

Event Horizon: The Alt New World

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Delving into the dark corners of what history textbooks refer to as the first Cold War of 1947 and compare it to the Cold War 2.0 that we live in now, it becomes clear why many of today's leading strategists and historians suggest



that it should be considered “World War III”. This article dives deep into how prolonged periods of tension have created an alternative world order, considering its profound impacts on global power dynamics and the implications for all future business landscapes.

Here we explore the roles of the “New World Leaders” from nations like China, Russia, India and Iran that are now filling the power vacuum left by previous Western powers, essentially altering the chessboard of international relations. The rise in multipolarisation has been a slow and complex process. Historically, post-World War II and throughout the Cold War, the US emerged as the sole superpower, often demanding that its policies be followed over the sovereign wishes of other countries. This hegemony fomented distrust and a desire among other nations to pull away from such dominance, a wish that was not feasible until alternative funding options were found outside of US-controlled institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). That alternative notably came in the form of China, shifting the global balance of power more definitively towards a multipolar world order.

In defining and examining the “New World Order”, the “Cold War” and “Third World War”, we should also reflect on the careful linguistic shift by Western leaders over the last 10-15 years from “international law” to “international ‘rules-based’ order”.

This terminology, seemingly benign, translates in practice to a system where rules are made and enforced unilaterally, by the US, without any formal agreement or written precedent. These strategies reveal how the first indication a country has violated a rule is when it is so informed by the US, underscoring a genuine shift towards exerting control under the guise of maintaining order.

Historical background

The first Cold War, born in the aftermath of World War II, references an era defined by socio-political conflict and bipolar military sabre-rattling between the US and the Soviet Union. This period witnessed confrontations and several near misses that went on to shape modern geopolitics. Some memorable hostilities were the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the world to the precipice of nuclear war; the Korean and Vietnam Wars, which were ultimately bloody proxy battles between the communist bloc and the West; and, although not a hostility, the Space Race, as a quest for technological sovereignty.

As the decades passed, the previously observed clear divide of the world into just two opposing camps slowly gave way to a much more complex structure of global power. The ensuing dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave rise to a unipolar US-led world, which acted as the world's police championing a "new world order". Regional blocs like the European Union (EU) played a more important role setting the stage for what most perceived at the time to be a more bilateral community.

The rise of new alternative world powers

Fast forward to 2024, and we see the rise of an "alternative world order" where powers like China, Russia and Iran, and regional blocs like BRICS (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates) are taking more active roles in dictating the terms of global governance, trade policies and security agreements. These nations have not only challenged the long-standing dominance of Western powers but are also shaping the world's economic and political landscape.

China, and its age old strategic long-term vision, has in no uncertain terms ascended as an economic powerhouse. Initiatives like the Belt and Road (BRI) have seen the country increase its influence across the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe, promoting infrastructure development and fostering controversial economic dependencies through lending. Add this to China's meteoric advancements in technology and manufacturing, the country is not just reshaping world trade channels, but also pushing the boundaries of technological innovation.

Russia, in contrast, has sought to reassert its influence through a blend of energy diplomacy and military intervention. The control it wields over expansive portions of Europe's energy supply through gas reserves, acts as significant leverage to gain political concessions. Russia's involvement in Syria from 2015 and Ukraine from 2022 has demonstrated its readiness to holdfast its sphere of influence and challenge Western ideology, exhibiting a return to Cold War-era strategies.

Then there is Iran, which has sought to push on with its nuclear ambitions with great resolve, much to the dismay of the West. This nuclear ambition positions Iran as a key player in Middle Eastern politics, despite a multitude of sanctions and international disdain. The nation's strategic alliances and proxy involvements in countries like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon have given it the ability to exert significant influence, making a complex environment for US and allied forces in the region.

Combined, these powerful nations reveal the intricate web of alternate world powers that have emerged post-1945 Cold War era, all leveraging assets, strategies and combined influence to reshape world order.

Current geopolitical climate

The existing geopolitical climate is marred by a complicated exchange of control where historical dominance has been challenged and reshaped by new rising economies and technologies. The globe's power balance is progressively more multipolar, with China and Russia asserting their authority, while traditional powers like the US and the EU have been forced to compromise and reassess their relevance and global footing.

Trade wars and economic sanctions further complicate this shift, and it is only through strategic and political alliances that economic landscapes are redefined. International bodies like the United Nations (UN), World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) seek to regulate these power shifts through governance mechanisms. However, their effectiveness is more often than not weakened by national interests and the actions of powerful states.

