

A Cold War legacy of intervention

The Cold War is still generally assumed to have been a contest between two superpowers over military power and strategic control, mostly centred on Europe. Arne Westad, however, argues that the most important aspects of the Cold War were neither military nor strategic, nor Europe-centred, but connected to political and social development in the Third World.

In a historical sense, the Cold War was a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means. As a process of conflict, it centred on control and domination, primarily in ideological terms. The methods of the superpowers and of their local allies were remarkably similar to those honed during the last phase of European colonialism: giant social and economic projects, bringing promises of modernity to their supporters, and death, mostly, to their opponents or those who happened to get in the way of progress.

For the Third World, the continuum of which the Cold War forms a part did not start in 1945, nor even 1917, but in 1878, with the Conference of Berlin that divided Africa between European imperialist powers – or perhaps as long ago as 1415, when the Portuguese conquered their first African colony. Not even the conflict between the superpowers, nor its ideological dimension, was a new element in this longue durée of attempted European domination.

The tragedy of Cold War history, as far as both the Third World and the superpowers themselves were concerned, was that two historical projects that were genuinely anti-colonial in their origins became part of a much older pattern of domination because of the intensity of their conflict, the stakes they believed were involved, and the almost apocalyptic fear of the consequences if the opponent won. Even though both Washington and Moscow remained opposed to formal colonialism throughout the Cold War, the methods they used in imposing their version of modernity on Third

World countries were very similar to those of the European empires that had gone before them, and especially to their immediate predecessors, the British and French colonial projects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

These methods were centred on inducing cultural, demographic, and ecological change in Third World societies, while using military power to defeat those who resisted. With their founding concepts of social justice or individual liberty long atrophied into self-referential ideologies, the starting point was what the anthro-

pologist James C Scott (following David Harvey) has called 'high modernism', defined, in Harvey's terms, as 'the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders under standardised conditions of knowledge and production... The modernism that resulted was... positivistic, technocratic, and rationalistic at the same time as it was imposed as the work of an élite avant-garde of planners, artists, architects, critics... The 'modernisation' of European economies proceeded apace, while the whole thrust of international politics and trade was justified as bringing a benevolent and progressive 'modernisation process' to a backward Third World.'

Colonial control

As parts of the Third World rebelled against colonial control around the mid third of the 20th century, the revolutions that followed were often inspired by either the Soviet or the American form of high modernism. In a period of extreme global instability, it is not surprising that highly ideologised regimes such as the United States and the Soviet Union opted for intervention in what seemed to be a zerosum game, unless there were strong domestic reasons against it. What is more surprising is the key role local élites played in abetting and facilitating these superpower interventions. Marrying their own domestic purposes to a faith in a common, international ideology, many aimed at some form of superpower involvement from the revolutionary stage onward. A few of them set agendas – economic, political, military – that they knew could only be fulfilled through American or Soviet intervention. A large number waged war on their own peasant populations, attempting to force them – sometimes in conjunction with foreign interveners – to accept centralised plans for their improvement. Perhaps even more than the Cold War superpowers to which they were allied, these Third World élites viewed the modernisation and ultimate abolition of the peasantry as a supreme aim, the pursuit of which justified the most extreme forms of violence.

While one Cold War superpower collapsed, the other went on to become the hyperpower of our times. As is becoming clear from the newly emerging history of the Cold War, it is unlikely that historians of the future will date the emergence of the United States as a hyperpower to

the beginning of the 1990s; indeed, it is likely that many will see America as entering this phase at the beginning rather than the end of the last century. From this, it follows that the Cold War era never saw two equal superpowers – one was distinctly more 'super' than the other, even though its power was never limitless. America just had more of everything: power, growth, ideas, modernity. The expansion of all of these aspects of the United States is one important part of the history of the Cold War, domestically and internationally.

