

Revisiting Cold War Concepts and Interpretations

The State of the Art Among the Echoes of a New Cold War

Conceptos e interpretaciones de la Guerra Fría en revisión

El estado actual de la cuestión entre los ecos de una Nueva Guerra Fría

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ABSTRACT In face of the growing systemic conflict between the West and China and the sudden escalation of tensions with Russia in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, the concept of the Cold War reappears in recent years as a reference category. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present an exhaustive and up-to-date review of the historiographical state of the art in relation to the concept, interpretations, physical and mental spaces and defining systemic structures of the world order between 1947 and 1991. Classic references are included, as well as the most recent, innovative and ground-breaking contributions to the

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historiography of the Cold War, which since 1991 has undergone a profound makeover, due to the broadening of interpretative categories and the multiplication of historiographical sources. Only by identifying what the Cold War really was will it be possible to construct valid comparative analyses, highlight lines of continuity, describe new variables and, ultimately, draw interpretative frameworks that allow us to understand a potential new cold war in light of the systemic confrontation during the second half of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS Cold War, New Cold War, international relations

RESUMEN Ante la creciente conflictividad sistémica entre Occidente y China, y la repentina escalada de tensiones con Rusia a raíz de la invasión de Ucrania, el concepto de Guerra Fría adquiere nueva relevancia como categoría de referencia. Por ello, el presente artículo tiene por objetivo presentar un exhaustivo y actualizado estado historiográfico de la cuestión en relación al concepto, las escuelas interpretativas, los espacios físicos y mentales y las estructuras sistémicas definitorias del orden mundial imperante entre 1947 y 1991. Incorpora al mismo los referentes clásicos, así como las aportaciones más recientes, innovadoras y rompedoras de la historiografía de la Guerra Fría, que desde 1991 ha pasado por una profunda renovación, basada en la ampliación de categorías interpretativas y en la multiplicación de fuentes historiográficas. Sólo identificando lo que realmente fue la Guerra Fría podrán construirse en adelante análisis comparativos válidos, destacarse líneas de continuidad, describirse variables nuevas y, en definitiva, dibujarse marcos interpretativos que permitan comprender una posible nueva guerra fría a la luz del enfrentamiento sistémico de la segunda mitad del siglo XX.

PALABRAS CLAVE Guerra Fría, Nueva Guerra Fría, relaciones internacionales

INTRODUCTION

Few descriptions are as condensed and accurate as that of the German historian Bernd Stöver (2017), when he depicts the Cold War¹ as a “radical era”.² The statement encapsulates in a single adjective many of the realities and truths that characterised global society between 1947 and 1991.

In the third decade of the 21st century, the shadow of the Cold War is once again darkening Europe’s skies and its vicinity, radicalising relations between the main global powers, and placing the international system under tension. The United States and its allies in the Old Continent, on the one hand, and Russia on the other, once again perceive each other as a vital threat; the wars in Syria and the military confrontations in Libya, among others, have in the last decade updated the concept of proxy wars, which threaten to spread to other scenarios; the narratives of spheres of influence and peaceful coexistence, cornerstones of the Cold War worldview, are being resurrected from Moscow in a calculated attempt to force a return to the prevailing rationale of a time when a superpower was run from the Kremlin. The threat of nuclear war has even resurfaced in collective memory to occupy a real place in the imagination of the European population.

If there were doubts among Western leaders until February 2022, Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the currency of one of the former country’s traditional foreign policy guidelines: to exert pressure on Central Europe with the aspiration of dominating it directly or indirectly, with both geopolitical security reasons and a desire for imperial grandeur as part of its justification. As a result, NATO is, in the words of French President Emmanuel Macron (2019), re-emerging

1 For pragmatic conciseness, we have chosen to use capital letters to refer to the historical period between 1947 and 1991, marked by the systemic conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Lowercase letters are used to refer to situations which show certain characteristics allowing analogies to be drawn with the Cold War as a historical phenomenon in its own right.

2 Freely translated by the authors: “ein radikales Zeitalter”.

from its brain-dead state to revive Euro-Atlantic military, economic, and cultural loyalty through the essence of its original founding identity: the defence of the so-called free world against Moscow's expansionism.

The war in Ukraine has also radically updated the concept of the Cold War, paradoxically at a time in which an armed conflict with Russia that began in 2014 has resulted in large scale open warfare. Politicians, analysts, and journalists have returned to the idea of systemic confrontation to be applied as an analytical category for current situations. The fact that it is Russia, heir to the USSR, confronting the West – and the excessive force with which it is doing so in Ukraine – makes for more explicit analogies between the present and the period that seemed to have ended in 1991. In reality, it is the multifaceted rivalry between the United States and China which looks more likely to evolve into a cold war, especially after president Xi Jinping opted to make his country a great power in the military arena as well, and set a clear time-frame for reunification with Taiwan by whatever means necessary. The indefatigable Henry Kissinger (2021) views this bilateral relationship as the greatest problem of the modern age, with potential for an economic, technological, and military Armageddon.

