

Global Power Competition Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

This research analyzes the changing geopolitics popularly under the broader theme of global power competition, with emphasis on the strategic interactions between Russia, China, and the United States, and their complex implications for Pakistan. Grounded on theoretical frameworks of realism, geopolitical models, and constructivism, the research contextualises the global power rivalries in relation to them and evolving international alignments. It highlights remarkable continuities like weapons competition and proxy warfare but finds new features like economic interdependence, cyber conflict, and multilateral institutionalized relationships.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Russia, China, United States, Realism, Proxy Warfare

Introduction

The introduction of great power strategic rivalry in the twenty-first century has renewed Cold War analogies in policy and academic discourse. The phrase "global power competition" (Cold War 2.0) has become widely used to characterize the renewal of tensions between the United States and its two main adversaries, China and Russia. Despite being controversial, the designation fits a list of concrete geopolitical developments reminiscent of the early Cold War: ideological contest, arms race, proxy competition, and pursuit of worldwide predominance. The term itself first started being used in the media and academic literature following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and once more during the Trump administration trade war with China and NATO's shift away from Russian aggression (Gvosdev & Marsh, 2019). Following the 2022 war in Ukraine and subsequent freezing over of Western ties to Moscow, and rising speed of U.S.-China strategic decoupling in commerce, technology, and security, the "new Cold War" or "Cold War 2.0" metaphor has increasingly had analytical value on a grander scale (Westad, 2017). While the Cold War 2.0 line is convenient shorthand for current tensions, it should be grounded in isomorphism of behavior and structure, not rhetorical correctness. One such essential comparability is the bipolar or at least duopolistic nature of power rivalry. The first Cold War had two ideologically polarized blocs centered around Washington and Moscow. In the same vein, the world of today is experiencing hardening of alignment between the United States and her allies on the one hand, and China (with opportunistic Russian support) on the other. While Russia lacks the economic or technological foundations to be an authentic peer rival of the United States, its nuclear leverage and military belligerence enable it to play spoiler, strategically aligning with China against the liberal

international order. This new double rivalry has formed a de facto strategic triangle equal to the original Cold War's divide of the world into competing camps (Allison, 2017)

There is yet one more deep similarity in the ideological tone that characterizes the rivalry. The Cold War was in terms of a system rivalry between capitalism and communism, characterized primarily in terms of civilization. The U.S.-China, and Russia secondarily, rivalry now is characterized in the same terms of one ideological polarity: liberal democracy and authoritarian state capitalism. During the Biden administration's National Security Strategy in 2022 formally describes the competition as a conflict between "autocracy and democracy," and Chinese official rhetoric routinely accuses Western models of being hegemonic and destabilizing (Ikenberry, 2020). The ideological construction is not rhetorical alone; it conditionally structures alliance, aid, and diplomatic relations, and both blocs seek swing states in the Global South, much as they did during the Cold War. Furthermore, the technology competition of early Cold War has an unmistakable resonance in today's competition among powers for such cutting-edge technologies as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, 5G networks, and semiconductors. As the Soviet-American space race was a synecdoche for ideological and technological hegemony, so the U.S.-Chinese competition for technological leadership now is inseparably bound up with national security and global supremacy. The US embargo on Chinese technology pioneers like Huawei and limitation of cutting-edge semiconductor exports to China record the securitization of global supply chains and innovation hubs (Segal, 2018). This follows technology decoupling and strategic denial thinking that characterized Cold War export controls and research compartmentalization.

Posturing military and alliance entrenchment represent an additional site of continuity. Rival military blocs like NATO and the Warsaw Pact were created by the Cold War, advancing systemic polarization. In the modern period, the U.S. has revamped NATO, established new security alignments like AUKUS, and entrenched alliances with the Quad (U.S., India, Japan, and Australia), which represent a posture of containment against China in the Indo-Pacific. While this, simultaneously, has stepped up Sino-Russian defense coordination, which has translated into bilateral naval maneuvers, weapons sales, and UN Security Council diplomatic cooperation. Though no alliance, the intensifying Sino-Russian rapprochement recalls Cold War bloc thinking, where states ally with hegemonic states in order to preserve security and reap economic dividends (Kaczmarek, 2019). The omnipresence of Wang's proxy wars' and gray-zone competitions also justifies the Cold War analogy. During the first Cold War, superpowers never directly confronted one another but fought their proxies throughout the Global South in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Angola. Now, Syria, Ukraine, Taiwan, and the South China Sea are locations of choice where great powers probe red lines short of war. American defense of Ukraine and defense of Taiwan, Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, and Russian meddling in the post-Soviet sphere all are the Cold War great powers' indirect confrontation tactics. Even cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns, as much as they are technologically new, are an imitation of the propaganda wars of the Cold War, in which perception management and psychological warfare were prime strategic competition weapons (Rid, 2020).

