

The Cold War in Asia

The Battle for Hearts and Minds

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BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON

2010

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT COLD WAR IN ASIA? AN INTERPRETATIVE ESSAY

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The phrase “the Cold War” refers to a narrative that was intended to and is supposed to summarize how we are to understand a geopolitical reality over the period of time running approximately from 1945 to 1991. This narrative is today very widely accepted. It originated with political leaders. It was adopted by scholars. And it was intended to influence the thinking of everyone else. It has been the dominant narrative, although there have been some dissenters.

In this essay I would like to review this narrative and what it is supposed to tell us. It tells us that the Second World War was a war that was started by Germany and Japan as aggressor nations that sought to conquer other nations. They did fairly well at first, but then resistance to them grew stronger. In 1941, both the Soviet Union and the United States entered the war against Germany, and the coalition took on the name of the United Nations. The three countries in this alliance that were most significant militarily were the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union. They were called the “Big Three,” and together they won the Second World War.

During the Second World War, the United Nations did not have a single unified military structure. Rather, there was on the western and southern fronts a joint military structure of the United States and Great Britain, in which a number of other countries joined, while on the eastern front there was a separate Soviet military structure. In order to work together, the leaders of the “Big Three”—Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin—met several times to coordinate the conduct of the war and to discuss postwar arrangements.

Perhaps the most famous meeting was the one that occurred just before the end of the Second World War, in February 1945, at Yalta. The three countries made, in effect, a kind of deal that involved a division of the postwar world into two spheres of influence. In Europe, the line of division was specific and was drawn across the middle of Germany. At the end of the war, the Soviet Union’s sphere covered

approximately one-third of the world, running from the Oder-Neisse line in Germany to the northern half of Korea. The American sphere covered the other two-thirds of the world. The Big Three were supposed to cooperate in the new institutions that were being established—the United Nations as the overall world political structure, the so-called Bretton Woods financial institutions (which were eventually called the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) and a series of other specialized agencies.

According to the narrative, this agreement, in the views of the participants, quickly became less amicable. Each side accused the other almost immediately of bad faith. As a result, there began a conflict which we call the Cold War. The Cold War was more or less officially launched in a speech given by Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri in 1946. He chose Missouri because it was the home state of Roosevelt's successor, President Truman. In this speech, Churchill said that an Iron Curtain had descended over Europe, "from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic."

This conflict was defined in the West as a struggle between the "free world" and the "totalitarian world." George Kennan wrote a famous article in 1947 calling for the "containment" of the Soviet Union. John Foster Dulles subsequently argued that containment was not enough. He called for the "rollback" of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had its own language to describe the Cold War. It saw it as a struggle between the bourgeois or capitalist world and the socialist world.

What was common to both discourses was the argument that there was an irreconcilable ideological gulf between the two camps, and that it was incumbent on everyone to choose sides. In Dulles's language, "neutralism was immoral."

According to the narrative, each side then began to build appropriate institutions to carry out this struggle. There were military institutions. On the Western side there was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in Asia, the US-Japan Defense Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. Australia, New Zealand and the United States were joined together in ANZUS. There was an attempt to establish a parallel institution in the Middle East, but it failed and the US made do with a de facto alliance with Israel.

The Soviet Union established its own military structures—the Warsaw pact in Europe and a treaty with the People's Republic of China (PRC), which was a kind of equivalent of the US-Japan defense pact.

Since the United States and the Soviet Union after 1949 both had nuclear weapons, these institutions faced each other in what was called a “balance of terror.” This phrase refers to the presumption that neither side would be the first to launch nuclear weapons, because a response was certain, and the damage to both sides would be too dangerously high.

Besides military structures, economic institutions were also established. On the US side there was the Marshall Plan. Later, a whole series of economic institutions was created in Western Europe, which ultimately led to the European Union of today. On the Soviet side there was the Comecon, which was supposed to be a kind of counterpart to the Western institutions. In Asia there were less formal institutions, but there was a good deal of US economic assistance of various kinds to Japan, Taiwan and South Korea in particular.

According to the narrative, this situation continued for some time with ups and downs. At some point in time it became less intense, during a period that was called *détente*, but then tension became more serious again. In the 1980s, Reagan became the President of the US, calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union. He tried to reform the Soviet structure with *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

One outcome of all of this was a series of largely bloodless revolts in 1989 in the erstwhile Soviet satellites in east-central Europe, and finally in 1991 came the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, in this narrative, we say that in 1991 the US won the Cold War. It was the end of a bipolar situation; we had entered into a unipolar world. The US had now become the “indispensable nation,” in the language of Madeleine Albright. Some even dared to suggest that this was the “end of history.” But this view didn’t last too long because it didn’t conform to reality.