Since the – perhaps false – end of the conflict in 1991, historiography of the Cold War has undergone a profound renovation (LEFFLER; WESTAD, 2010; KALINOVSKY; DAIGLE, 2014; MUNHOZ, 2020). The progressive opening of the main powers' official archives, and the gathering of memoirs, personal testimonies, and other historical sources has allowed historians to confirm and refute hypotheses, refine their approaches, unravel previously unknown or poorly studied events and, as a result, propose new interpretation paradigms. With the aim of enabling a comparative analysis between the periods marked by the milestones of 1947, 1991, and 2022, highlight lines of continuity, describe new variables, and, ultimately, draw an interpretive framework from a historical perspective in which to situate the current evolution of East-West relations and the deep shift glimpsed in the international system, it is essential to revisit the concepts, lines of interpretation, physical and mental spaces, and systemic structures of the Cold War and present an

exhaustive and up-to-date historiographical state of the art about the question of what the Cold War really was. This text should be understood as a contribution to the idea that, in the words of Brands and Gaddis (2021, p. 10),

the greatest unfought war of our time – the Soviet-American Cold War – (...) might expand experience and enhance resilience in a Sino-American rivalry [without disregarding the Russo-American one] whose future, hot or cold, remains unclear. That history provides a framework within which to survive uncertainty, and possibly even thrive within it, whatever the rest of the twenty-first century throws our way.

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF THE COLD WAR: CONTROVERSIES THROUGHOUT HISTORY

It was the English writer George Orwell³ who, just weeks after the end of the Second World War, used the term “cold war” in an article for the London Tribune magazine to refer to a theoretical confrontation between superpowers under the threat of a nuclear war. In April 1947, the US financier and presidential advisor Bernard Baruch used the concept to refer specifically to the post-war geopolitical confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union (GRANT, 1997). The same year Walter Lippmann (1947), an influential North American journalist, popularised the term in his volume *The Cold War. A Study in US Foreign Policy*, applying it to the dynamic that the relationship between his country and the Soviet Union was acquiring. In this way, since 1947 a concept which had been previously used to refer to, among others, tense relations between Germany and the United Kingdom in the 1890-1914 period, became indelibly linked to the systemic clash

3 ORWELL, George. You and the Atom Bomb. In: *The Orwell Foundation*. Available at: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/you-and-the-atom-bomb/>. Accessed on: 1 Aug. 2022.

between the United States and the Soviet Union during the second half of the 20th century.

Since then, Cold War studies, a melting pot of multi and interdisciplinary studies on the cold war, of varied epistemological and methodological focuses, has attempted to delimit a term whose use has proliferated despite being what Holger Nehring (2012, p. 948) describes as a “conceptual fuzziness” due to the lack of analytical and conceptual precision. Also complicating its use is the polysemy of the term: it identifies both a concept and a time period, as well as a system (NEHRING, 2012, p. 923-924). For the historian Odd Arne Westad (2010, p. 1-19) this complexity and plurality are precisely the defining elements of the Cold War. In recognition of this situation, Federico Romero (2014, p. 685) has urged historians to “(re)define their object of inquiry and strive for at least a minimum of conceptual clarity”. John L. Gaddis, the historian who has had the greatest influence on the interpretation of the Cold War, hints that the debate on the meanings of the concept will perhaps never be unequivocally resolved, laying out the intrinsic polysemy of the term:

The cold war was many things to many people. It was a division of the world into two hostile camps. It was a polarization of Europe in general, and of Germany in particular, into antagonistic spheres of influence. It was an ideological contest, some said between capitalism and communism, others between democracy and authoritarianism. It was a competition for the allegiance of, and for influence over, the so-called Third World. It was a game of wits played out by massive intelligence organizations behind the scenes. It was a struggle that took place within each of its major adversaries as supporters and opponents of the confrontation confronted one another. It was a conflict that shaped culture, the social and natural sciences, and the writing of history. It was an arms race that held out the possibility - because it generated the capability - of ending civilisation altogether. And it

was a rivalry that even extended, at one point, beyond the bounds of earth itself, as human beings for the first time left their planet, but for a set of reasons that are likely to seem as parochial to future generations as those that impelled Ferdinand and Isabella to finance Columbus when he first set out for the New World five hundred years ago. (GADDIS, 1992, p. 234-235).

The very conceptualisation of the Cold War as a “war” is problematic and begs the question of what kind of war it was. Undoubtedly, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1989 were marked by confrontation and conflict, but Gaddis (1986) paints this conflict, in a systemic perspective, as a “long peace”, analogous to the international system prevailing in the 19th century. After the Congress of Vienna, which produced a long period of relative peace, wars were not infrequent, but they were localised and did not plunge Europe into general war. In the same way, the Cold War opened up fronts and trenches on all continents, although at the same time it contributed to maintaining a state of peace understood as the absence of a new world war. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1992, p. 31), however, based on the Clausewitzian concept of war as a continuation of politics through other means, proposed that the Cold War be understood as war by other (non-lethal) means, without forgetting that “nonetheless, warfare it was”. Seeking to situate the Cold War in a novel angle on the war-peace dichotomy, Bernd Stöver (2017, p. 20) has convincingly conceptualised the Moscow-Washington confrontation as a permanent “non-peace”.⁴

Similarly, the characterisation of bipolar rivalry as “cold” must be problematised in light of the constant proxy wars that punctuated the four decades of conflict, fought in various parts of the Third World at the behest of the superpowers or with their explicit consent and support. There were real “hot” conflicts – some 150 of them –, fought fiercely, claiming millions of victims. For a good part of humanity, and in particular the

4 Freely translated by the authors: “Nicht-Frieden”.

Global South, the Cold War was nothing more than the continuation of colonial liberation struggles waged with new actors (WESTAD, 2017). The Third World, which emerged in the wake of the decolonisation process, found it extremely difficult to articulate foreign policies outside the superpowers' spheres of influence. The logic of nuclear deterrence – which guaranteed mutual destruction – avoided a direct war between the United States and the Soviet Union only in the Global North.

