

Cold War, Cold Peace, and the Colour Revolutions

Are we in a New Cold War with China and Russia?

A possible New Cold War became a much discussed topic since about 2017 when the term Great Power Competition was (re)introduced in the National Security Strategy in the first year of the Trump administration.

Opinions on the matter vary and lead to passionate discussions. Some observers started using the term early: George Kennan, the eminent theoretician of the original Cold War, already in the late 1990s. Edward Lucas wrote a full book on it in 2008. Those early mentions meant the New Cold War as a return or continuation of the confrontation with Russia. China, at that time still economically underdeveloped and internationally isolated after the Tian'anmen massacre in 1989, was not quite in the picture till the mid-2010s.

Some have argued that the first Cold War has never really ended; we just stopped paying attention in our post-1989 triumphalism. In the ensuing euphoria, we were eager to embrace soothing notions like "the end of history" and the "flat world". Yet Huntington's Third Wave of Democratisation had been left unfinished, stopped by the People's Liberation Army tanks in Beijing and elsewhere in China in June 1989.

Indeed, despite their frequent ritual protesting against "the Cold-War mentality" of their western counterparts, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) never got out of their own Cold War mindset. Deng Xiaoping is on the record declaring shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union that one Cold War had been replaced with another. As Rush Doshi skilfully demonstrated in his 2021 book *The Long Game*, the Chinese leadership started systematically planning for a future conflict with the U.S. already in the early 1990s, right after the "trifecta" shock of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and U.S. military triumph in the first Gulf War.

Yet, have we really come a full circle into a New Cold War? There are at least as many differences from the original one as there are similarities. The main parallel is of course the underlying logic of two incompatible world systems, with radically different ideas of the domestic societal organization and the rules of international engagement, locked in a fierce global competition.

The main difference, on the other hand, is that there lie in between then and now three decades of intense globalisation that have created unprecedented inter-connectedness and mutual dependencies. The assumed analogy with the Cold War was for a while reflected in the aspirational term "decoupling", meant to bring the world back to the clear-cut bi-polar division of that era. When the realisation dawned that this was no longer possible, the new term "de-risking" has taken hold in both the EU and the US, with very different understanding in various quarters of what it actually means.

There are other substantial differences between the two eras as well. One notable distinction is the emergence of a reverse geostrategic triangle. For most of the original Cold War, China and Russia were sworn enemies. Since the 1970s, the PRC had even entered into a quasi-alliance with the US, driven by their shared concern with Soviet expansionism. Thirty years on, China and Russia are now "partners without limits", both bitterly opposed to the US, and to the "collective West" by extension.

Another departure from the original Cold War is the existence of an active and brutal conflict in Europe. Unlike the previous era, characterized by political and ideological rivalry but not direct military confrontation, we now witness an ongoing war on our doorsteps that serves as a stark reminder of the heightened volatility and the risks involved.

Perhaps more productive than enumerating the similarities and differences with the original Cold War might be to try and think what we can possibly do to mitigate the consequences. How could we prevent the New Cold War from setting in, and if it is indeed already happening, from escalating into a potentially devastating hot war (as it already has in the Ukraine).

In his latest book, "Cold Peace: Avoiding the New Cold War" (Liveright, April 2023), renowned international relations scholar Michael W. Doyle puts forward an intriguing proposal. Doyle is well-known for his work on the idea of Democratic Peace, building on Immanuel Kant's theory of Perpetual Peace (Zum ewigen Frieden, 1795). Somewhat surprisingly, he seems to be arriving at different conclusions in his new book.

To avoid a New Cold War, Doyle proposes that the Great Powers conclude a non-subversion compact:

"The world can evolve from a cold war confrontation to a cold peace détente if the major powers implement a non-subversion pact."

Or elsewhere:

"In a cold peace, no great power attempts to subvert the political independence or territorial integrity of another."

With due respect, on closer scrutiny such a proposition sounds a bit hollow. It seems to ignore the basic world outlook of the two "revisionist powers", Russia and China, perhaps best expressed in their "Olympic" Joint Declaration of February 4, 2021. One of the more explicit paragraphs in the document is devoted to their joint opposition to the "Colour Revolutions".

That clause is not incidental. In fact, there has been a similar paragraph on the Colour Revolutions in just about every major bilateral document since at least the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Already the 2015 cooperation agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union (Putin's project to recreate a semblance of the former USSR) and the New Silk Road Initiative (now Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI) speaks of their joint opposition to the Colour Revolutions. This aversion was once again reiterated during the recent summit between Xi Jinping and Putin in Moscow in April 2023.

One could be excused to infer that there's a certain obsession with the Colour Revolutions (颜色革命, цветные революции) in Moscow and Beijing. But what exactly are they?

In the Kremlin and CCP worldview, the Colour Revolutions are attempts at regime change in their respective "civilisational spaces" instigated by the US and the West, or, as the CCP parlance has it, the "hostile foreign forces". In reality, they are more often than not spontaneous attempts by frustrated populations to democratise their systems of governance, or simply to oppose the corruption and arbitrariness of their governments.

For Moscow, the quintessential Colour Revolutions was the 2004 Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, and for Beijing, the 1989 Tian'anmen movement, and again the recent upheavals in Hong Kong: the Umbrella Revolution in 2014, and the "Revolution for our Times" in 2019.

Such spontaneous bottom-up movements are bound to arise in repressive societies as an all-too-human aspiration for a more dignified life. No "non-subversion pact" can ever prevent such outpourings from erupting; they are entirely within the agency of people that none of the Great Powers can presume to control. Every such occasion will be instantly interpreted by Russia and the PRC as "instigated by the West." For their part, the free societies will find themselves obliged to sympathise with them, and offer at the very least their moral support. This will in turn only reinforce the autocratic regimes' paranoia. There's nothing a "non-subversion pact" could do about it - in fact, it would likely make the situation worse by convincing both sides that the other one is cheating on their treaty commitments.

In conclusion, we probably do need some kind of a "Cold Peace" arrangement to prevent the current Cold-War-like confrontation from escalating beyond control. But it may have to be built on different propositions than those put forth in Richard Doyle's latest book.