

# The New Cold War

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## Abstract

*The article is regarding the New Cold War that is building up between the United States (US) and China. An old era is passing, even if the contours of what is yet to come have not truly announced themselves. We cannot fully imagine them in part because of the sticky weight of the present. But even if the quotidian blinds us, an age of substantially redistributed global power is fast approaching. This quote by Howard W. French is apt for the new Cold War or the Cold War 2.0 i.e., is slowly but gradually emerging between the US and China. "The Sino-US relations are getting bitter and complex with each passing year and it seems that this situation is going to stay for a long period of time". India's has to ensure that in her strategic interests, economic interests, and overall national interests this new Cold War doesn't impact her negatively.*

## Introduction

The global balance of power is shifting and the relationship between the US and Peoples Republic of China (PRC) is undergoing a tectonic shift, and the world is now preparing itself for a real change. Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister in his annual interaction with the media had noted that it has come to his attention that the US and China were on the brink of a 'new Cold War'.<sup>1</sup> Cui Tiankai, the Chinese Ambassador to the US has upped the ante by making it clear that the US had to make itself aware

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of the existing realities that governed our understanding of modern-day international politics where China and the US were now standing shoulder to shoulder in the realm of international politics.<sup>2</sup> The diplomatic relations between the US and China have thus turned somewhat sour in recent months and years.

### **The New Cold War**

The new Cold War is now a reality. The question that, however, remains to be answered relates to its onset. The erstwhile Cold War saw the US competing with the Soviet Union for 45 years. It was a battle of wit and ideology and a way of life. The new Cold War is 'new' in every sense of the word and unlike popular perception this Cold War between the US and China did not begin with the Trump Presidency but it can be dated to the early 2010s when the US-China relationship started showing signs of disarray. Nicholas J. Spyker states that large states become great powers and remain strong under centralised rule, and it is the location of these states that influence their foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> Since, China and the US are undergoing a centralised period of governance where the states are being led by strong personalities; it is possible that the new Cold War becomes an ongoing phenomenon.

Moreover, the rise of Xi Jinping's China Dream Project and his clarion call for 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' came at a time when US had begun its symptomatic decline. Interestingly, US is trying to be 'great again' while China excels in its attempts to 'greatly rejuvenate itself again'.<sup>4</sup> The ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) started by President Xi Jinping is a case in point. Through this project, he 'aims for open co-operation and mutual development' and has decided to connect all the nations along the ancient maritime and terrestrial silk route. China has its 'own strategic considerations' in proposing the initiative and it is well known that 'China wants to explore a new development space for its own economic transformation' especially across the Eastern Arm of China which has remained considerably poor as compared to her Western Arm. Moreover, for China, 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' which is a key goal of this initiative involves restoring its place in the international order as visualised by them. These ideas backed by the notions of Tian Xia and Pax Sinica have now created a molotov cocktail. China is going back to its roots to secure its future through the initiation of the 'BRI and wishes to gain control of the littorals of Southeast Asia which had

traditionally served as 'transmission belts of Chinese culture and prestige from the time of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) till at least 1912. China wants the world to recognise that it is hardly a pawn but a strategic actor in international relations who executes its own interests and political will.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, China can be deemed to be a revisionist power in this era while the US is in favour of maintaining the status quo. China, with its two-pronged attack on the US, therefore, is keen to alter the existing status quo.

### **Sino-US Great Power Rivalry**

The US and China want to view themselves as 'great' and these two powers draw significantly on the notion of 'symbolic power'. Since this notion grows on the notion of 'cultural capital' that refers to non-financial social assets, both are seeking a revival in their status through ways and means that are independent of their economic status. This desire for notional power has also led to the acceleration in the Cold War in recent years as both countries have realised their 'rejuvenation with a difference' within their own cultural contexts. In other words, since the notion of symbolic power is essential to both the Chinese and Americans as China is on the rise and America seems to be on the decline as the US faces its own set of challenges and both aspire to spread their cultural footprint far and wide. Cultural power remains a significant attribute of overall power. On the contrary, US foreign policy has historically harped on the notion of the age-old notion of 'Manifest Destiny' and 'Monroe Doctrine'.<sup>6</sup> China is today where the US was 200 odd years ago. However, today the renewed clash of civilisations between the West and Sinic world is due to the 'ensuing strategic competition' that has engulfed them.

### **Theatres of the New Cold War**

Like any war in the past, the new Cold War is being fought on many frontiers though the two major frontiers of this Cold War include East Asia and North America. The new theatres of this Cold War exist both in the tangible as well as the virtual realm i.e., traditional (SCS, intelligence, hegemonic ambitions, and alliance building) and non-traditional security areas (technology, Artificial Intelligence) while China has chosen to attack through more traditional or tangible means in East Asia, her attacks in North America are more in the non-traditional realm.

China wants to become a great power and it understands that its great power aspirations can be fulfilled only through control of the seas. Since control of the sea is a prerequisite for achieving great power status in the international order and sea power has primacy over land in both war and peace time. China feels the need to exert its influence over the SCS.<sup>7</sup>

### **The SCS**

The control of the SCS has become a major bone of contention between China and the US. Since it is a repository of seabed oil and gas and controls large volumes of international trade, it has become a theatre of the new Cold War. It is non-traditionally a virtual area of the Cold War between China and the US for both nations have used the SCS for power projection in East Asia.<sup>8</sup> The possibility of a full-scale conflict over the SCS is a distant possibility considering the US has now become rather inward in its approach and especially after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, she wishes to steer clear of long and arduous conflicts that have dotted her recent history. The US wants to secure its own backyard now and is less inclined to enter full blown conflicts in other parts of the world.

