

# Cold War as a Special Type of Conflict: A Strategic Sketch

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## **Abstract**

Russian, Chinese, and Western scholars refer to the current confrontation between the United States and China as Cold War 2.0. However, it remains only a figure of speech used to emphasize the global nature of the conflict. This article proposes to rationalize the analysis of the Cold War as a systemic phenomenon requiring the development of a specific strategy and tactics. This is a difficult task, since any Cold War suggests a long-time span, with no possibility for crushing the enemy with a rapid offensive. By way of example, this article outlines a possible naval strategy for Russia.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Russia, China, U.S., naval strategy, South Atlantic, Indo-Pacific.

“The animosities between China and the United States that have been simmering for decades are now transforming into a full-fledged confrontation, complete with economic, technological, geopolitical, military and even ideological dimensions. Not only has the coronavirus pandemic failed to slow down this growing confrontation, but it has actually served to accelerate it quite dramatically. The world is moving towards a new kind of bipolarity, albeit one that is quite different from the Soviet-American bipolarity we witnessed during the second half of the 20th century” (Kortunov, 2020).

“If the idea of a new bipolarity is untenable, then the possibility of a new Cold War, that is, the appearance of elements of the political, military, financial, and economic confrontation between Russia and the West, has also no substance behind. The phenomenon of the Cold War is inseparable from the postwar conditions that led to the emergence of U.S.–Soviet bipolarity. Its key parameters are well known and almost none of them have been recreated” (Gromyko, 2020).

These two quotes, belonging to prominent Russian international relations experts—Russian International Affairs Council Director-General Andrei Kortunov and Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences Alexei Gromyko—clearly show two approaches to the U.S.-China confrontation and two views on the possibility of a new Cold War. Proponents of the former approach consider a Cold War one of the subtypes of conflict with its own features and characteristics; advocates of the latter view consider it a unique phenomenon, part of the historical process with unique characteristics that exclude its repetition in the future. In our opinion, both are correct.

If we understand a Cold War as a specific historical phenomenon, then it undoubtedly belongs to a certain period of history, occurred due to certain circumstances, evolved under certain conditions, and therefore it will never happen again. Any attempt to draw an analogy between current and past events will be wrongheaded, since their causes, participants, and goals are different. At the same time, it is quite possible to regard a Cold War as one of the types of interstate conflicts with specific features and peculiarities, and regard the Cold

War of 1946-1990 as its special case. Such an analysis is complicated by the fact that the only example of a full-scale Cold War we know of is the 1946-1990 Cold War; most living researchers were its participants or witnesses one way or another, and this somehow affects their perception of that Cold War as a type of conflict.

This article draws a difference between the Cold War of 1946-1990 as a historical phenomenon and a Cold War as a subtype of wars, with the previous Cold War being its special case. The focus of this article is on a Cold War as a phenomenon. The article postulates that a Cold War is a special type of interstate conflict, which is the highest level of confrontation between two actors without full-scale hostilities. A Cold War must be viewed precisely as a war, although different from the usual one. Therefore, in order to win it, it is necessary to use specific strategies, operational art techniques and tactics, which are characteristic of a Cold War and differ from both the strategy and tactics used in a “hot” war, and the development strategy of a state during peacetime competition. Developing a large-scale Cold War theory is not the purpose of this article. Instead, it outlines strategic imperatives of states for the ocean theater and proposes one of the possible options for Russia’s actions in this situation.

### **NECESSARY HISTORICAL JOURNEY**

To understand its essence, it would be useful to recall the very origin of the term ‘Cold War.’ It was coined by 14th century Castilian thinker and writer Juan Manuel, who used the term ‘*la guerra tivia*’ (literally “cool war”) in his work *Libro de los Estados* to denote a long confrontation between Muslim and Christian soldiers on the border during the Reconquista. The “cool war,” Manuel complained, was a series of endless skirmishes, ambushes, assaults, cattle raiding attacks, abductions, and hostage-taking incidents, and, unlike ordinary war, brought neither honor, nor glory, nor decisive victory. When Manuel’s book was reprinted in the 19th century, the word “*tivia*” was changed to “*fria*” (Spanish for cold), and it was this version of the term that was accepted first by Spaniards, and eventually, through George Orwell’s mediation, by English-speaking political circles (Dalby and O Tuathail, 2002, p. 67).