Despite the multiplicity of settings, the proliferation of actors and the *global* dimension of the conflict, the Cold War ultimately always had a *two-state* leadership. The main actors in the process, the United States and the Soviet Union, emerged from the Second World War as the only superpowers – a new category of analysis and a distinctive feature of the *nuclear era* – and aspired to consolidate their ideological systems in the geographical areas which they considered to be priorities for the interest of their respective states. Convinced of the universal validity and applicability of state communism and liberal capitalism they progressively embarked on a process of ideological expansion, which culminated in the division of the world into two opposing blocs, led directly or indirectly by the new metropolises. London, Paris, and Berlin were replaced by Washington and Moscow as centres of gravity in the political world. The traditional multipolarity and eurocentrism gave way to bipolarity and the displacement of the seats of power to the peripheries. Constrained by this international power structure, the United Nations, as a universal agent, became a public arena for bipolar confrontation, rather than an instrument for resolving international differences (KENNEDY, 2007). At the same time, the Cold War was of a *multidimensional* – i.e., *total* – character, encompassing all aspects of social and human life: military conflict was joined by a clash of economic-commercial and technological-scientific interests and competition in political-ideological, social, and cultural fields worldwide – and even in outer space through the space race.

It is worth recalling – particularly as we have witnessed in the last five years a revival of the concept of the Cold War as an interpretative category of the present – that in the first decade and a half of the

21st century academic debate was generated around an “overvaluation” of the concept of the Cold War for the interpretation of international reality in the second half of the 20th century. Most historiography has – and continues to do so – situated the Cold War as the hegemonic international dynamic of its time, which, even if it did not determine all contemporary developments, had an impact on many of them. But globalisation, the shift in the centres of international power, constructivist debates in international relations, and the cultural turn have made possible the emergence of publications by eminent authors which relativise the general importance of the Cold War. As an extreme case, Walter L. Hixson (2008, p. 166) questions the existence of the Cold War by defining it as a mere “cultural construction devoid of ontological status”, as a narrative discourse, not a reality. Other researchers, expanding the range of vision and incorporating newly accessible archival sources, propose that it not be conceived as an omnipotent and absolute truth. Matthew Connelly (2000, p. 769) calls for historiography, as well as political science to “remove the Cold War lens” and try to explain the world beyond the rivalries between superpowers and analyse the struggle for political, economic, and cultural influence between the United States and the Soviet Union in terms other than the axiom of bipolar rivalry. Along the same lines, Westad (2017, p. 6) predicts that “it is therefore quite possible that the Cold War will be reduced in significance by future historians” when interpreting the international history of the second half of the 20th century. The multipolarity of international relations in the 21st century and the return to the international politics of the great powers in a world which is now increasingly deglobalized (TOVAR RUIZ, 2021) draw interpretive frameworks ever further from the old diagrams conceived in the 1947-1991 period.

INTERPRETIVE DEBATES ON THE COLD WAR

From the very beginning of the bipolar conflict, analysis of its origins and reasons has generated deep controversies and heated debate, neither devoid of ideological foundations. The different perspectives and

visions form three main interpretive schools: traditionalist, revisionist and post-revisionist.

The *traditionalist* interpretation, also called *orthodox* or *realist*, was predominant in the West during the years the two blocs were formed. Its exponents blamed the Soviet Union for provoking the Cold War due to Stalin's expansionist policy and aggressive attitude in Eastern Europe after 1945. According to these authors, the Soviet leader used any means possible to achieve his objectives, including trickery, lying, and false promises towards his former allies. The forced Sovietisation of the Governments of European countries occupied by the Red Army as well as support for pro-Soviet forces and parties from Greece to France, with the aim of subverting the political order in the rest of the continent, made it impossible to maintain the Grand Alliance, and put the West on the defence. The commitments made at the Yalta conference were nothing more than a diplomatic manoeuvre of trickery by the Soviet dictator, a betrayal. Some traditionalists identify ideological intransigence and the aspiration for the global reach of Marxist-Leninist tenets as the underlying explanation for the Cold War, while others, in line with classical *Realpolitik*, put geopolitical interests comparable to those of imperial Russia first.

Authors of the traditionalist school usually share the interpretation of the American policy of containment as a legitimate and necessary defensive response to a Soviet Union that in both its moral turpitude and threat potential was, in their view, comparable to National Socialist Germany. Between 1943 and 1946, Franklin D. Roosevelt and then Harry Truman attempted to negotiate an agreement on the new world order but the adverse realities created by the Soviets pushed Washington towards confrontation. In this sense, the realists consider the Cold War to have been inevitable. The analysis by the US diplomat George Kennan (1947) on the nature and intentions of the Soviet Union was the basis for the traditionalism systemically developed in the fifties and sixties by Kennan himself (1951), William McNeil (1963), Herbert Feis (1957; 1960; 1970), Thomas Bailey (1950), Louis Halle (1959; 1967), Adam Ulam (1960; 1969), Norman Graebner (1962), Martin Herz (1966) and

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1970), among others. Kennan, however, over time would distance himself from the way in which his doctrine of the containment was distorted by several representatives of this perspective.

