

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8245>



Geopolitics

Imperialism(s) and the New Cold War

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV584 - September 2023 -

Publication date: Friday 15 September 2023

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The Cold War commonly refers to the historical period that followed the Second World War, when the world emerged torn between two imperial superpowers: the United States of America (US), dominating a mostly informal global empire stretching way beyond the defunct British Empire as it acquired a planetary scope, and the Soviet Union (USSR), in control of the bulk of the Eurasian landmass from Central Europe and the Baltic Sea to the Pacific. The equilibrium between these two superpowers was completed in 1949: the USSR detonated its first nuclear bomb and China's Communists triumphed over the whole of mainland China while the US-backed right-wing nationalist forces took refuge in Taiwan. In that same year, Washington founded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a military alliance of North America and Western Europe against the USSR.

The Cold War and its legacy

The Cold War opposed a bloc of imperialist states – in the classical economic definition of “imperialism” that is common to authors such as the liberal J.A. Hobson and the Marxist V.I. Lenin: domination of foreign territories for the sake of securing markets and investment outlets for monopoly capital (military-industrial complex included) – to a bloc of Stalinist states, based on state-owned economies and ruled by bureaucratic elites concerned above all with the preservation of the totalitarian order that underlies their ruling privileges. Bureaucratic rule is conservative by nature, fearing destabilization that could lead to its collapse. This qualitative difference between the two blocs explains why the former was overall much more aggressive and expansionist, whereas the latter mostly acted defensively.

The term Cold War was created to describe the permanent readiness for war of both camps, engaging in a hugely costly arms race while avoiding direct confrontation. In the age of nuclear weapons, a war between them would have led to “mutual assured destruction” (MAD). To be sure, they fought several indirect wars in the Global South (the largest were Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan), but no new world war occurred during the Cold War. It ended with the terminal crisis of Soviet bureaucratic rule in the 1980s, the collapse of Moscow's domination over its Central and Eastern European “satellite states” in the late 1980s, and the dissolution of the USSR itself in 1991.

US imperialism was confronted with a choice between the pacification of international relations on the basis of the UN Charter – ambiguously promised by George Bush senior under the label of “new world order”, when he was preparing for the first major war waged by Washington with Moscow's approval: the first US-led war on Iraq in 1991 – and the consolidation and further expansion of its hegemonic sphere premised on hostility to post-Communist Russia and “Communist” China. Washington chose the latter option in practice, maintaining a Cold-War level of military expenditure, deciding to keep NATO and enlarge it eastward to states that were formerly under Moscow's thumb, and engaging in provocation against China on the issue of Taiwan.

The New Cold War: A new phase of imperialism?

It thus laid the basis during the 1990s for a New Cold War, finally unleashed by NATO's 1999 Kosovo war, the first US-led war of the post-Soviet era waged in violation of international law, i.e., by circumventing the UN Security

Council. This political course was confirmed by the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and further rounds of NATO enlargement, including the Baltic states, three former republics of the USSR. The relations between NATO and Russia reached high tension in 2008, after NATO, bowing to the pressure of George W. Bush, declared that Georgia and Ukraine would join the alliance (although that commitment remained indefinite).

Russia had meanwhile completed its post-Soviet mutation into a capitalist as well as imperialist state. The social collapse resulting from wild neoliberal policies fostered by Western powers in the 1990s, combined with the national frustration created by persistent Western treatment of Russia as a potential enemy, produced fertile ground for the rise of Vladimir Putin's nationalist authoritarian rule. The new highly concentrated Russian capitalism, characterized by porous boundaries between public and private interests, provided the basis of a new Russian imperialism relying on fossil energies and military industries. Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2004) would become the first targets of this reborn Russian imperialism, before its later expansion in the Middle East and Africa.

The Putin regime grew increasingly authoritarian and revanchist over the years. Its botched attempt at invading Ukraine in 2022 accelerated its shift to neofascism, while bogging Russia down into a protracted and murderous war of attrition. China too grew increasingly authoritarian in the past decade, under Xi Jinping. It had undergone since the 1990s a spectacular economic and social development that lifted it from the condition of poor state into that of major economic power, the main challenger of US economic supremacy. China's development occurred within a combination of Stalinist state features with capitalism, resulting in a peculiar "bureaucratic capitalism". It has tended naturally to ally with Russia in the face of US bullying, although it has kept aloof from military expeditions abroad until now – unlike the two other powers of the global strategic triad.

The New Cold War has reached a dangerous peak since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Global military expenditure reached a new high of 2.24 trillion US dollars in 2022 and is well on its way to largely exceed this colossal amount in 2023. The Ukraine war has been seized as a golden opportunity by the military-industrial complexes of major imperialist countries such as Britain to lobby for massive increases in "defence" budgets, at a time when the global expenditure needed for the fight against climate change – the most important threat faced by humanity – remains short of several trillions of US dollars compared to what is needed to achieve the modest and rather insufficient goals fixed by international conferences.

[AntiCapitalist Resistance](#)

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.