History knows many examples of a “cool war” like the one described by Manuel: border scuffles were an inalienable part of any frontier activities in the following centuries; hunting down merchant ships outside European waters was also considered legal and was not accompanied by a declaration of war. Conflicts between polities belonging to various international systems can also be analyzed within the framework of a “cool war.”

Studying the history of “cool wars” as a phenomenon is of interest for understanding the evolution of the Cold War concept, but can hardly be used for analyzing the current war. In the 19th century, radical changes occurred in the very foundations of the concept: the West had completed the subordination of the world by having mapped, measured and turned it into a closed system, thus transforming regional politics into geopolitics, which by definition is global. In addition, the growth of nationalism and social changes led to the creation of grass roots armies, and scientific and technological progress ensured the continuous improvement of murder weapons and the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which by the middle of the 20th century had evolved into nuclear weapons. This is the watershed that separates previous “cool wars,” where the geographical factor was largely the main limitation, from Cold Wars as a modern phenomenon. The destructive power of the military machine in an industrial state armed with nuclear weapons made unattainable Liddell Hart’s formula, according to which “victory in the true sense implies that the state of peace, and of one’s people, is better after the war than before” (Liddell Hart, 1991, p. 357).

The existence of nuclear weapons determined the form and the course of the past Cold War, turning it into a *systemic phenomenon*. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the production and social structure continues to change, and work is underway to develop new types of weapons. This development may put an end to a Cold War as a phenomenon until one side plucks up enough courage to use WMD, taking the risk of suffering their effects, or until it minimizes the likelihood of these effects as much as possible. However this does not rule out a Cold War in the future as new, even more deadly types of WMD and their means of delivery come into existence.

## **COLD WAR STRATEGY**

A Cold War has the same fundamental properties as any other. Therefore, it is necessary to understand why it begins, to develop a strategy for achieving victory and to pursue it in accordance with the basic principles of warfare. A Cold War can be compared with a multi-level chess game played simultaneously on several boards: economy, technology, politics, security, and ideology. Moves on one board cast a strategic shadow on the other boards, and a loss on one board leads to a loss of the entire game. This is why this war is totally hybrid, and fishing fleet activities in it are no less important than military naval operations, hackers' attacks are just as essential as the deployment of another battalion, and the improvement of one's image in the eyes of part of the world community means just as much as the construction of a military base.

Since a Cold War is still a war despite all its specific features, it can be fought in accordance with two main strategies: ***destruction or attrition***. In a conventional war, the former strategy implies decisive defeat of the enemy by preparing and conducting a major operation or a series of operations. In a Cold War, this is a series of foreign policy and economic defeats that undermine the martial spirit of the population, cause disappointment with the professed ideas, and make a country capitulate or switch sides. The latter strategy in a conventional war implies mutual exhaustion on the expectation of either one's own superiority in resources (an example of such a strategy is the idea of *grignotage* attributed to Joseph Joffre (literally meaning nibbling, taking in small bits), parallel attrition of the German and Anglo-French troops, which enabled the outnumbering allied troops to win), or superiority in equipment and combat qualities, as a result of which one of the parties conducts *grignotage* more effectively. In a Cold War, the attrition strategy produces a long-term negative impact on the enemy at all levels of the multidimensional chessboard, aimed at depriving it of its resources in a broad sense and strengthening one's own base. At the same time, the enemy is forced to constantly overextend itself and spend resources as ineffectively as possible. A Cold War involving great powers shifts to a global level. Fighting for allies and partners who provide resources becomes an important element.

As a rule, this is a complex strategy, with destruction and attrition complementing each other, but the war of attrition precedes the final blow.