Economic statecraft and sanctions, all-time Cold War geopolitics tools, are once more à la mode. Economic blockades, aid diplomacy, and commercial restraints in the Cold War were employed as instruments to isolate or reward states depending on political alignment. Economic warfare in the form of sanctions versus Russia, technology blockade versus China, and tit-for-tat tariffs presently indicates a recrudescence of coercive economic instruments as statecraft. Most significantly, the weaponization of interdependence, specifically of energy and digital networks, reuses Cold War economics of linkage and leverage (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Alternatives to Western financial institutions, such as central bank digital currencies and SWIFT alternatives, have also been developed and invested in by China and Russia in a bid to diversify away from institutions dominated by the US. Media, academia, and strategic culture recycle the Cold War

patterns. Scholarship and journalism traditionally were involved in monitoring ideological changes, military balances, and nuclear relations of deterrence. Defense journals, think tanks, and international relations departments today are again dominated by discourses of competition, deterrence, and strategic balancing. The increase in military spending, the nuclearization of weapons, and the growth of dual-use technologies are signals of the continuation of deterrence thinking and security dilemma processes that underlie realist understandings of the Cold War. However, while such continuities are helpful, they do not suggest that the future is only the recitation of the past. The contemporary world is more institutionally concentrated, more economically interdependent, and more electronically connected than the early Cold War. Nevertheless, structural elements—strategic suspicion, bloc formation, ideological enmity, and competitive action—validate the Cold War 2.0 model. Grasping these similarities is important not only in analytical terms but also for policy-making within areas like South Asia, where countries like Pakistan are forced to handle this nascent bipolarity with an astute combination of hedging, band wagoning, and strategic autonomy.

Arms Race, Proxy Conflicts, and Ideological Contest in Cold War 2.0

The emerging geopolitical rivalry always termed "Cold War 2.0" reminds us of most of the classic Cold War characteristics, including a reinitiated arms race, proxy conflicts, and an ideological battle for global dominance. All these features highlight the continuity of great power strategic competition despite the cataclysmic changes in the international order since 1945.

Arms Race

The previous Cold War was marked by an unprecedented arms buildup as the Soviet Union and the United States invested heavily in nuclear and conventional weapons in a bid to secure strategic superiority or parity. Thus, the present geopolitical competition has seen an increased buildup of weapons, with dominant participation by the United States, Russia, and China. For example, Russia's modernization of its nuclear deterrent and hypersonic missile development of the Avangard and Kinzhal is a calculated move to regain strategic deterrence (Rumer, 2020). China's rapid expansion of its missile forces, aircraft carriers, and fifth-generation stealth fighters also indicates that it is attempting to check U.S. military supremacy in the Indo-Pacific (Krepinevich, 2020). Now China enter in this race and we see a downfall of west military arms and weapons after the India Pakistan war 2025, in which china and west technology compete with each other and Chinese technology win the war. The United States has retaliated with growth in defense budgets and spending on next-generation technologies like artificial intelligence-based weapons and missile defense, an emerging military technological frontier of competition. Today's arms competition goes beyond the nuclear realm to cyber war, militarization in space, and emerging technologies, demonstrating a multifaceted competition broader than the Cold War nuclear-focused policy.

Proxy Conflicts

Proxy wars were the signature of the Cold War, in which the two superpowers avoided direct military conflict but fought through client states and ideological proxies in the Southeast Asian, African, and Latin American theaters. Cold War 2.0 witnesses the same phenomenon, with the indirect military conflicts being waged in regional hotspots such as Ukraine, Syria, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. For example, Russia's own military intervention in Ukraine's eastern region and support for separatists have been the primary focus of U.S.-Russia rivalry, and they have been a replay of 20th-century proxy conflicts. The United States, in turn, has provided significant military aid to Ukraine, and that has been part of a larger strategic investment to curb Russian expansionism without yet unleashing immediate war. In the same way, in the Indo-Pacific, the

U.S. defends Taiwan to prevent China's aggressive claims, while China has beefed up naval patrols and built artificial islands with military bases across contested waters (Fravel, 2020). Furthermore, the recent (June 2025) war between Iran and Israel, we observe how these states China, Russia, and US supported their allies. These instances show a restrained but relentless proxy engagement strategy aimed at containing escalation and advancing strategic interests.

Ideological Contest

Whereas the ideological confrontation between capitalism and communism characterized the initial Cold War, the ideological struggle is more nuanced in the current era's Cold War 2.0. The United States advocates liberal democracy, market economy, and a rules-based international order as universal values, whereas China advocates authoritarian state capitalism and a model of governance founded on state control and national sovereignty (Ikenberry, 2018). This ideological contest is presented through rival stories of governance, human rights, and international order. The U.S. presents its contest as defending democracy against the spread of autocracy, as in official texts like the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy. China presents its contest through non-interference and development requirements, accusing Western-led international institutions of serving as tools of neo-imperialism (Zhao, 2020). Russia's anti-Western nationalism and ideology, as different, underpin this ideological threat to Western liberalism. In contrast to the bipolar ideological separation of the Cold War, current ideological rivalry is between competing models of rule with different attractions in various regions and developing nations.