In 1959, William A. Williams postulated an interpretation that broke with the vision of the United States as an anti-imperialist, peaceful and disinterested power. With emphasis placed on American economic interests, the *revisionist* school started by this author accused the North American political and economic system of unleashing a series of reactions and counterreactions which resulted in the Cold War. For US leaders, freedom, and trade freedom in particular formed part of their identity and mission, and coalesced with the need to open new markets to maintain the high levels of economic activity of the war years. Williams (1959) placed the origins of this policy in the last decade of the 19th century, with the victory over Spain in the Cuban War of Independence (1898) and the “Open Door Policy” starting from 1899-1900. From 1940 onwards, Washington managed to break the trade monopoly of the British Empire with the conditions of the Lend-Lease programme, and from 1945 on it was able to impose its views on its old ally from a position of supremacy. American liberal principles were also to govern economic reconstruction throughout Europe and thus benefit the business and trade network of the United States.

Other prominent revisionists include Denna Fleming (1961), Christopher Lasch (1962), Gar Alperovitz (1965), David Horowitz (1965) – an exponent of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, and an ultra-conservative and anti-liberal activist in the 1980s –, Walter LaFeber (1968), Gabriel Kolko (1969), Joyce and Gabriel Kolko (1972), Thomas McCormick (1989), and Lloyd Gardner (1993). According to them, the Soviet Union, whose economy had been greatly weakened by the enormous effort of the “Great Patriotic War”, perceived the attempted expansion of American economic influence as a threat not only from an ideological point of view, but also as a challenge to its internal security and stability. Stalin interpreted the Marshall Plan, also offered by the United States in 1947 to the countries liberated by the Red Army, as an instrument to extend American reign to the very borders of the

Soviet Union, and therefore, as a serious threat for the security of the country, his regime, his ideology, and himself. The American attitude – defiant and aggressive in the eyes of the Soviets – led the Kremlin, according to these authors, to give a free pass for revolutionary forces, that until then had been on a short leash in Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria, to transform those countries in pro-Moscow directions.

Nor, according to the revisionist school, was the creation of political and economic ties between the Sovietised states anything other than a reaction to the dynamic of building blocs and spheres of influence that the United States had initiated in Western Europe through the unilateral application of instruments of economic cohesion: monetary reform in the Trizone – i.e., the western parts of Germany – and the creation of the EOEC (European Organisation for Economic Cooperation, since 1961 the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: OECD).

If revisionism reached its high point between 1965 and 1975, to a large extent driven by the new European and North American intellectual left, since the 1970s to the present day a “third way” of interpretation, between the orthodox and revisionist positions, has emerged. Favoured by the atmosphere of détente of the 1970s, *post-revisionism* abandoned the search for parties to blame and a certain tendency towards simplification, to move towards an understanding of the Cold War as a result of complex interactions. Beyond politics and diplomacy, internal questions such as public opinion, the dynamics between stakeholders and parties, and economic aspects were incorporated into the analysis. In this globalizing approach, Stalin appears more as a pragmatic statesman than a revolutionary. A central element, provided by Gaddis in *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War: 1941-1947* (1972), a publication which makes the first step towards post-revisionism, is the erroneous or distorted perception by both superpowers of the needs and interests of the adversary, which led Washington and Moscow to adopt foreign policy decisions based on incorrect assumptions. Both powers made errors when assessing the movements of the adversary as offensive instead of aimed at meeting vital needs, which in reality were

not irreconcilable with each other. It was basically an issue of communication failure, leading another major contributor to post-revisionism, Wilfried Loth (2000, p. 388-389), to deduce that the Cold War was the result of a probable but not necessary evolution.

Other influential authors in this movement, also fed by the key contributions of Robert Jervis (1976) on the role of perceptions and misperceptions in international relations are Melvyn Leffler (1986) and Marc Trachtenberg (1999). Also within the context of revisionism, Geir Lundestad (1986) formulated the concept of “empire by invitation”, also adopted by Gaddis (1997) According to this interpretation, the United States is not an intrinsically imperial power and, if in the post-war period it adopted imperial politics form time to time, it was against its will and at the request of Western democracies that felt threatened by the USSR and asked for Washington’s protection (LUNDESTAD, 1986, p. 263-277; 1999, p. 52-91; GADDIS, 1997, p. 285-286). This argument has been criticised based on the evidence of US interventions to overthrow democratic governments in Latin America and other parts of the world (MUNHOZ, 2020, p. 46, 168).

In dialogue with and, in part, in opposition to these three main interpretations, the so-called corporatist interpretation, of which Michael Hogan (1987) is the leading exponent, also developed. The corporatists emphasise the influence of US economic groups and the internal social and ideological factors as an explanation for major US policies throughout the 20th century, which would have been guided by the project to plan a world order based on the domestic model of corporate neocapitalism. After the Second World War, the confluence of Soviet expansion with endogenous factors fostered the US construction of this order based on a global power structure supported on the Bretton Woods Agreement, the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), to which the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and regional alliances (NATO, SEATO, ANZUS, etc.) were subsequently added. Soviet leaders perceived the US strategy as a threat and responded with measures which Washington, in turn, considered aggressive, which increased the

climate of tension and led to the Cold War (HOGAN 1987; 1991). The economy was also the basis for the analysis of Fred Halliday, who in 1983 developed his concept of a Second Cold War from a post-Marxist theoretical framework of a world system as a system of interrelations on a global scale.

