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# Rethinking the Cold War: a global conflict?

David Brydan

When we're studying or teaching most wars – the Napoleonic Wars, for example, or the two world wars of the twentieth century – we can point to major battles and specific theatres of conflict around the world. We can show students maps of how territories expanded or receded, where armies met, and how front lines shifted.

But can we do this for the Cold War? We could use maps that show the world divided into two opposing blocs, but we'd have to think about which specific countries each bloc encompassed, whose perspectives the maps adopted, and how they accounted for developments such as the Sino-Soviet split. We could highlight locations of specific Cold War conflicts – Korea or Vietnam perhaps – but they would only give us a snapshot of where the Cold War happened to be at its hottest at a particular moment in time. Or we could focus on an iconic location that somehow captures the essence of the Cold War, somewhere like divided Berlin. But no actual battles took place in Berlin during the Cold War, no shots were fired between the two superpowers, and few lives were lost. Telling students that Berlin was the epicentre of the Cold War is not going to help them understand what it was.

The question of geography is one of the main ways in which scholarship on the Cold War has developed over recent decades. For many years historians saw the Cold War as simply a bi-polar conflict. Historiography was dominated by the actions and policies of the United States and the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent by countries such as China. Gradually, historians began to integrate other regions of the world more systematically into the Cold War story, particularly Europe and Latin America. But over the last decade scholarship of the Cold War has gone truly global, exploring the relationship between the Cold War and parallel histories of decolonisation and economic development, and integrating areas such as Southern Africa and Afghanistan which only ever featured on the margins of earlier histories.

These developments have undoubtedly served to broaden and deepen our understanding of the Cold War. But they have not made the task of teaching it any simpler. It is easy to say that the Cold War was a global conflict, much harder to explain exactly what that means or how it came to be. And there is always the risk that as the geography of the Cold War expands, its core characteristics grow ever more hazy and its boundaries begin to blur – so the 'Cold War' serves as an unhelpful shorthand for everything that happened from the end of the Second World War to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

What, then, were the core features of the 'global Cold War'? In what ways was it global, and where do the boundaries

between the Cold War and other areas of post-war global history lie? Perhaps, most importantly, what ideas and topics can we use to teach the global Cold War to students in ways that make sense to them?

## Proxy wars

The most obvious reason we have for thinking about the Cold War as a global rather than a bi-polar conflict is the series of proxy wars which took place around the world during the period. Some of these conflicts were primarily driven by Cold War rivalries, interests and agendas: Korea being the most obvious example. Others were military interventions carried out principally by one of the major Cold War powers, such as the US intervention in Guatemala, or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And in some cases they were anti- or post-colonial conflicts which became enmeshed with the Cold War dynamics of the time, including in Vietnam and Angola.

What is striking about these examples is that they all took place in the 'Third World' (itself a Cold War era term), what some scholars now refer to as the 'Global South'. As Paul Chamberlin has argued in his recent book, *The Cold War's Killing Fields*, around 70% of the roughly 20 million wartime deaths during the Cold War era took place across an arc of territory from West Africa, across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, to South East Asia.<sup>1</sup> Many of those deaths occurred in wars such as Vietnam and Korea, which we are fairly familiar with. But others took place in conflicts that have received far less attention, either in Cold War scholarship or in the Western world in general – the anti-communist massacres in Indonesia, the Bangladesh war of independence, the Ethiopian civil war, the Iran-Iraq war, and so on.

If we limit our attention to Europe, North America and the Soviet Union it is easy to interpret the Cold War as an era of 'long peace', as John Lewis Gaddis termed it.<sup>2</sup> But this interpretation is a lot harder to maintain if we adopt a global perspective on the Cold War, and foreground the experiences of countries in the Global South. Indeed, if we do so it becomes difficult to argue that the Cold War was really 'cold' at all.

## Decolonisation

If there was one factor which helps to explain the global scope of the Cold War it is the processes of decolonisation which ran parallel to it. The Cold War emerged in a world which was being utterly transformed by the breakdown of the old European empires – from the Indian subcontinent in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, to much of



North Africa and South East Asia in the 1950s, and finally to the great wave of sub-Saharan African decolonisation which reached its peak in 1960 and continued until the mid-1970s. The total number of sovereign states rose threefold during this period.