Throughout this narrative, there is one underlying assumption: that anything important that happened in all those years was initiated either by the US or by the Soviet Union. So if one wanted to explain what was going on anywhere at all, one had to look at what the US and/or the Soviet Union were doing and why they were presumed to be doing it. Once one knew that, one could explain why X or Y or Z had happened.

This narrative is in my view largely a fantasy. There exists an alternative or counter-narrative, though it was never as widespread as the

narrative of the Cold War. When, after independence, India proclaimed itself neutral in the Cold War and began to vote in the United Nations in ways that reflected this position, its policy was based on this alternative narrative. This other narrative denied the basic premise of the Cold War narrative, namely that there were only two sides, and that every country was either on one side or the other.

The proponents of this alternative narrative began to construct various institutional structures. In 1955, the Bandung Conference gathered the independent states of Asia and Africa. It was convened by five South Asian nations—India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and Indonesia. It is well known that the People's Republic of China was invited and came to that meeting, and played a very important role at it. It is less well remembered that the Soviet Union formally requested of the organizers that they invite the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union on the grounds that they too were independent states of Asia, but the organizers refused.

Shortly thereafter the prime ministers of Yugoslavia, Egypt and India met and decided to convene a meeting of “non-aligned” nations. There came to be various other institutions as well—a tricontinental structure (of Asia, Africa and Latin America), originally convened by Cuba, and several non-governmental structures comprised of so-called Third World countries.

All these structures were based on a rejection of the validity of a bipolar division of the world. In 1968, there occurred what I think of as a world revolution. It was a world revolution in the sense that it occurred virtually everywhere. I myself was at Columbia University at that time and witnessed it there. It occurred throughout the pan-European world, in many parts of the so-called socialist bloc, and throughout the Third World. The year 1968 is useful as a symbol but the events actually occurred over a longer period, roughly 1966–1970. I consider the Cultural Revolution in China to be part of this world revolution of 1968.

At that time the Chinese put forward a third geopolitical narrative. They asserted that the world was divided between the two superpowers and everybody else. That is, rather than being divided between the US bloc and the Soviet bloc, or between the North and the South, the world was divided between the US and the Soviet Union on one side and everybody else on the other side. As Rothwell and Johansson show in their chapters of this volume, this narrative took root in such surprising places as Latin America and Sweden. For a time, this third

narrative had wide acceptance, especially among those who participated in the various movements that were part of the world revolution of 1968. To be sure, the exact terminology varied a bit in different parts of the world. The basic idea, however, of those that accepted this third narrative was that the US was a hegemonic imperialist power—this was the era of the Vietnam war—and that the Soviet Union was collusive with the US as a hegemonic imperialist power.

This third narrative—a division between the two superpowers and everyone else—did not survive the 1970s. But the second narrative, that of a North-South division, continued to gain adherents. I believe that it provides a better intellectual framework to understand what went on between 1945 and 1991 than the more dominant narrative of the Cold War. Far from the United States and Soviet Union being the primary agents of almost everything, everywhere, such that one could explain almost anything that went on as result of Soviet or American wishes, the reality was almost the opposite.

The Soviet Union and the US had made an arrangement at Yalta which was a status quo arrangement. But they ran into constant problems in enforcing the status quo all over the world. What happened is that many countries and movements that rebelled against the status quo used the language of the Cold War to force the US or the Soviet Union to support them in what they were doing.

The so-called Cold War ended, according to all accounts, in 1991. But it didn't "end" in the same way everywhere. In Europe, all the so-called communist states collapsed. However, in the three principal communist states in Asia—the People's Republic of China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Vietnam—the communist parties remain in power, even if the economic policies of at least two of the three have changed radically. (In Cuba as well, the Communist Party of Cuba remains in power.) Why this difference with the European states?

There is a second difference between Europe and Asia. The cold war was "cold" in Europe, but it was quite "hot" in Asia. Why? I don't think that was accidental. First of all, what we mean when we say that it was a "cold" war is that neither the US nor the Soviet Union used its military in combat against the other at any time. That is of course true. One would be hard-pressed to think of a moment in which there was actually an exchange of shooting between the US and the Soviet Union. If the Yalta agreement was an agreement that there would be no shooting, that neither side would attempt to change the frontiers

that were established in 1945, then in this sense the Yalta agreement was a great success. It achieved its primary objective. But it achieved it primarily in Europe.

