

The Cold War: A World History

By Odd Arne Westad
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The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace

By Paul Thomas Chamberlin
HarperCollins, 2018
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Reviewed by Walter M. Hudson

The Cold War is now suddenly back in vogue, since we are supposedly entering an era of great power competition. China looms as the greatest security challenge according to the latest National Defense Strategy. China and Russia are considered revisionist powers, disturbers of the existing international order. Therefore, there is an understandable impulse to look back, beyond the war on terror of the 21st century's first decades, beyond the dubious "End of History," the info-tech boom of the 1990s, past the hubristic and all-so-brief "Unipolar Moment," to the last great power struggle itself. It is ancient history to many now, but the decades-spanning Cold War, with its ideological clash between the communist and free worlds, certainly seems germane today. It was, at certain times, a potentially existential conflict that would turn the world into cinders. It was, at other times, a tense conflict that many thought would never end.

Two recently published sweeping surveys tell the Cold War's story. Odd Arne Westad's massive *The Cold War: A World History* broadens the temporal perspective. Instead of the standard 1945 to 1991 bracketing, he opens up a panoramic 100-year-long view. The Cold War did not start following apparent Soviet (or, depending on your perspective, American) encroachments into an opposing sphere of influence. The capitalist West and the communist Soviet Union had been in conflict from the USSR's very founding in 1917. Indeed, Westad goes back even further than that. The Cold War era was born of larger 19th-century socioeconomic transformations. Economic unravelings, such as the global crisis of the 1890s, consequently loosened communists from socialists, turning the former into radical revolutionaries. Anti-colonialist stirrings in turn-of-the-century national parties and congresses from Indonesia to South Africa also contributed. These events subsequently brought forth leaders and mass movements, paving the way for ultimate independence. Europe's 1914–1945 immolation, as Westad terms it, the "thirty-year European civil war," gave

rise to "revolutions, new states, economic dislocation, and destruction on a scale that nobody . . . would have thought possible." World War II's outcome finalized the global order's de-Europeanization.

Seen this way, as part of a huge geopolitical economic and political reordering, we can therefore also see that the Cold War did not exclusively, or even primarily, define the planet and its inhabitants. Westad's perspective shows that the U.S.-USSR Cold War dynamic can be seen as part of a larger historical process that was concurrent with the years of superpower standoff. Indeed, much of what strikes us as uniquely part of today's newest *novus ordo seclorum*—its multipolarity, its nationalism, its identity obsession—was all underway during the Cold War. This very multiplicity continuously defied superpower attempts at taming and reducing it. As Westad writes, "Time and again, grand schemes for modernization, alliances, or transnational movements stumbled at the first hurdle laid by nationalism or other forms of identity politics."

This reconfiguration of the Cold War as more than a bipolar ideological struggle is also emphasized in Paul Thomas Chamberlin's hefty *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace*. The author's perspective is equally global, and to some degree revisionist (hence the title, a respectful *riposte* to Professor John Lewis Gaddis's book) in challenging the notion that the Cold War was a time of bipolar placidity. As he capably sets forth, not only was the Cold War not bipolar, it also was not in the least sense cold. Fourteen million people were killed in what he calls "catastrophic waves of violence" that crashed on a huge geographic arc from northeast to southwest Asia.

What really mattered in emerging nations throughout the world, and especially in this killing arc, was not some proletarian revolution, but a workable model to jumpstart a new country into modernity. In all its cruelty, destruction, and waste, the Soviet model for development—a combination of state planning, collectivized agriculture, and nationalized industry—seemed to offer the fastest path.

According to both authors, time and again the superpowers misread particular

yearnings. In so doing, bipolarity not only did not keep the peace, but it also prolonged or otherwise escalated struggles into long-drawn-out conflicts fueled by superpower arms and money. Westad states, “Over and over again, events that were in origin local and specific metamorphosed into manifestations for a global struggle.” For Westad, the Cold War’s “universalist heart” drove America to stake massive amounts of blood and treasure in places that, only a few years earlier, had meant nothing. In American eyes, communism became the exemplar transnational threat that often demanded total, whole-of-government approaches on a scale that would dwarf anything today.

Chamberlin writes that sometimes America did not even understand that success, in terms of stopping communism, was staring it in the face—for example, the brutal obliteration of the Indonesian Communist Party in the mid-1960s that all but secured much of Southern Asia from communism and that served as a “harbinger for the collapse of the Communist movement in the Third World.” Yet at the same time, the United States plunged ever deeper in the Vietnam morass to stop a model of communism already on its way to being discredited in the same region. Of course, the Soviets misread the world as well. According to Westad, the fundamental contradiction of the seeming pan-Marxist offensive during the Cold War was that communism premised itself on a classless, nationless world of proletarians and peasants—but the “problem was that for many ordinary people . . . a strong nation-state was what they wished for most.”

