, as has been pointed out by a number of scholars, is distinctive in being both unique and imitable i.e., transportable. This gives the US a cultural-emotional magnetism of sorts which other countries and cultures do not have to anywhere near the same degree. This does not exercise any decisive pull but it is an advantage others do not possess.

(d) Irrespective of the fluctuating Russian role, China will not replace the US as world Number One; nor will it ever establish an alliance structure that can match the range and depth of that held by its US rival.

4. However, in this new era of one super-imperialist power co-existing with a triadic form of major inter-imperialist tensions, then unlike in the older era there will be no eventual victor or loser. Both US relative supremacy and China's uneven rise will be progressively less and less consequential. Even without a World War III (improbable but not impossible) the clear unfolding script is that of an increasingly unmanageable, turbulent and chaotic world order of (i) ecological devastation, (ii) persistent mass poverty and obscene inequalities of income and wealth, (iii) steady erosion of political-democratic forms of governance, and (iv) the ever present possibility of a nuclear breakout of some sort somewhere.

Strategic thinking about the future is inescapably speculative. But for it to be somewhat intelligent speculation informed by current realities, the time-span for such thinking cannot exceed twenty or so years into the future. What has been presented here is within this time span and is undoubtedly a bleak perspective. Can things turn out very differently and much more positively? Not unless an anti-capitalist breakthrough emerges somewhere to give promise and hope that across national boundaries we can recognise our common humanity and collectively organise to overcome the four 'horsemen of the apocalypse', as it were, that have been detailed in the preceding paragraph. Systemic change of a new and better kind in the current world order is what can save us.

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P.S.

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