Access to Russian archives after the 1990s added new nuances to the theses of different schools, but especially to those of the post-revisionists. Although these nuances could lead one to speak of a fourth (or fifth) interpretative model, which has been tentatively called the *post-cold war school*, it seems more coherent to understand it as an updated version of the previous one, given that the Soviet sources have not modified the fundamental post-revisionist tenets. At the present time, with the historiographical debate stripped of the passionate and ideological overtones typical of the time of the conflict and most of the archival sources evaluated, the contemporary post-revisionist school is consolidated as hegemonic. One should bear in mind, in any case, the many differences between authors who usually ascribe to this school, as well as the sharp criticisms directed at its postulates by corporatist historians such as Hogan (1991) and revisionists such as Cumings (1981; 1990). From the updated studies of John Gaddis (1997; 2000; 2005), Melvyn Leffler (1999; 2008; 2017) and Wilfried Loth (2000; 2016), and the new contributions by Vojtech Mastny (2006) and Vladislav Zubok (1997; 2008), Zubok and Konstantin Pleshakov (1996), Vladimir Pechatnov (2002, 2010a, 2010b) and Geoffrey Roberts (2006) – who also co-authored a study with Folly and Rzhesheshevsky (2019) –, a few conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, ideological motivations contributed only to a very limited extent to triggering the Cold War. Both Truman and Stalin used liberal and communist ideals more as a justification for their policies than as an inspiration for them. Stalin did not attempt to expand the communist revolution, and Truman did not want to fight for Europe's freedom as a value in itself. Secondly, security concerns were a key factor. Stalin did not repress the regimes of Central and Eastern European countries until it became clear that their former Western allies were unwilling to consider this geopolitical space as a zone of Soviet influence. Thirdly,

perceptions of the respective opponent's expectations and those regarding security were far from reality. Fourthly, the paranoid personality of Stalin led him to making personal decisions based on irrational analyses which could not be comprehended by Washington and resulted in erroneous interpretations of the USSR leader's intentions. Fifthly, the personality of Roosevelt/Truman and Stalin and their leadership styles play a key role in deciphering their foreign policy decisions, decisions that brought the two countries irrevocably into conflict. The importance of this personal factor is equal to or even exceeds that of ideological precepts and national interest.

FACTORIAL VARIABLES OF THE COLD WAR

The Geopolitical Dimension

Over four decades, the geopolitical map of the Cold War has changed in such a way that, according to Saul Bernard Cohen (2003), three phases can be distinguished: (i) 1945-1956: the constitution of a security zone – or *cordon sanitaire* – around the USSR, countered by the West with a *cordon sanitaire* of their own; (ii) 1957-1979: the communist penetration of Western geopolitical space; (iii) 1980-1989: the Soviet withdrawal from maritime domination and the constitution of a third pole of geopolitical power.

The geopolitical spaces in which the USSR and the US exercised their hegemonic power in the first phase of the Cold War – the Eurasian Continental Realm and the Maritime Realm respectively, in the geopolitical terminology of Saul Bernard Cohen (2003) – were found to be clearly separate. The integration of the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the Warsaw Pact consolidated the continental sphere of Soviet influence. The *cordon sanitaire* initiated by Truman in face of the feared communist expansion was implemented through NATO in Europe, the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in the Middle East and Central Asia, SEATO in Southeast Asia and bilateral security treaties with Japan in the Far East. It was in the border areas

between the Soviet security zone and the western *cordon sanitaire* where modifications to the geopolitical map were made. The evolution and outcome of the Indochina War, the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War were responsible for these territorial adjustments while stabilising, by the mid-1950s, the dividing lines between the two major geopolitical spheres (COHEN, 2003, p. 63-67).

After the Soviet Union achieved ballistic nuclear parity in 1958, Soviet foreign policy became more ideologically flexible. Its new orientation towards a liberating mission against colonial imperialism led the Eastern bloc to penetrate the US Maritime Empire globally. With the help of a strengthened naval capacity, the USSR expanded its influence primarily into the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, aided by the decline of European colonial power and the permeability to socialist postulates of the liberation movements and the Non-Aligned Movement. The extension of Soviet power led to the destabilisation of the regions it reached, turning them into what Cohen (2003) calls shatterbelts or collision zones.

In contrast to the traditional conception of these geographical spaces, and the Third World in general, as the “periphery” of the Cold War and only passive recipients of superpower politics, the recent large-scale integration of countries and regions of the “Global South” in Cold War Studies has shed light on important decentralised perspectives of the “Global South” vis-à-vis the “Global North”, revealing autonomous and active state actors and South-South relations that nuance the perception of superpowers as all-powerful and exclusive magnets (MANKE; BŘEZINOVÁ; BLECHA, 2017). Historiography on Latin America, the space considered to be the geopolitical “backyard” of the US (DODDS, 2003, p. 210) and which suffered with particular rapidity and virulence from Washington’s response to Soviet (and generally leftist) influences, is uncovering the multiple relationships between Latin America and the rest of the Global South as a part of the history of the Cold War (FIELD JR.; KREPP; PETTINÀ, 2020). Far from being mere receptacles for Washington and Moscow’s influences, Latin American countries contributed to shaping the conflict on multiple levels (PETTINÀ, 2018),

an assessment that can be extended to other regions such as Africa, the Middle East, or South, Southeast, and East Asia.

Still before the end of the Cold War – coinciding with the economic decline of the USSR in the 1980s which forced its withdrawal from the global stage – East Asia emerged as a new, third geostrategic space. The economic strength of Japan, along with the consolidation of Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore as economically significant entities, the exponential growth of China and the establishment of solid economic-trade links between them turned the region in a new element in the global geopolitical balance (COHEN, 2003, p. 63-84).