At the same time, the profound advent of emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the proliferation of cyber warfare, has opened new barriers in the quest for global supremacy. Cyber-attacks on national infrastructure and critical industries have become the 'exchanges of fire' in this modern World War, subtly moving the model from any historic examples of military confrontations to clandestine social engineering and cyber battles that dismantle the fabric of international co-operation and peace.

Stakeholders and influencers

Within this complex web of present-day geopolitics, is a diverse compilation of actors all with crucial roles, shaping global outcomes. Major players include the US and the EU, who continue to exert force, but now so are rising powers like India and regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Breaching the confines of state actors lies the multinational corporations like the US' Blackrock and Exxon Mobile, non-governmental organisations (NGO's) such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) and Amnesty International, and even terrorist groups like Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi Rebels in Yemen and Al-Qaeda in the Middle East, all either emerging as significant influencers or having already done so. Then there is the media, and the expansive realm of social media, creating platforms with which to influence the hearts and minds of public opinion.

These dynamics underline the complex relationship between traditional power frameworks and modern digitisation, where it is the dissemination of information itself that has become a global governance tool.

Potential long-term leaders and outcomes

As the global landscape and balance of power continue to evolve and shift from dark corridors of the first Cold War into this intricate, multipolar arena, some nations stay one step ahead strategically, positioning themselves as future world leaders.

China, and its vast, bold Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and high-tech innovations, is soon to sit on top of the mantle in global trade and digital governance. The US, setting its internal and external challenges aside, is still a key player given its economic size and technological expertise. Rising giants like India and regional organisations such as the EU also remain prominent, each wielding influence over policies and trade routes.

We are already witnessing the profound effects of power shifts with global markets and trade being influenced by nations forming new alliances and adopting their own policies to protect and expand interests. As a consequence of a heightened need for security and defences, technological races in areas like AI, cybersecurity, weapons and biotechnology are the new priorities; all tools that combined will determine who the world leaders will be in the coming years.

Therefore, this time must be considered an event horizon, the point at which no one knows what the future might look like as such events have not occurred in history before.

Looking ahead to the next five years, three potential scenarios could emerge.

Multipolar world with regional powers: In this scenario, the world shifts towards economic localisation and domestic protectionist policies, driven by distinct regional leaders. Developed economies might leverage their technological and financial clout to forge new economic blocs, while emerging markets could focus on strengthening intra-regional trade and infrastructure projects to bolster independence. Advances in technology such as AI, digital trade platforms and blockchain could serve as tools for these regions to maintain global connectivity despite political fragmentation. This diversification in regional power centres will lead to varied responses to global challenges, potentially intensifying regional conflicts. This is really where we are now.

China-led dominance in global trade and technology: As China ascends to the top position in global trade and governance, its influence becomes particularly pronounced in sectors like telecommunications, AI and green technology. Internally, China faces demographic challenges and regional economic disparities that could stall its progress or influence its policies. Externally, China's ascension would set new standards in market regulations and internet governance, prompting a divergence from existing standardised (Western) global systems into those aligning with Beijing. This scenario explores the dual reaction of strategic alignment by some nations and resistance from others, ultimately leading to an on-going Cold War in technology and trade norms.

Co-operative global order led by a reformed United Nations or similar organisational structure: This final scenario envisions a global system where increased co-operation is facilitated by significant reforms in either the UN or a new organisational structure (NOS). Such reforms could include restructuring the Security Council to reflect contemporary power dynamics, enhancing the enforcement mechanisms of international law and improving the organisation's financial sustainability. Focus areas for global co-operation could be humanitarian crises and economic inequality. The reformed UN or NOS would work towards fairer economic policies and trade agreements, aiming to redistribute economic power and resources fairly.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the interwoven nature of global politics following the first Cold War, it becomes clear that the world has pivoted from a unipolar to a multipolar world stage, with the likes of China, Russia and regional blocs collectively directing the dynamics of global leadership without influence from the US. This new environment marks a critical point in the evolution on global governance, where the stakes for economic and technological supremacy sit high on international agendas.

Considering the future, the potential scenarios outlined from a multipolar to a co-operative global order, underscore a pressing need for adaptive strategies and relationships that embrace competition and collaboration, and do not enforce the will of any particular nation state's ideologies and faiths.

The choices those in power make today will truly define the economic and technological paradigms of tomorrow, challenging them to forge new mechanisms for co-operation and conflict resolution.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

William Shakespeare, from Henry IV, Part 2.

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