These new states represented both a threat and an opportunity for the Cold War superpowers. Both the United States and the Soviet Union sought to win them over to their respective sides, and feared the consequences of them falling to the enemy. Following the Sino-Soviet split in 1956, China became an increasingly independent rival for influence over newly independent states. This Cold War context indelibly shaped the international and domestic fortunes of the newly independent states, usually for the worse.

But post-colonial states and their leaders were not mere pawns in the Cold War diplomatic game. Often they tried to benefit from both sides. Figures such as General Abdel Nasser in Egypt were masters at playing off the superpowers to secure military and economic aid, while never drifting far enough towards any one power to risk direct military confrontation with the other. The overbearing influence of the Cold War also helped to foster new forms of solidarity and co-operation among post-colonial states, built around their shared commitment to national sovereignty, and their opposition to all forms of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The 1955 Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, for example, brought together 29 countries from the two continents to advocate for self-determination, respect for national sovereignty, non-interference in states' internal affairs, non-aggression, and international equality.

Bandung was followed by the foundation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which united Afro-Asian countries with other states such as Yugoslavia and Cuba, all seeking to maintain their sovereignty and independence in the face of those who wished to divide the world into two mutually antagonistic blocs. Leaders such as Nehru, Nkrumah, Nasser, Sukarno and Tito who helped to forge this movement were vocal opponents of the binary logic of the Cold War, and helped to ensure that the superpowers weren't given free rein in international organisations like the UN.

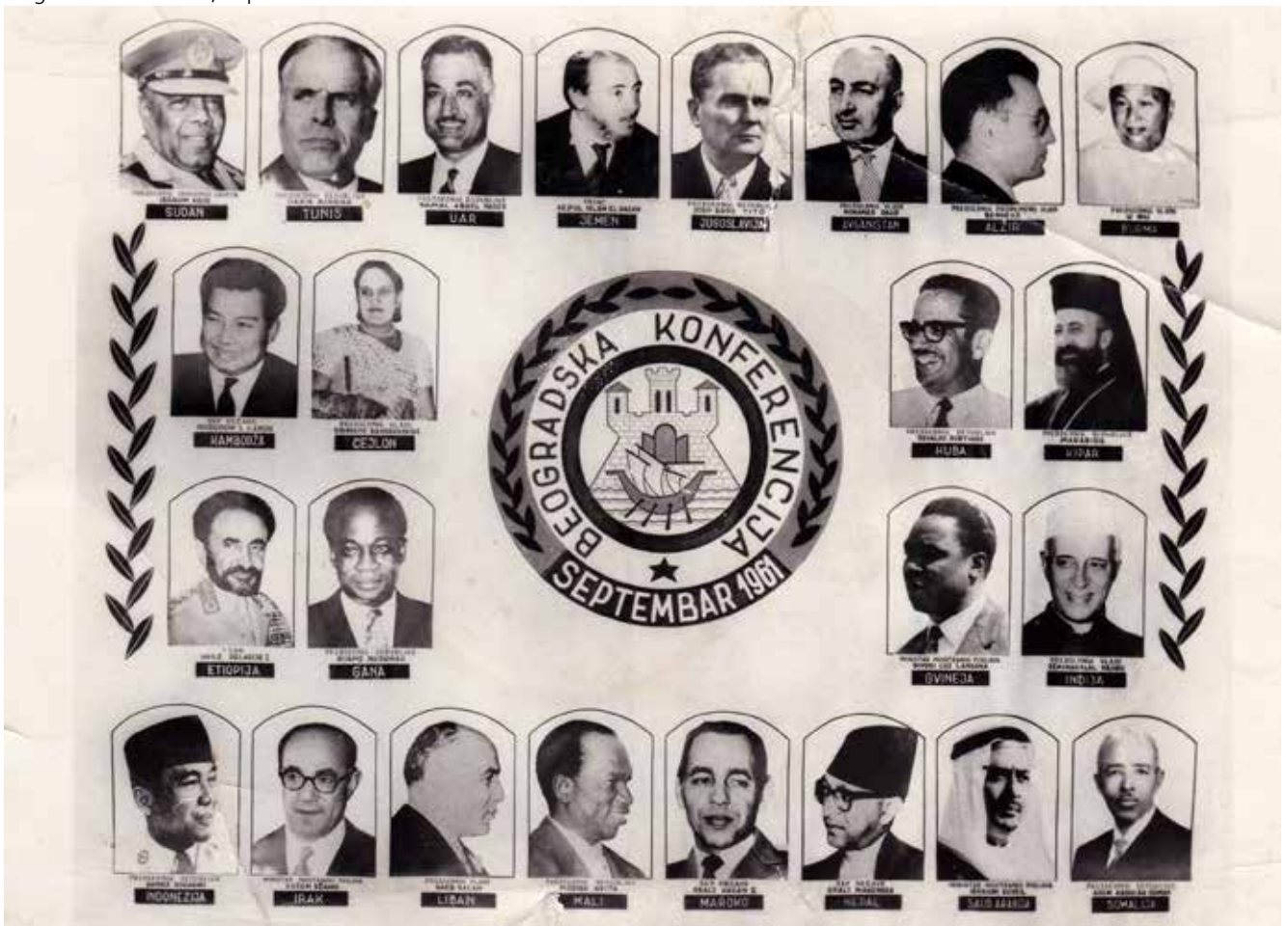
But we need to be careful about oversimplifying the relationship between decolonisation and the Cold War. Anti-colonial movements had a history which stretched back well