The Geoeconomic Dimension

That during the Cold War the economy and its trade and financial systems were also used as weapons in the competition between superpowers was widely demonstrated in studies by revisionist authors such as William A. Williams (1980) and Thomas J. McCormick (1989).

In parallel to its role as “world police” in NATO, Washington was also “world banker” through the Bretton Woods economic order agreed upon in 1944 without the USSR (with the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, today the World Bank, as kingpins). Based on rules dictated to the tune of American economic interests, such order was completed by the OECS, the GATT, and the European Economic Community (HOGAN, 1987; 1991; 1996). Thus, the organising arrangements of the Cold War Western liberal order were a combination of economic openness, reciprocity, and multilateral management, which went beyond the ambition of simply countering Soviet power (IKENBERRY, 1998, p. 77). Allies of the United States benefited not only from the initial investment of the Marshall Plan, but also from technological transfers and access to enormous foreign markets, which served as the basis for the European and Japanese economic miracle.

The Soviet Union advocated a statist planned economy and a closed internal market, with the participation of the same satellite states

that formed the Warsaw Pact as a military alliance and COMECON as an economic organisation. Recent research based on Russian sources postulates, as opposed to the traditional interpretation of a voluntary autarky, a reactive Soviet economic and trade policy, always accommodating and cooperative with the West, as Stalin was aware of the lack of competitiveness of the USSR's industry and agriculture (SANCHEZ-SIBONY, 2014, p. 8). Although in the 1950s there were spectacular rates of growth which frequently exceeded those of the capitalist system, the gap between COMECON and the capitalist bloc in terms of technology and quality of production was increasing. Khrushchev, and then Brezhnev took advantage of the *détente* period from 1962 to open trade with the West. The more trade increased in the 1970s, the more the USSR's economy suffered, however, and its lack of competitiveness resulted in growing foreign indebtedness and stagnating growth (TRACHTENBERG, 2018).

The Soviet and Western blocs did not coexist hermetically side by side, but competed with each other in rates of growth, production quotas and technological advances, for which the United States did not shy away from using methods of commercial warfare. The main pillar, the "strategic embargo", was enforced between 1950 and 1994 through the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (CoCom), to which almost all NATO members plus Australia and Japan belonged, and which controlled the enforcement of the non-export to the Eastern bloc of goods considered to be strategic. The economic efficiency of this tool was called into question in light of the spectacular evolution of socialist economies in the 1950s, to which the leaps and bounds of the Soviet space programme testified (JACKSON, 2013). The increasing mutual permeability of the two blocs' markets during the *détente* had a catalytic effect on the improvement of the political climate and can be directly linked to the substantial advances and agreements in the politico-military field, such as the SALT-I agreements of 1972 and those reached in the framework of the CSCE in 1975 (SPAULDING, 2013, p. 399).

A genuine geoeconomic tool of the Cold War was foreign aid or development aid (LANCASTER, 2007, p. 5). Since the late 1950s, superpowers used this mechanism – rather than to be developmentally

effective – to maintain loyalties among like-minded states and, to an even greater extent, to create them among those who were committed to political and military non-alignment (LEE, 2022, p. 12). In this sense, it became a more efficient geoeconomic instrument than economic pressure or direct foreign investment, as the humanitarian impression given made targeted governments more receptive.

The Geo-Cultural Dimension

The battle between different visions of human reality, identities, and national vocations, i.e., culture in a broad sense, occupied a central position in the conflict, in particular after the development of nuclear technology made direct military conflict unfeasible. Soviet communism and American liberalism both professed a self-conceived exceptionalism, from which a proselyting mission emanated. The debate on whether ideas “determined” (GADDIS, 1997; 2005) or “influenced” (LEFFLER, 1999; 2008; ZUBOK; PLESHAKOV, 1996; MASTNY, 2006; and others) decision-making in foreign policy has been intense and fruitful. Analysis of recent decades is precisely reevaluating the weight of ideas and ideology in the decision-making processes of the main actors in the Cold War, with renewed proposals on the Chino-Soviet rivalry (LUTHI, 2008; RADCHENKO, 2009; FRIEDMAN, 2015) and the struggle for influence in the Third World and the Global South (FRIEDMAN, 2022).

Culture was also a battlefield, and is a flourishing field of research in studies on the Cold War since the reception of the cultural turn (GRIFFITH, 2001) and the adoption of innovative approaches from a gender perspective (MUEHLENBECK, 2017), among other contributions. Since Christopher Lasch (1967) conceptualised the idea of the Cultural Cold War, this angle of analysis has given rise to penetrating research such as that of Hugh Wilford (2003) on the CIA and the British left and that of Frances Stonor Saunders (2013) on the CIA and the US Congress for Cultural Freedom. Westad (2017, p. 8) has convincingly suggested that geoculture allows the Cold War to be understood as a conflict between two ideologies over the hegemonic view of modernity.

When culture became equivalent to lifestyle (HIXSON, 1997, p. 10), the cultural war was also the stage and backdrop upon which to contrast the validity of respective convictions and demonstrate their superiority.

America's universalist social-political mission, i.e., the idealistic defence of the principles of freedom and progress, which had coexisted in the two World Wars with other geo-strategic and pragmatic considerations, catalysed Truman's policy of containment, for in his eyes it was a "conflict between good and evil, between freedom and tyranny, between liberal democracy and totalitarianism, between capitalism and communism" (SPALDING, 2006, p. 223). Such policies thus mobilised popular support for the anti-communist cause to the extreme point of a witch-hunt within the country itself.