China gets rich treatment in both books. The communist victory in China was, Chamberlin notes, of momentous consequence. Its triumph there, with fully 20 percent of the world’s population, seemingly made the world look all of a sudden “Red.” In America, the shock was enormous (imagine if all of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Turkey fell completely under al Qaeda, and one gets a small sense of the dismay). It astonished the Soviets precisely because what happened went completely against communist doctrine—China was a peasant nation, not

an industrialized one, and its revolution was not led by the proletariat. And in just a few years after communist China’s founding, China broke decisively with the USSR and pursued a separate geopolitical trajectory. Even among major powers, the Cold War ceased being a bipolar struggle. Westad points out that the mid-1950s Sino-Soviet split ended the notion of the USSR and China as “brother states” for good. Any notion that the world was simply bipolar should have been discarded.

Few policymakers understood this. Westad notes that President Richard Nixon, for all his many faults, was one of the few who did. Nixon, in Westad’s book, is a very strange hero of the very strange Cold War (juxtapose this with Chamberlin’s villainous take). It was Nixon, who in Westad’s words, “[b]ecause he fundamentally distrusted his own people, forced U.S. foreign policy onto a track where, for the first time during the Cold war, it dealt with others on the assumption that U.S. global hegemony would not last forever.” Nixon, in his rejection both of American exceptionalism and democratic globalism, was thus able to grasp China’s *singularity*, a concept far more important than “linkage.” China could be separated and dealt with as its own entity, not as part of a larger global pattern.

Nixon’s breakthrough occurred in the 1970s, the Cold War’s strangest decade. Experts assumed the superpowers were becoming, in Westad’s words, a “permanent duopoly, in which the United States and the Soviet Union shared responsibility for limiting regional conflict, making sure that nuclear weapons did not proliferate, and avoiding restlessness within their own ranks.” But this overstated superpower influence and importance. The ground was in fact shifting tectonically during the 1970s. Conflicts broke out that escaped the taut Cold War logic. The India-Pakistan War in 1971 had little to do with superpower ideological struggle; the stakes were not in the slightest over whether a communist party would prevail. Rather, as Chamberlin notes, the war indicated the rise of “ethno-religious politics of violence in the Third World.”

This new wave of conflict defied superpower labeling. Chamberlin writes

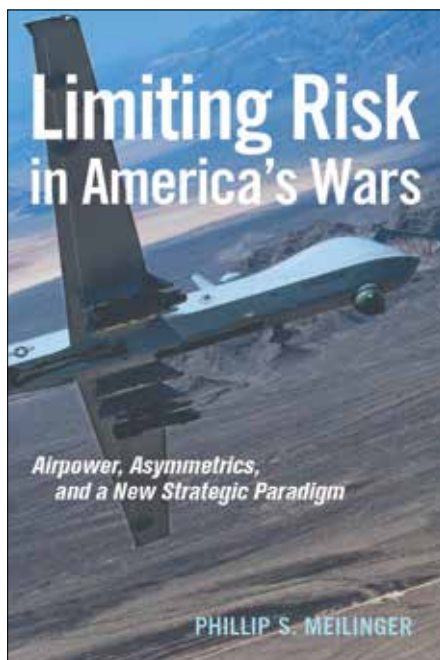
of “a new breed of radicals driven by religious and ethnic politics [that] seized the vanguard . . . this next generation of fighters rejected both Washington and Moscow’s influence.” A prime example was Lebanon, the apparent “model of a functioning, multisectarian republic” that exploded into violence and anarchy. Beirut’s Battle of the Hotels, during which Phalangist, Muslim, and pan-Arab secularist gunmen shot it out from atop luxury resort high-rises, augured this era. Meanwhile, Marxist globalist pretensions were dashed as neighboring communist nations fought each other tooth and claw. Cambodia launched attacks into Vietnam in 1977, just 2 years after absolute communist victory in both countries, and Vietnam responded with its own invasion. By the following year, Pol Pot was calling for Vietnam’s “wholesale destruction.” And, of course, nothing was more astonishing than the Iranian Revolution.

All in all, neither book is perfect. In Chamberlin’s account in particular, there is a whiff of *agit*-history, of revisionist historical thinking that, at times, makes American policymakers and their policies sound venal, and/or downright sinister in ways that strike this reviewer as unfair. And Westad concludes with a sort of would-be idealist paean that the previous 600 pages-plus of his global history undermine. Nonetheless, both books’ distinctive virtues strongly outweigh their flaws.