Karl Marx was right in foreseeing the United States becoming the main revolutionary power of the 20th century, a power that would sweep long-established economic, political, and cultural patterns before it on its way to global supremacy. It transformed trade and financial markets, creating a new form of world economy. It defeated its enemies – Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union – while setting the terms for the democratic revolutions that reshaped their politics and societies. It inspired fundamental changes inside and among its European allies, helping to do away with privileges and social obedience, and create more open societies, while assisting in a process of transnational integration. It created a new form of audiovisual culture and patterns of consumption stimulated by it. And the US created the Third World, by repeated interventions, by its need for raw materials, and – first and foremost – by its vision of development.

And the Soviet collapse? The political costs of continued involvement in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were disastrous at a time when people in Moscow and other cities were beginning to count their own part of each expense within a declining economy. The Afghanistan war became the symbol of these expenses, in lives as well as resources. The Soviet leaders who had brought about the intervention were, by the end of the 1980s, seen as fools or knaves, and the critique of the war and the way it had been fought undermined the faith many people had had in the Soviet state.

Unnecessary wars

Together with the economic decline, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the image of having fought unnecessary wars and supported unviable regimes destroyed the legitimacy of the Soviet government, creating an impression of unending mismanagement and failure. When the servants of the Kremlin had to decide where they stood during the coup attempt in August 1991, they themselves deserted the CPSU in droves just for these reasons.

Can there be an end to American interventionism? Unlikely, but not impossible. The United States has been an interventionist power for most of its existence, and its emergence as global hyperpower has made this into a permanent state of affairs. But there is also another America, symbolised by the resistance to the war in Vietnam, the protests against intervention in Central America, and the opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. This anti-interventionist fringe is strongest when it can demonstrate how wars abroad defeat improvements at home. In ideological terms, the

only way of breaking the bond between what Jefferson described as interventionist 'tastes' and democratic 'theory' is probably – as it should be in all democratic politics – through appeals to what serves the country best. It is a debate that America needs now, because as global resistance to US interventionism increases, its democratic practices will come under increasing pressure at home. Without a genuine reorientation of its foreign policy, American democracy may end up suffering the same fate as Soviet socialism.

At the end of the Cold War, about one out of four of the world's inhabitants lived in areas with improving standards of living. Today, the lucky few number less than one out of six, and the difference between the numbers is increasing rapidly. In the long run, it will be impossible for a dwindling privileged minority to impose its economic, political, and military *fiat* worldwide. Unless there is a reversal of the processes of impoverishment, the impoverished majority will begin to turn the tables on the United States and the pan-European world, through intervening in its affairs in the same way as it has – over centuries – intervened in theirs. In this context, the crime against the people in the Twin Towers of New York City was no bigger, or smaller, than those committed against the peoples of Luanda or Kabul during the Cold War. In light of the history of the recent past, the greatest shock of 11 September 2001 was certainly where it happened, not the murderous act itself.

Much of the future may therefore depend on how we revise our actions in order to reduce the potential for violent conflict. If there is one big lesson of the Cold War, it is that unilateral military intervention does not work to anyone's advantage, while open borders, cultural interaction, and fair economic exchange benefit all. This is not a pacifist argument – I believe firmly in the right to self-defence when attacked. But it is an argument which recognises that in a world that is becoming increasingly diverse ideologically at the same time as communications tie us closer together, the only way of working against increased conflict is by stimulating interaction while recognising diversity, and, when needed, acting multilaterally to forestall disastrous events. The Cold War remains a dire example of what the world looks like when the opposite happens and regimes of global intervention take hold. ■



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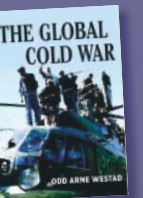
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The Global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times

Odd Arne Westad

Cambridge University Press 486pp £19.66 h/b



This book shows how the globalisation of the Cold War during the last century created the foundations for most of the key conflicts we see today, including the war on terror. It focuses on how the Third World policies of the two 20th century superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – gave rise to resentments and resistance that in the end helped topple one and still seriously challenge the other. Ranging from China to Indonesia, Iran, Ethiopia, Angola, Cuba and Nicaragua, the author explores both the development of interventionist ideologies and the revolutionary movements that confronted interventions.