For Stalin and the USSR, the ideological framework of the conflict with the United States was based on a revolutionary-imperialist hybrid paradigm, as a confluence of the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on the one hand, and traditional Russian exceptionalism and Soviet experiences in its foreign policy since 1917, on the other (WESTAD, 2007, p. 72). The traumatic experience of the Second World War formed the base of the imperialist component: the urgency of consolidating a *cordon sanitaire* and the national obligation to mobilise for a second Patriotic War. The revolutionary component was provided by the Marxist-Leninist view of the expiry of capitalism and the irrevocable supremacy of communism. Propaganda – and terror – did what was necessary for the population to take on the cultural consensus summed up in: the West is aggressive; the future of the world will be Soviet. This "socialist-nationalist" ideological-cultural consensus had the virtue of mobilising the population both as communists and as Russians (ZUBOK, 2013, p. 306-307).

Although Stalin would reject pacts with ideologically similar countries such as China or North Korea when they did not align with Soviet geopolitical interests, Khrushchev took advantage of the decolonisation process to attempt to achieve the global dominance of socialism in the long run, in line with his theory of Peaceful Coexistence (PECHATNOV, 2010b). Khrushchev's soft power project reached the Third World as a whole, and the USSR took on as its mission the

liberation of those peoples from exploitative capitalist imperialism, a task for which Moscow deployed an unprecedented array of resources. In the 1960s the financial, economic, technological, logistic, and military support of the USSR reached 69 developing countries and national liberation movements (PECHATNOV, 2010b, p. 312).

The attempt to mould Europe and Latin America according to the American way of life and worldview resulted in the old continent in the hybrid economic models of the social market economy, coined in Germany, and the welfare state theorised in the UK. Rather than Americanisation, the export of values from North America produced “westernisations”, i.e., a set of new hybrid values, marked by the moderation and nuance which the European cultural identity exercised on the ostentatious North American vision (ENDY, 2013, p. 327-332). In Latin America, the cultural pressure exerted by Washington did not contribute to ideological fusion, but to the radical polarisation between right and left. The North American government did not shy away from using *manu militari* coercive methods of direct interference that, in the name of freedom, replaced leftist governments with others that were undemocratic but geopolitically aligned with Washington (O’ROURKE, 2020, p. 114-116).

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE COLD WAR

Although the Allies had negotiated and agreed in Tehran, Yalta, and San Francisco on the principles and governing structures of a new international system, the cohabitation from 1945 onwards of two incompatible international orders (KRIEGER, 2006, p. 29) made it impossible for such system to function fully. The guiding principle of international cooperation, which was to be embodied by the United Nations, was not heeded by the hegemonic members of the system; the absence of coercive means, which its designers did not assign to the UN, ended up – resorting to the neo-realistic conceptual structure of Kenneth Waltz (1979) – in an anarchic configuration of the system, dominated by two superpowers and marked by the rivalry between them. Thanks

to a combination of elements, the rivalry resulted in a balance of power that gave the system relative stability.

An identifying feature of the system was its bipolar character, with two blocs functioning as “full-service security communities” (IKENBERRY, 2018, p. 10), with their own principles, structures, and institutions, in which only the respective members of the blocs participated and which were not incompatible in their objectives with the general principles that inspired the United Nations through its Charter. Kissinger conceptualises two sets of balances, “which for the first time in history were largely independent of each other: the nuclear balance between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the internal balance within the Atlantic Alliance, whose operation was, in important ways, psychological” (KISSINGER, 2015, p. 90). It was precisely bipolarity, along with mutual independence, which gave the system a certain stability. In his influential 1986 article, which is still relevant today, Gaddis stresses that the simple bipolar structure was less prone to imbalances than a multipolar system, and did not require particularly skilful leaders to make constant adjustments. Also contributing to stability was the realistic character of the Cold War international system in that it accurately portrayed the distribution of power produced by the Second World War. In addition, the geographical independence of the two superpowers, added to their limited interrelation in economic and social terms, contributed, in the author’s opinion, to the stability of their relations (GADDIS, 1986).

Apart from these structural considerations, there are, in Gaddis’ (1986) analysis, other powerful arguments in terms of the behaviour of the main actors that catalysed systemic stability: their low propensity for warlike confrontation, in other words, a policy of calculated risk, based on nuclear deterrence; and mutually assured destruction. The ideological moderation deployed throughout the conflict also contributed to stability. Both poles adjusted the universalist ideological discourse to make it compatible with basic respect for the status quo, i.e., the coexistence of two international orders in their respective spheres of influence. As a consequence, a pattern of implicit norms emerged that served as

mutually accepted rules of the game: respect for spheres of influence, a veto on direct military confrontation, the use of nuclear weapons only as a last resort, and a preference for maintaining anomalies over forcing change with unpredictable consequences; examples include Castro's Cuba or the Berlin enclave. Within these rules of the game, the bipolarity of the system was made more flexible and relativised by the possibility of moderate dissent within the blocs, within certain limits: European autonomy led by de Gaulle's France and Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, or the particular course of Ceaușescu's Romania and the dissidence of Mao Zedong's China – leading to the Sino-Soviet schism – marked the transition, in the 1960s and 1970s, towards a multipolar tendency compatible with the basic bipolarity of the system. Similarly, smaller actors in the system often extracted what they could from the two hegemonic superpowers, either by swinging between the blocs – such as Nehru's India or Nasser's Egypt – or by profiting from their allegiance – such as Castro's Cuba or Sukarno and Suharto's Indonesia (WESTAD, 2017).