### **Technology and Cold War 2.0**

The technological realm has emerged as the most important area of conflict in this *nouveau* or new Cold War and is the oldest area of contestation as well. The battle of the technological realm is multi-fold in nature with control of the Internet and the realm of information security forming the chief pivot of this model. The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) forms the second pivot of contestation while 5G is the latest technological innovation to join the bandwagon forming the periphery.<sup>9</sup>

The US had traditionally held an upper hand in this domain with US based companies like Microsoft, Google and Apple controlling the realm of Cyberspace. China joined the internet in 1994 and started building the 'great firewall' to regulate the flow of ideas and information from abroad. Since 2000s, it has moved from censoring ideas to regulating public opinions on the net. From the 2010s, she has chosen to reward and punish her people based on their social credit score in what has been called digital

totalitarianism. The Chinese state has unleashed a practice whereby the state assesses the digital activities of its citizens. Under Xi Jinping, it has taken a step further and tried to evolve into a 'norm maker' from being a 'norm taker' especially in the realm of Cyberspace. China has promoted 'Internet Sovereignty' to reshape the discourse and practices of global cyber governance. Thus, China has used technology to not just control its own citizens but also of the world. Interestingly, countries like Iran and Russia have supported China's strict national sovereignty model in this regard. China fears that the US has attempted to 'nationalise the realm of information security' and it has reiterated its stance to have access to a 'free and fair internet' in this regard.

### **The Advent of AI**

AI has changed the scenario with China seeing exponential growth in this field due to the rise of a burgeoning AI infrastructure, abundant data and a highly skilled workforce led by 'tenacious entrepreneurs'. China has, therefore, emerged as the leader in technology be it in the domain of AI, cloud computing, IoT or 5G. While the technological sphere was dominated by the US for much of mankind's history, the shift towards China is now more palpable than ever. China boasts of incomparable advantages in the domain of 5G. While 5G construction in the US and Europe have been managed purely by telecom enterprises, 5G deployment in China is a 'national strategy guided by the government'. Since regime security continues to be the core concern of the Chinese state, it controls the hearts and minds of its people by controlling the digital resources. This calibrated control is facilitated by the media which acts as a bridge between the Chinese Communist Party and the people.

### **Cold War 2.0 and India**

Cold War 2.0 is an emerging and ongoing phenomenon and India is treading a cautious path while dealing with both China and the US. It is in India's strategic interests, economic interests, and overall national interests that this new Cold War doesn't impact her negatively. The US sees India as a potential balancer to China's ambitions of power maximisation in the Asia-Pacific. India itself is indulged in the long-time boundary dispute with China's territorial claims in Aksai Chin and India's North-Eastern borders. Keeping this in mind, India is choosing to be non-aligned, which is still a

backbone of India's foreign policy. India's strategic community has started using terms like 'Strategic Autonomy' to convey the same message, albeit with a different terminology. New Delhi's interests lie in hoping and aiming that the international system remains in a mode of status quo. What this means simply is that New Delhi wouldn't want Beijing's power to increase as an outcome of the Cold War 2.0.

The reason being, that China's rising power could potentially prove to be much more detrimental to India's own interests than the hegemonic interests of the US. Atleast, in the short term, it is India who would be wary of China's growth. This analysis could be challenged by those scholars who are proponents of liberalisation and globalisation, and they might project a critique that this new Cold War 2.0 and its analysis is based on the assumptions of structural realist thinking. The liberals argue that the forces of globalisation almost force nation-states to pacify their militaristic expansionist over zeal in favour of financial progress for large-scale business interests. These two analyses are ideologically opposed to each other and therefore provide a different explanation to the same phenomenon i.e., Cold War 2.0. The new Cold War or the Cold War 2.0 is increasingly getting acceptance as the pressing reality of our times according to most of the scholars and international relations observers.

For instance, in his book, 'Cold War 2.0: Illusion versus Reality', author Madhav Das Nalapat, has summed up the new Cold War. He opines, "Cold War 1.0 was fought principally between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Soon after the collapse of the latter, Cold War 2.0 began. Just as with the earlier Cold War, this is also a battle of systems on an existential trajectory. This time around, the principal protagonists are the US and the PRC. Those who deny the reality of the new Cold War believe that Cold War 1.0 has reappeared, this time with the Russian Federation replacing the Soviet Union as the opponent. Such a view ignores the changes to the global order caused by the increasingly visible efforts of the PRC to replace the US as the prime mover influencing the trajectory of the twenty-first century".

### **Conclusion**

This new Cold War could well be unlike the Cold War of twentieth century. Of course, some parallels always exist because of the great power rivalry, power maximisation, hegemonic ambitions of

great powers etc but the nature and character of the new Cold War has changed tremendously. In the Cold War both the US and the Soviet Union were already established superpowers in the international system who were tussling with each other to become a global hegemon. Here, in the new Cold War, the US is already a hegemonic power while China is yet to be accepted as a superpower in the international community, despite its military and economic power. China has still not filled the vacuum which was left in the international system because of the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union.

However, with the growing bitterness in the Sino-US relations, it would be interesting to see whether countries like India still play a balancing act in this Cold War or China's bullish intentions would propel India to take sides with Washington to serve its own interests. Unlike the 20th century, today non-military arenas are increasingly getting more securitized than even before. Areas like Environment, Health, Cyber-Space, Water and even Outer Space are getting securitised. These non-military areas could potentially be the ones where the new Cold War would be fought. India needs to increase its power in all these non-militaristic areas as well to defend itself with ease.

To conclude, the Sino-US rivalry could well be a defining factor of international relations in the twenty first century. With increasing natural calamities, disasters, and pandemics on their way, if humanity as a race couldn't cooperate to avert these challenges, it would be disastrous for the world. In pursuing their hegemonic ambitions, both China and the US should not take steps that could prove disastrous for global security.

### Endnotes

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