before 1945. Decolonisation was not a sub-section of the Cold War, in as much as its development was influenced by the geopolitical context of the era. While the Non-Aligned Movement, for example, was very much a Cold War-era institution aimed at maintaining peace, non-interference and sovereignty, Bandung was first and foremost an anti-colonial project. As Matthew Connelly has argued in relation to the Algerian War of Independence, it is sometimes helpful to take off the 'Cold War lens' and consider the other factors that shaped international relations during the period.<sup>3</sup>

### International development

Superpower interest in the Third World drove military interventions and the proxy wars discussed above. But it also ushered in a new era, and a new language, of 'international development' and 'technical assistance' which bound much of the world into the Cold War nexus. The United States and the Soviet Union wanted to gain the support of states around the world. But the Cold War was an ideological conflict, and geopolitical acquiescence was not enough. Above and beyond that, both powers sought to bind other countries to their specific economic and social models, and particularly to provide a model of economic development for the newly-independent post-colonial states. Many anti-colonial leaders were sympathetic to socialist or communist ideas, and looked with admiration at the Soviet experience of rapid industrial development. But they also aspired to the kind of prosperity offered by western capitalism, and were conscious of the economic largesse which the United States in particular was able to bestow.

From the perspective of the United States, the appeal of its own economic model seemed self-evident. It was, after all, a country which had thrown off the shackles of colonial rule and become the richest state in the world thanks, according to its advocates, to a combination of entrepreneurial capitalism, rugged individualism, and technological development. During the Cold War, US intellectuals and policy makers attempted to codify these experiences into a specific theory of modernisation which could be adopted by countries around the world. And they feared that countries which failed to embark on this path would remain mired in the kind of poverty and underdevelopment in which communism would be able to



thrive. It was these beliefs which underpinned substantial US support for international development and technical assistance, from the Point 4 Programme announced by Truman in 1949, to Kennedy's launch of the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress in Latin America in 1961.

Unsurprisingly, the Soviets saw things differently. For them, the Soviet Union's experience following the revolution of 1917 offered the obvious model for states seeking to make the rapid transition towards industrial development. Like the US, the Soviet Union offered economic aid as well as military supplies to newly-independent states, and it also sent technicians, engineers, doctors and other experts to help developing countries with specific projects. Soviet money and expertise lay behind major development projects across the globe, from the Bhilai steel plant in India, to the Aswan Dam in Egypt.

But the Soviet Union was not the only country promoting its own development model within the socialist world. China felt that its experience of communist revolution in a peasant-dominated agrarian society offered a much more appropriate model for African and Asian countries. The global spread of Maoist ideas, particularly following the Sino-Soviet split, saw Chinese financial and technical assistance sent to countries from Tanzania to Albania. Cuba combined its direct military aid to anti-colonial revolutionaries with social aid and expertise, particularly in the field of healthcare. And socialist countries in Eastern Europe also provided development and humanitarian aid around the world, from East German and Polish technical experts in the Middle East, to Yugoslav workers promoting the idea of 'self-management' in Kenya.