So, in the end, what lessons can we derive, explicit or implicit, from these Cold War histories? We know that the Cold War demanded a clear and long-term strategy at the highest level. Strategies, often due to their temporal and contextual construction, as well as the demands for parsimony, have to whittle down complex situations. The Cold War strategies adopted by the United States may not have been done with ill will or bad intentions. At times, they may have been theoretically sound and coherent. But they often simplified and assumed away too much. Given the stakes, the temptation was constantly to seek connection when there was, in fact, particularity or separation. Events seemed linked, though often such events were not, and nations and peoples acted with

unique motivations. This pattern-seeking compulsion in turn prompted and itself fed what David Halberstam termed the “crisis psychology” of the Cold War: threats were everywhere and increasing, and thus they became existential. Instead, what we can learn from each book is that, often during the Cold War, the parts were greater than the whole. Nations and peoples worked out their own destinies, regardless of, and sometimes in defiance of, superpower goals. Perhaps the biggest lesson, as simple as it may be, is to be aware, not of connection and pattern, but of exceptionalism and singularity. JFQ

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Limiting Risk in America's Wars: Airpower, Asymmetrics, and a New Strategic Paradigm

By Phillip S. Meilinger
Naval Institute Press, 2017
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ISBN: 978-1682472507

Reviewed by Tom Greenwood

In *Limiting Risk in America's Wars*, Phillip Meilinger boldly argues against conducting prolonged wars of annihilation with large conventional U.S. ground forces. This strategy has proved too costly and seldom achieves the political goals for which recent campaigns have been fought, he argues. Instead, Meilinger, a retired Air Force pilot, favors the indirect approach espoused most prominently after World War I by British military thinkers Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart and Major General J.F.C. Fuller. Building on their ideas, the author contends U.S. strategy would be better served if our forces undertook *second-front operations*, which he defines as a “grand strategic maneuver involving a major military force that strikes the enemy unexpectedly somewhere other than the main theater of action (the source of the enemy’s strength).” Such operations could help divert opposing forces, attack critical vulnerabilities, reinforce allies, develop asymmetric advantages, and be decisively exploited. In short, second-front operations could enable military forces to avoid prolonged and inconclusive conflicts and more rapidly achieve stated war aims at lower risk.

The foregoing summary of the author’s analysis may strike some readers as strategically valuable. It may be in some contexts, but it is deceptively simple (perhaps even facile) when one ponders just how difficult it is to open up second-front operations against nonstate actors whose foot soldiers wear no uniforms, defend no sovereign territory, and rely on illicit transnational networks to fund their operations. Moreover, few readers are likely to argue that deception and surprise—key tenets of the indirect approach—are less important today than they were in Sun Tzu’s day. But, as U.S. Navy SEALs learned in 1992 when they came ashore in Somalia under the glare of TV cameras, the proliferation of information technology makes achieving and maintaining surprise on the modern battlefield extraordinarily difficult.

The most controversial theme of this book, however, is that advanced precision munitions have now elevated airpower to be America’s most decisive arm. And

when combined with sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) networks and highly trained special operations forces (SOF), the author believes this triad now renders large ground formations (similar to those employed in Afghanistan and Iraq) irrelevant. In his view, the latter are unwieldy, easy to target, often misconstrued as occupation forces, and responsible for a preponderance of civilian casualties. Citing 2006–2007 statistics from Afghanistan, Meilinger writes:

Nearly 95 percent of the 35 airstrikes resulting in collateral damage involved troops-in-contact—those instances when the rigorous safeguards taken at the air operations center to carefully vet targets to avoid such mistakes were bypassed. Given that there were some 5,342 airstrikes flown by Coalition air forces that dropped “major munitions” during those 2 years, the number causing collateral damage was a mere 0.65 percent of the total.

He further asserts that this percentage could have been lower if there had been fewer situations where troops-in-contact needed in-extremis close air support. Unfortunately, he offers scant evidence that SOF troops-in-contact were more adept at accurately guiding air-delivered munitions on to enemy targets than general purpose forces. Nor does he examine the implications of greater risk for SOF units in different operational contexts.

The author does a nice job balancing his discussion of warfighting theory with historical vignettes that highlight both successful and unsuccessful indirect approaches and second-front operations. The successful campaigns he discusses are the French and Indian wars in America (1754–1763), Wellington in Spain (1809–1812), the Arab Revolt (1916–1918), and Operation *Torch* in North Africa (1942). The failed campaigns he analyzes are the Sicilian Expedition during the Peloponnesian War (415–413 BCE), Imjin War (1592–1598), Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt (1798–1799), Gallipoli (1915), and Norway (1940). Not surprisingly, he dedicates a separate chapter, titled “Descent into