Despite the tensions, crises, and proxy wars, the international system of the Cold War was also characterised by “a remarkable story of negotiations and institution-building through the Iron Curtain” (KRIEGER, 2006, p. 35). Initiatives such as the Baruch Plan, Atoms for Peace and the Open Skies proposal during the first phase of the Cold War relate the interest of Washington and Moscow in reaching global agreements; a series of important treaties on arms controls, with the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty leading the list, as well as agreements about the decolonisation process and the structures and policies for development aid, encapsulated in resolutions and new agencies within the framework of the United Nations – and of course the Helsinki accords – attest the ability, albeit limited, of the international system to manage the evolution of international society and confront fundamental challenges.

The very evolution of the international system cautions against any static conception of the Cold War. Many authors have identified a pattern of cyclical evolution beneath the apparent continuity, with moments of maximum tension followed by periods of *détente*, which

frequently culminated in international understandings or agreements, which then made way for new escalations until leading to proxy wars or severe diplomatic tensions (SANZ DÍAZ; SÁENZ ROTKO, 2022, p. 21). Of particular importance in this formulation is the conceptualisation of the détente phases, for which various chronologies have been proposed. It is possible to identify a mini détente in 1963 after the missile crisis of the year before (SANZ DÍAZ; SÁENZ ROTKO, 2022, p. 126) and a more substantial and prolonged détente between that year and 1975 (SANZ DÍAZ; SÁENZ ROTKO, 2022, p. 151-178). Westad (2007, p. 194-206) places the détente stage between the superpowers between 1968 and 1975, while Halliday (1983) extends it from 1969 to 1979, as the stage after the First Cold War (1946-1953) and the oscillatory balance phase (1953-1969), and before what he conceptualises as a Second Cold War (since 1979). In view of this plurality, Munhoz and Rollo (2014) have convincingly proposed that there was not just one but several détentes with differentiated rationale.

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Three decades after the end of the bipolar conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Cold War has experienced an unexpected revival as a concept of choice for the analysis of the present, as a historical reference category and as a basic metaphor through which to understand the current situation of international relations. In the third decade of the 21st century, the Cold War is thus no longer understood as a finished historical period locked in a closed past, but threatens to become a “new” present, an open historical process with an unpredictable end.

The flexibility with which the term Cold War is applied today, whether to the systemic rivalry between the US and China, or to the current tension between the US and other Western countries and Russia – under formulations such as New Cold War, Cold War II, Cold War 2.0 or Cold War Redux – is illustrative both of the complexity of a multiple and multi-faceted concept, and of the intentions with which it is invoked.

The term has come to occupy a preeminent place in the repertoire of historical analogies and its use can both illuminate and complicate the creation of an intelligible image of international relations (KORNPROBST, 2007). Specifically, it is worth pointing out, as Yin (2020) does, how the use of analogies taken from the Cold War and applied to the post-1991 international system both simplifies and distorts reality. Such analogies resort more often to the construction of mental frameworks and self-interested narratives than to the quest for historical rigour, a risk against which the search for clarity of concepts and historiographical criticism proves to be an effective and necessary escape route.

The brief analysis and overview outlined in these pages allows us to assess more clearly and precisely the spaces that the Cold War analogy projected onto the present illuminates and those that it leaves in shadow. The essentially bipolar nature of the “historic” Cold War is poorly adjusted to the multipolarity of the present, as evidenced in the difficulty in defining two single nuclei of rivalry, which leads us to consider in the multilevel power equation, along with Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, also New Delhi, Brussels, and Tokyo (a reality, moreover, already evident in the times of Sino-Soviet split and the Gaullist and *Ostpolitik* “dissidences” in Western Europe). The aspect of ideological rivalry with universal pretensions of that time has no comparable equivalent today (LEGVOLD, 2016; TSYGANKOV, 2016; KARAGANOV, 2018), with a USA prone to withdrawal, a Russia whose ethno-nationalist project is exhausted in its borders and neighbouring regions, and a pragmatic China with little interest in exporting its model to the world, no matter how discursively fronts of democracies against autocracies and other similar configurations are invoked. Similarly, the poor relations between the Cold War blocs contrast with the interdependence that defines today’s world: while trade between the US and the USSR never exceeded one percent of their respective GDPs, China and the US are now major trading partners. Although the economic sanctions imposed on Russia in 2022 show the reversibility of trade as historical processes, and de-globalisation is an upward trend accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and international instability, relations between the economic

giants remain characterised by exchange rather than hermetic closure. In hindsight, the Cold War of 1947-1991 is increasingly seen, rather than as a mirror of the present, as a peculiar parenthesis between earlier and later periods characterised by multipolar rivalry between several great powers.

The rigorous historiographical discussion of the meanings and scope of the Cold War constitutes the unavoidable basis on which valid comparative analyses can be built, lines of continuity can be highlighted, new variables can be described and, in short, interpretative frameworks can be drawn about that era of bipolar conflict and our present era of systemic rivalry (SANZ DÍAZ; SÁENZ ROTKO, 2022). At the same time, the changes in the international relations of our times, along with the possibility of consulting previously inaccessible sources, and the creation of new conceptualisations, shine a new light which helps to reconstruct and reformulate the historiography of the Cold War, in a dialogue between the present and the past that is the basis of the historian's work.

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