It is questionable, however, how successful any of these projects were in either practical or ideological terms. US development aid had little substantial impact in a context where Western powers were fighting hard to prevent any fundamental restructuring of the economic system in favour of the Global South, and where the US frequently replaced moderate reforming governments with reactionary anti-communist regimes. Many developing countries hoped to secure aid from

both sides while remaining detached from concrete military or political alliances. And the neo-colonial undercurrent of many Cold War-era aid projects represented exactly the kind of politics that the Afro-Asian states criticised so forcefully at Bandung.

### Mental maps

The Cold War is ultimately best thought of as a global conflict, because that was how many of its participants saw it. Both US and Soviet 'cold warriors' imagined their countries encircled by enemies, and only able to survive by going on the offensive. Both China and the Soviet Union saw themselves, at least to some extent, as the vanguard of global revolutionary movements, justifying both their own interference in other countries and Western fears of such interference. The 'domino theory', so beloved by US Cold War policymakers, saw any region where communism threatened to extend its influence as the frontline in the defence of the 'Free World'.

This was also an era when the key technologies of the Cold War were ushering in a new era of global thought and consciousness. The development of nuclear weapons threatened catastrophe on a planetary scale unimaginable in earlier eras. The idea of Mutually Assured Destruction which became central to nuclear strategy explicitly carried the threat of global destruction. Similarly, the development of space technology symbolised by the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, and the American moon landing in 1969, prompted people around the world to think about the planet in a new and more unified way. The famous Earthrise and Blue Marble photographs taken of the earth from space helped to foster belief in both the planet's unity and its vulnerability – be it to environmental catastrophe or nuclear destruction.

But once again, we have to be conscious of the fact that these new global ways of thinking were not simply caused or defined by the Cold War. They force us to return to the problem of the ever-expanding boundaries of the Cold War.

A Cold War map showing the Berlin Wall as a bricked-up barrier and barbed wire surrounding West Berlin. The map was published by the Press and Information Office of the State of Berlin, probably in 1963.

Cornell University – PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive Cartography



If everything was part of the global Cold War, where do the borders of its history lie? Expanding the geography of the Cold War means having to incorporate the big historical process it overlapped with – not just the ideological clash between communism and capitalism or the shifting balance of geopolitical power, but imperialism, anti-colonialism and decolonisation, development and modernisation, technology and the environment, globalisation and internationalism – and that makes the task of teaching it much more complex.

None of these subjects are reducible to the Cold War; they have much longer histories and were more than just a subsection of this particular part of international relations in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather than seeing all of global history after 1945 as part of the Cold War, we can read the Cold War as a particular sub-history of these much larger processes which defined twentieth-century history. The ‘Cold War’ was, of course, a Cold War concept, developed and used in a particular ideological and political context. Now that context has changed we would perhaps benefit from reducing our vision of the Cold War back down to its core characteristics. It was a particular moment of geopolitics which coloured many other important developments of the era, but didn’t necessarily define or subsume them.

### Further reading

Sandra Bott, et al (eds.), *Neutrality and Neutralism in the Global Cold War: Between or Within the Blocs?* (2015)

Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake (eds.), *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (2015)

Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, *The Development Century: A Global History* (2018)

Robert J. McMahon (ed.), *The Cold War in the Third World* (2013)

Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (2017)

### Online resources

The blog of the Afro-Asian Networks project (<https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions>) brings together some fascinating new perspectives on decolonisation, the Cold War, and Afro-Asian connections.

The Cold War International History Project ([www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project)), hosted by the Wilson Center in Washington DC, has digitized and published a wide range of sources on the Cold War, including translations and originals of recently released documents from former Eastern bloc states and the non-Western world, alongside commentaries and research from historians.

The Seventeen Moments in Soviet History website (<http://soviethistory.msu.edu/>) is an archive of primary sources on Soviet history. It includes sources on international relations and the Cold War, but also helps to put the Cold War in the context of the longer history of the Soviet Union.

### REFERENCES

- 1 Chamberlin, P. (2018) *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace*, New York: Harper Collins.
- 2 Gaddis, J.L. (1989) *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War*, Oxford: OUP.
- 3 Connelly, M. (200) 'Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence' in *The American Historical Review*, 105, no. 3, pp. 739-679.

David Brydan is a Lecturer in the History of Modern International Relations at King's College London. He works on the history of international co-operation and exchange, particularly in modern Europe. Much of his research has focused on the history of modern Spain and the Franco regime. His book, *Franco's Internationalists* is published by Oxford University Press in 2019 and is available open access.