Economic Interdependence

Arguably most telling of the differences between Cold War and Cold War 2.0 is the level of economic interdependence between the competing great powers. During the Cold War, the world economy was virtually split into Soviet and Western blocs with little trade and financial ties between them. Presently, the world economy is highly integrated, particularly between China and the United States, which are each other's largest trading partners. This economic dependence makes the competition more complex and separates Cold War 2.0 from zero-sum Cold War rivalry. For instance, even with increased tensions, U.S.-China trade is massive with hundreds of billions of dollars worth of goods and services traded annually (Bown & Zhang, 2020). This is paradoxical as economic interdependence is both a source of mutual openness to vulnerability and leverage, creating instances of cooperation amidst competition. The phenomenon has been most commonly described as "complex interdependence", meaning that decoupling unilaterally or confrontation is economically costly. Nonetheless, trends like the U.S.-China trade war and curtailments in technology transfers are indicative of efforts at weaponizing economic interdependence. The nations have also pursued supply chain diversification as well as diminishing reliance on one another, with the implications of the fragmentation of globalization in global economic architecture (Friedberg, 2018). Nonetheless, current economic interdependence is a lingering factor that prevents the rivalry from spilling into a full-blown severance of relations like in the original Cold War.

Cyber Warfare

Cyber warfare is a new phenomenon that had no equivalent in the original Cold War, a major transformation of Cold War 2.0's security architecture. Although the Cold War was primarily a territorial struggle based on nuclear and conventional capability, current strategic competition brings cyberspace as an arena into play. Cyber activities cover all the way from espionage and intellectual property hijacking to sabotage of critical infrastructure and election tampering. For example, U.S. authorities have accused Russia of orchestrating cyberattacks on U.S. electoral infrastructure and systems, most notably the 2016 hacking of the Democratic National Committee

(Rid, 2020). Likewise, China has been accused of pervasive cyberespionage operations against U.S. businesses and government ministries aimed at acquisition of cutting-edge technologies (Segal, 2018). In contrast to nuclear weapons, cyber warfare capabilities are marked by ambiguity, attribution issues, and asymmetric deployment, making deterrence and escalation measures more difficult. The cyber platform brings with it an evolving and multi-polar battlefield on which state and non-state entities operate, necessitating novel doctrines and international norms that are as yet in the process of underdevelopment relative to classic arms control regimes.

Multilateral Institutions and Global Governance

The Cold War 2.0 also fundamentally differs in the function and nature of multilateral institutions, as well as global governance structures. The original Cold War was marked by institutions including the United Nations and Bretton Woods system, but the superpowers imposed their dominance in the guise of independent spheres of influence, usually eschewing international organizations directly in direct confrontation. Conversely, while renewed great power rivalries, multilateral institutions remain in the vanguard of management of war, norm-setting, and facilitation of cooperation today. Institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Security Council remain spaces of rivalry and negotiation but ones where strategic competition is infused (Ikenberry, 2018).

Besides, new multilateral institutions and regional organizations have emerged, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which are evidence of China's aspirations to reshape global governance. This multipolar set of institutions makes Cold War 2.0 more complex, where global governance is no longer the prerogative of two rival superpowers but increasingly being claimed by several powerful actors (Zakaria, 2020). The simultaneous coexistence of rivalry and cooperation in these kinds of multilateral structures marks Cold War 2.0 apart from the more rigid bloc politics of the initial Cold War. For instance, in the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. and China were engaging both confrontation and cooperation at the same time through the WHO and international health diplomacy, demonstrating the complexity of twenty-first-century geopolitics.

Role of Nuclear Deterrence and Hybrid Warfare

Nuclear deterrence continues to be a key support in the strategic thinking of great powers, still holding its value from the initial Cold War to today's era of Cold War 2.0. Mutually assured destruction (MAD) doctrine that once ruled over U.S.-Soviet relations continues to shape deterrence policy but with significant changes. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was essentially a bipolar pair of not attacking each other in outright war between two superpowers. Such architecture was based on open discussion, institutionalized arms control agreements such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), and an unspoken agreement not to use nuclear forces (Gaddis, 2005). Nuclear deterrence continues to be pivotal in the current competition but is complicated by emerging technologies, multipolarity, and asymmetrical capability. Russia and America still hold the largest nuclear arsenals and continue with arms control talks, but recent setbacks like America pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty have contributed to skepticism (Sokov, 2020). China's own nuclear doctrine, on the other hand, has been traditionally modest but steadily growing in ambition and sophistication, as Beijing aspires to have the capability to offer credible deterrence against both the U.S. and local rivals (Heginbotham, 2015). Diversification of nuclear technology, i.e., low-yield nuclear weapons and hypersonic delivery vehicles, is bad for traditional deterrence stability (Lewis & Postol, 2019). They reduce the nuclear use threshold, thus beckoning the escalation of crisis miscalculations. Second, use of missile defense technology, e.g., the U.S. Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD), destabilizes strategic balance by interrupting second-strike capability, which compels Russia and China to