Let me review the history. There were of course repeated political “crises” in Europe. The first was the Berlin crisis, which derived from the complicated boundaries in Germany, such that the city of Berlin was surrounded by the Russian zone of East Germany. The Western powers sent supplies to their occupation zones in West Berlin by land transport across the Soviet zone. In 1948, the Soviet Union closed the land route, which effectively meant that the western (US, British and French) sectors of Berlin were blockaded. The US decided to fly in planes to feed and otherwise re-supply the people of its Berlin zones. The reason the Soviets did not shoot down those planes as they traversed East Germany without authorization, which of course they could have done, was because of the key rule of Yalta: that there would be no shooting. Eventually, the Soviet Union lifted the land blockade, and the world was back to status quo ante.

The first of the uprisings in Eastern Europe took place in 1953—in the Soviet sector of Berlin. This was a popular rebellion against communism. Did the West come in to support the rebels? They uttered not a word, not a sound. In 1956, there were more serious uprisings in Poland and in Hungary. These were suppressed brutally by the Russians. Did the West do anything about it? There were broadcasts on the Voice of America and reports about what was going on in Hungary. But were troops sent in? No. In 1968, there was a further series of uprisings in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Again the Soviet Union sent in troops to Czechoslovakia to put down this uprising. Did the US do anything about it? Absolutely nothing. 1980 saw the Solidarity Movement in Poland. This movement evolved and gained strength for over a year. At one point, the Soviet Union threatened to send in troops again. But the Polish communist Prime Minister, General Jaruzelski, told the Soviets that they did not have to send in troops, because he would handle it internally. He did. Did the US do anything? Absolutely nothing.

The Cold War was cold in Europe because the US and the Soviet Union had an agreement that it would be a cold war, that neither side would do anything to change boundaries. The one attempt to change the boundaries was when the Greek Communist Party resumed the Greek Civil War in 1946. The Greek communists were at one point winning, and might have come to power. They did not do so because

the Soviet Union, in accord with the agreement made in Yalta, pulled the plug on them and refused to support them. The Soviet Union cut off their supplies and the Greek Civil War came to an end in 1949.

This is what happened in Europe. Yalta was an agreement primarily about Europe. It was a little vague at the time of Yalta what the agreement implied for Asia. The first problem was China. When the Second World War came to an end, the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) resumed. It had been partially suspended during the war with the Japanese, but after the defeat of Japan it began again. The Chinese Communist Party was doing well in 1945 and seemed to think that they should continue to do well. But Stalin strongly recommended to Mao Zedong that the CCP not march on Shanghai. Rather, he suggested that the CCP make some kind of deal with the Kuomintang, to split power in some way.

This was Stalin's attempt to enforce a version of the Yalta arrangement on China. Mao Zedong decided to ignore him. The hot war in China continued because the Chinese decided not to pay any attention to the wishes of the Soviet Union. The Kuomintang was pushed out of the mainland. It is an accident of geography that there happens to be an island that is part of China called Taiwan. The Chinese army was not strong enough in 1949 to conquer Taiwan. Had Taiwan been part of the mainland, today it would undoubtedly be a part of the PRC just like the rest of China. But at that time, the US stepped in and proclaimed the Taiwan Strait the new boundary line. They insisted that neither side could cross this new boundary, seeking thereby to freeze the situation. It was not, however, the initiative of either the US or the Soviet Union that had led to the hot war that culminated in the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The CCP had called the shots.

The next hot war that occurred was in Korea. There is a lot of debate among scholars as to what actually happened in 1950 and who started what. One thing that I don't think happened is that Stalin got on the telephone in the Kremlin and told Kim Il Sung to invade South Korea. While there may be debate about who took the first step, we are clear about what happened militarily. North Korea sent troops into South Korea, where they did quite well. Then General MacArthur was able to turn the tide, push back the North Koreans, and march north. At one point, he seemed ready to march all the way to the Yalu River and beyond. Before MacArthur was able to do this, the Chinese government sent in troops and pushed back. MacArthur wanted to use

nuclear weapons at that point. What happened? The President of the United States fired him. MacArthur was a very popular man within the United States, so this was politically very difficult to do. But it was part of the agreement that had been made at Yalta—the US felt it couldn't risk going to war with the Soviet Union over this. So where did the Korean War end? It ended just where it began. The boundary line was kept exactly where it had been before the war.

The next development of great significance in Asia was Vietnam. The Japanese had occupied Vietnam during the Second World War. Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh had led an important political guerilla movement against the Japanese. At the end of the war, they wanted to negotiate with France (still juridically the colonial power), seeking at a minimum autonomy and at a maximum full independence. The French, intent on restoring colonial rule, refused. So war broke out between the French and the Viet Minh. The French did not do well in that war and ultimately were defeated at Dien Bien Phu.