The attrition strategy is one of the most complex strategies, since in a Cold War resources are attrited much longer than in a conventional one. As a result, a Cold War can go on for generations and either turn into a thing in itself or change its aims in the process. This creates the main strategic contradiction. On the one hand, consistent implementation of the original strategic goals, as is known from military theory, is more likely to ensure victory (“better bad strategy than none”); on the other hand, the situation on all boards constantly changes (up to changing the cells from square to hexagonal with matching rule alterations, to use the chess analogy), and the party that strictly adheres to the initial strategy may lose the war simply because it will not have enough time to realize the scale of changes on one of the boards.

The players’ tasks in this game differ dramatically: while the main opponents in a Cold War for world leadership set themselves one goal, their allies and neutral countries pursue completely different ones, and it is quite possible that the latter, initially supporting one side, will eventually end up on the other, because the victory of the former ally is likely to worsen their situation much more than the victory of the former enemy. This is a specific feature of Cold War alliances: they are loose, their borders are vague, and allies often act against each other hand in hand with the enemy (for example, during the Suez Crisis, the USSR and the U.S. opposed Great Britain and France). This makes one rethink the concept of alliances and distinguish several types of allies: from clients, who temporarily or permanently subordinate their interests to the interests of the patron, to friendly neutralists who act according to the “not always together, but never against” principle.

One of the key problems both sides faced during the 1946-1990 Cold War was the actual lack of strategy, caused by the fundamentally new nature of the conflict: both Soviet and American elites had to process events in real time mode and act by intuition. As far as one can judge from the history of the Cold War in general and from published

documents in particular, the Soviet Union made considerable progress in implementing such an intuitive strategy. With obviously fewer resources and worse starting positions, Moscow withstood a 45-year confrontation and even sometimes launched counterattacks, albeit without an overall strategic goal. American politicians and the military, in turn, put forward numerous theoretical proposals and concepts that formed the basis of American doctrines, but due to the frequent change of presidents, the overall strategy was pursued in the most general terms. As a result, the Cold War dragged on as the American leadership refused to recognize it as a war. The resulting experience was not taken by part of the American elites critically, as can be seen from how in the current confrontation with Beijing Washington is trying to use well-proven tactics from the previous Cold War, seeking, in particular, to ideologize the conflict.

Thus, attrition, which is the main Cold War strategy, determines its basic features as a phenomenon: gradual beginning, long-term nature (possibly more than the lifespan of one generation), multidimensionality, high resource consumption, and a variety of possible moves that improve the position of one side and negatively affect the position of the other. Current relations between China and the United States can be defined as the initial stage of a Cold War.

Russia, which is inferior to both sides economically and technologically, risks losing out as a result of being drawn into this Cold War. The only way for Russia to get out of this war stronger is to develop a strategy for its participation in it, understand its goals and objectives, soberly assess its position at every moment, and be ready to make quick and, possibly non-standard, decisions.

### **NAVAL STRATEGY**

The ocean is the main theater of a Cold War between great powers. With the exception of territorial waters, it is not under the sovereignty of any state, which, if necessary, makes it possible to maneuver around the globe, moving means of destruction to the enemy's shores. The world's oceans are one: a ship located in the Pacific Ocean can be relatively quickly deployed anywhere around the world without major

refurbishment (with the exception of Arctic and Antarctic waters in winter). “Naval forces do not form a front line, they are mobile, their actions are not related to the advancement, capture or retention of any spaces,” Admiral Gorshkov wrote in his classic work *Sea Power of the State*. “They operate in ‘no man’s’ waters in areas where there is no ‘sovereign’ owner, because the principle of seas open (free) for all is recognized by international conventions” (Gorshkov, 1979, p. 338). The vast majority of goods are transported by sea and a significant portion of food resources is extracted from the sea.