develop countermeasures like multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs). Nuclear deterrence in Cold War 2.0 hence exhibits continuity in its underlying mission of preventing overt great power war but is faced with remade challenges by technological revolution, strategic distrust, and the emergence of new nuclear players.

Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare is a new, multi-domain form of war that combines traditional armed force with asymmetric warfare, cyberwarfare, information operations, and economic coercion. Hybrid warfare is becoming more widely recognized as the hallmark of Cold War 2.0, adding complexity to traditional deterrence with more advanced, deniable, and multi-domain methods. Russia's seizure of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 has broadly been seen as the climax of hybrid war. Moscow used every method of unmarked "little green men," cyber-attacks, propaganda campaigns, and political disinformation to take over Crimea and destabilize Ukraine without declaring full-scale war against NATO (Galeotti, 2016). This made the distinction between war and peace irrelevant, challenging the international community's ability to respond and exposing the weaknesses of conventional deterrence. China employs also the computer hybrid approach in Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, which blends cyber intrusions, economic coercion, military coercion, and diplomatic coercion (Shambaugh, 2020). Maritime militia use is blended with artificial islands and coercive pressure for territorial claims as features of this multi-faceted approach that balances coercion with the threat of credible deniability.

Hybrid conflict spreads across the battlefield to influence public opinion and political processes through disinformation and cyber warfare. Russian and Chinese election interference are the greatest examples of information weaponization in producing local politics of an enemy country (Nimmo, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed hybrid tactics, where state actors performed "infodemic" operations for the distribution of disinformation for geopolitical agendas (Kavanagh & Singh, 2020). Unlike nuclear deterrence, hybrid war is fought in the gray zone where areas of conflict are specifically hidden so that the customary deterrence and international law cannot react effectively. To this end, there must be new doctrines, strategic alliances with an emphasis on resilience, cyber defense, and intelligence sharing.

Global South in Global Power Competition

The Global South in the first era, Cold War, (1945-1990s) was an agonistic yet generally instrumentalized space. The newly independent countries of the African, Asian, and Latin American continents were performed as theaters for proxy conflict, in which the U.S. and the Soviet Union competed to extend their ideological and strategic reach through the dispensation of economic assistance, military assistance, and political alignment (Westad, 2005). States like Angola, Vietnam, and Afghanistan were battlefields upon which superpowers indirectly clashed, escalating wars of vast local importance (Westad, 2005). Ideological competition between capitalism and communism underpinned models and governance blocs of the Global South, and most nations cycled between the U.S. and USSR or joined the Non-Aligned Movement to preserve autonomy (Nye, 2011). Yet, the Global South was seldom considered in international decision-making and faced externalization of great power competition. The Cold War also intensified development issues as resources were redirected towards security and defense issues instead of economic development. In modern era of competition of superpowers, Cold War 2.0, the Global South has transformed from passive battlefields to active geopolitical players with rising strategic significance. The ascent of China as a global power and its ambitious BRI has reoriented economic and political courses, providing an alternative to the Western paradigm for development (Rolland, 2017). In contrast to the Cold War bipolar division, the Global South is now multipolar and fractured and has business simultaneously with the U.S., China, Russia, and regional leaders on

pragmatically interest-driven and not ideology (Paul, 2018). African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American governments have multi-diversified alliances to maximize economic benefits and strategic sovereignty. For instance, Pakistan is a country from the Global South managing Cold War 2.0 competition by juggling its historical alignment with the U.S. and the strengthening of its ties with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Rizvi, 2020). Analogously, India utilizes its strategic autonomy to manage relations with both the U.S. and Russia and extend its own regional influence (Pant, 2019)

The Global South is also made newly vulnerable during Cold War 2.0, such as being used as fronts for hybrid war, economic coercion, and technology dependence. Cyber attacks, disinformation, and debt diplomacy through infrastructure loans under the BRI signal the complicated challenge for developing countries (Mohan & Power, 2020). Secondly, the Global South demands more representation in international institutions, contrary to the domination of the West. Reform movements in the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank are an expression of growing vocal demands for more representative global governance proportionate to the realities of today (Weiss, 2019).

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