A multi-state meeting was then convened in Geneva to settle the situation. The United States was very reluctant to go to Geneva. The French Government was at that point led by Pierre Mendès-France and he wanted to withdraw French troops, so the Geneva conferees partitioned Vietnam into north and south, creating a new line. The United States refused to sign the agreement. Part of the arrangement was that free elections throughout Vietnam would be scheduled, and the US feared that the supporters of the South Vietnamese government would lose those elections. The war resumed and US troops replaced the French in fighting the Viet Minh. Did the Soviet Union send in troops? No. They did not. Did they help militarily with supplies? Yes, because the Vietnamese made use of the fact that Cold War rhetoric required the Soviet Union to do so. But Soviet aid was very limited.

Ultimately the US lost that war. This was very important. It had an enormous geopolitical impact. First of all, it was hugely expensive for the United States, which was forced to change its monetary system as a result. It was also extremely expensive politically. Internally, a large segment of the US population rebelled against US policy. The combination of actual defeat and widespread dissent in the US led to what we call the Vietnam syndrome—a popular reluctance in the United States to engage in wars in the global South. To deal with this political problem within the US, the government eliminated the draft, but this of course put a crimp in future military possibilities.

In the Vietnam War, was the Soviet Union a prime mover? Not at all. Was the United States a prime mover? Only secondarily. Did either move in such a way that there was a risk of nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the US? No.

There was in the 1980s the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan, which seemed to violate the spirit of Yalta. But it never involved a direct military confrontation with the United States, which participated only through proxies. In any case, the Soviet incursion turned out to be a disaster for the Soviet Union, akin to the defeat of the US in Vietnam, and eventually the Soviets withdrew, ending up at the frontiers from which they started.

The case of Cuba is similar. Fidel Castro came to power as the leader of a guerrilla movement that was in total political disagreement with the Cuban Communist Party, which had been supporting the Batista regime. Castro nonetheless ran into great difficulty with the US government, which sought to overthrow his regime. So Castro announced that he had been a communist all his life. This was perhaps true in some student-Marxist sense, but he was not a member of the party. The Fidelistas then took over the Cuban Communist Party, and this forced the Soviet Union, in the logic of the Cold War, to defend the Cuban regime against any US invasion. When the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred, the US did not send troops to Cuba. Rather, the US and the Soviet Union negotiated a *de facto* truce, thereby avoiding military conflict.

Thus the Chinese and the Vietnamese and the Cubans all used the Soviet Union to achieve the political changes to the status quo which they desired. It was not the other way round. It was not the Soviet Union that used the Chinese, the Vietnamese or the Cubans. Indeed, the Soviet Union was the reluctant ally.

Let us now look at the events of 1989–1991 in Europe. According to the Cold War narrative, the world moved from a bipolar situation to a unipolar one, in which the United States was for the first time the unquestioned supreme power. According to the counter-narrative, things look quite different.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was, from the US point of view, an absolute geopolitical catastrophe, because it eliminated two things. It eliminated the Cold War arguments that the US had used to insist that its immediate allies and the rest of the non-communist world follow the political lead of the United States, because they were arrayed against an enemy called the Soviet Union. Secondly, it eliminated the

role of the Soviet Union in restraining people who were more or less on its side from engaging in actions that might possibly lead to military confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union.

I would argue that Saddam Hussein dared to invade Kuwait precisely because the Soviet Union was collapsing. He would never have dared to do it five years earlier, because the Soviet Union would have said that this would cause a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union could not permit that. It was the collapse of the Soviet Union that lifted the constraints on Saddam Hussein.

If you look at the Cold War as a narrative, I think it fails as an explanation of reality. I think what was going on was rather an attempt by the United States to maintain and ensure its hegemony by making a deal with the only other country in the world that had a comparable military structure, the Soviet Union. The deal was a status quo deal. But neither side was able to enforce it in the long run. The slow collapse of the Soviet Union began with the 1956 Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the split with China in 1960. From that point on the Soviet Union grew weaker and weaker. The same thing was happening to the US, as Western Europe began to liberate itself beginning in the 1970s. The Western Europeans no longer wished to be treated as satellites and the US was forced to make a series of concessions. Nothing accelerated that process more than the collapse of the Soviet Union. Actually, there was one thing that accelerated it still more, and that was the attempt by George W. Bush to restore US hegemony through unilateral macho militarism, which backfired enormously and accelerated US decline precipitously.

The relations of the United States and the Soviet Union in Asia, as well as the policies each pursued, were quite different from their relations and their policies in Europe. It is probably not very useful to speak of the Cold War in Asia.