

### Mini-Essay 4

Is the US presently seeing the emergence of a 'New Cold War'? If so, with whom & why? If not, what is the likely US response to a rising China and assertive Russia?

The Cold War ended in the early 1990s and heralded what was hoped would be the rise of a new era of peace and prosperity under a "New World Order". The Soviet Union had collapsed and fragmented, leaving the United States as the world's only superpower.

While for a time it appeared that the dominance and hegemony of the United States, an era of *Pax Americana*, would go uncontested – now there can be said to be the beginnings of new challengers that could go up against the might of the US. Both Russia and China have shown signs of growth and militaristic power politics that run directly against the intentions and foreign policy goals of the United States, and both of these emerging powers do have potential to pose a serious threat to some US interests.

This essay will show, however, that although there may well be a new dynamic emerging in world politics that puts the United States in conflict with other major international players, it is not comparable with the Cold War and although there may be flashpoints it is not necessarily going to escalate to the terrifying levels that existed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Cold War was such an important and wide-ranging conflict because of the relative strengths of the two competing superpowers. Such a war cannot exist in the modern age when the imbalance between the US and every other country is so extreme.

When considering the existence of a potential ‘new Cold War’, one of the most important features to address is that the United States is unparalleled in terms of economic, military and political might in today’s world. The United States spends almost 36% of the world’s entire military expenditure, three times more than second-placed China, (Perlo-Freeman & Solmirano, 2014, Fact Sheet) and has a nominal GDP nearly double that of any other country, with China again in second place (IMF, 2014). The United States also has the world’s largest arsenal of active nuclear weapons, some 10% or 500 more active warheads than the nearest country, Russia. (Hans & Norris, 2014) With such superiority, it is impossible for any country to be considered true equals with the US, which would allow for the possibility of a Cold War-like scenario.

It is true, though, that Russia has returned somewhat towards a nationalistic foreign policy under the guidance of President Vladimir Putin – as the attempt at transitioning the country from communism to capitalism was largely seen as a botched experiment by the West that drastically impacted Russian fortunes, leading to a lost decade. In his three terms in office so far, Putin has tried to reinvigorate the national spirit present in the Soviet Union in various ways, including enhancing “the role of the state in all activity” (Gidadhubli, 2007, p. 19) – and these are becoming increasingly militaristic.

The diplomatic stand-off in recent years between Russia and the West has definitely been reminiscent of Cold War posturing. The expansion of NATO since the fall of the Soviet Union has meant that the span of the organisation, originally designed to counter-balance the threat of Soviet aggression towards Western Europe, has moved ever eastward into what was the Soviet sphere of influence. This has worried Russia, as they see this as further US/Western aggression towards their territory and

that they are in danger of being targeted economically, politically and perhaps militarily.

It is for this reason that Russia has engaged in numerous Cold War-style interventions in neighbouring states in trying to maintain a 'cordon sanitaire' with the West. In 2008 Georgia was the target, as Russia intervened in support of the South Ossetian independence movement – which was strongly pro-Russia in its' sentiment. Last year, Russia swiftly annexed Crimea from Ukrainian territory and supported further separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine. These moves have been seen to "return Moscow as an active player in Europe for the first time since 1989" (Trenin, 2014) and have created significant tensions in international politics.

While such action was not taken after Russian intervention in Georgia, the United States and European Union last year introduced trade sanctions on Russia based upon their actions in Ukraine. This is seen as proof, by Legvold, that:

"The crisis in Ukraine has pushed the two sides over a cliff and into a new relationship, one not softened by the ambiguity that defined the last decade of the post-Cold War period, when each party viewed the other as neither friend nor foe. Russia and the West are now adversaries." (Legvold, 2014)

These, along with falling worldwide oil prices, have helped hasten an economic recession in Russia. While this is indicative of the sort of measures that would be appropriate for a 'new Cold War', the way in which the Russian economy is responding so poorly to these events shows just how fragile it remains and that it cannot truly be an adversary of the United States in terms of a 'new Cold War'. The United States can maintain these sanctions to keep a check upon Russian assertiveness, and although they may not completely forestall their foreign ambitions

it certainly provides a big discouragement that will tip the balance of Eastern European influence in favour of the US and Europe, in line with American interests.

China, for its consideration as a possible 'new Cold War' participant, has been somewhat more subdued in its' actions compared to Russia but still poses a threat. Its spectacular economic growth over the last few decades, growing between 3.8% and 15.2% annually between 1980 and 2013 (IMF, 2014), combined with its' enormous potential given its' vast population, has led to it being termed a potential new superpower. It also has an enormous trade surplus with the United States, worth over \$7 trillion since 1995 (U.S. Census Bureau, Foreign Trade, 2015) which means that China holds significant economic leverage over the US.

China too has taken military action to assert its' power in recent decades – with its' aggression towards Taiwan, which it claims as part of its' "one China" policy; particularly in 1996 where it held missile tests off the coast of the island in a bid to influence the outcome of elections being held there. While later that year President Clinton said that the "one China" policy "is good for the United States, the PRC, Taiwan and the entire region" (Qimao, 1996, p. 1065), he also authorised "two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area near Taiwan to 'monitor Chinese military actions'" (ibid., p. 1055). Just like during the Cold War, the US felt obligated to protect a territory on behalf of its' interests against another major power.

However, despite China's growth and its' large military power it does not show antagonism towards the US in the way that would suggest a Cold War scenario could develop between them. While trade does not always signify good relations between states, the sheer volume of US/China trade does indicate that they are both important to each other economically. Despite numerous human rights concerns,

the United States does not publically denounce the Chinese policies, for instance towards Tibet. China may be a threat to overall US dominance in the long-term, but at the moment they are far too important an ally in economic terms to distance in the way a 'new Cold War' would, so the only course of action that can be taken is to maintain good relations and encourage, but not coerce, domestic change.

While tensions certainly still exist between the US and other world powers such as Russia and China, there is no evidence to suggest that a 'new Cold War' will emerge from them – and certainly not to the same extent as before the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian aggression under President Putin and Chinese economic advancement is certainly a threat to US interests, but not so much that its' global strategy need be as antagonistic as it was in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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