While in a conventional war the main task of the navy is to destroy the enemy’s fleet and ensure dominance at sea (as understood by Alfred Thayer Mahan) or inflict maximum damage on the enemy in order to force it to conclude peace (as understood by the French “Young School”), no damage is inflicted upon the enemy in a maritime Cold War.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to secure one’s guaranteed dominance at sea by destroying someone else’s fleet. The Cold War space is such that the enemy fleet can not only appear in any ocean, but it also has the right of unhindered passage through the territorial waters of the enemy country. Even in the midst of the Cold War, merchant ships sailed freely along sea routes, and combating the pirate threat, which can impede the safety of merchant shipping, becomes a common concern for the enemies’ navies. The navy faces the following tasks: demonstrating force against the main enemy, using it on a limited scale, performing police functions, and carrying out humanitarian operations. Each of these tasks is solved with regard to a specific enemy and contributes to a common victory.

*The demonstration of force* is designed to show the enemy the practical possibility of breaking through its defenses, imposing a blockade, and destroying bases and ground infrastructure. As a result, the enemy, seeking to eliminate the security deficit, invests more and more in the construction of its own navy and defenses, thus spending funds that otherwise would be used to strengthen the stability of the state and develop its economy. In the future, these investments can

<sup>1</sup> This term denotes the naval component of a Cold War; clearly, it is impossible to wage a purely maritime Cold War in isolation from its other components.

spur economic growth and prove beneficial, but at the initial stage, unproductive costs tend to be extremely high. The show of force also increases the authority of the state in the eyes of the political elites of neutral or enemy-allied countries, prompting them to opt for cooperation with a powerful player.

*The limited use of force*, as borne out by the experience of the previous Cold War, is one of the main forms of action both against the major adversary and against allied or neutral states. The scope of the limited use of force at sea is quite wide and ranges from launching missile attacks to forcing enemy ships out of one's territorial waters using a ramming tactic. A condition for the limited use of force is its *moral justification* in a broad sense: for example, a missile strike can be launched against the territory of the state where a civil war is taking place, as punishment for a real or alleged violation of international law.

*Policing* is to eliminate threats, unrelated to the activities of another state, (e.g. piracy) to one's own navigation or to the security of third parties (e.g. combating smuggling, arms or drug trafficking, terrorist groups). Over time, this helps improve connections and build some form of an alliance, which means a broader resource base and greater operational capabilities.

Finally, the purpose of *humanitarian operations*, which include post-disaster assistance, epidemic prevention, and post-war rehabilitation, is to carry out soft power programs, improve the image of the state in the international arena, and strengthen relationships with third countries for the same purpose as in the preceding paragraph.

Such a diversity of tasks creates a *Cold War naval development paradox*. All four tasks require fundamentally different types of ships, and ships designed to perform one task are not suitable or are poorly suitable for another task. In the first case, major ships (aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines) are needed, designed to destroy the core of the enemy fleet or its critical infrastructure, using, if necessary, special ammunition. The second case requires cruisers (destroyers, frigates, diesel-electric submarines), the task of which is to directly interact with the enemy and inflict limited damage on it with conventional weapons. In the third case, small craft (corvettes, patrol vessels, fast boats) are

necessary as they are most effective against pirates. Finally, in the fourth case, auxiliary vessels (hospital vessels, minesweepers) take priority.

In rare cases, certain types of ships may partly act as universal vessels (light aircraft carriers, helicopter carriers, amphibious assault ships, multi-purpose vessels), but none of them are able to fulfill all of the required tasks. As a result, in order to solve the entire range of tasks, the navy should have all types of vessels. Since the sea theater is the main one in a Cold War, a country that wants to win it or simply avoid a defeat must have a powerful navy, the composition of which can vary depending on the tasks facing it. Under these conditions, the speed of building new ships is more important than fitting them out with ultra-modern equipment. *Building a large navy becomes a strategic task for the state engaged in a Cold War.*

In addition to this paradox, an important element to consider in planning is **strategic viscosity**—a specific element of a Cold War. Ocean countries and other polities usually have historically developed perceptions of possible threats; an attempt by one of the players to increase its presence in an area where it is seen as a threat by the regional leader or a group of states provokes a retaliatory military buildup as a reaction to this threat. As a result, such a country falls into a trap, and its visible strategic advantage is countered by minimal efforts on the part of the adversary.

There are two examples to prove this. The Nordic countries historically consider Russia a dangerous neighbor. So any increase in the Russian military presence in European waters will be regarded by them as a threatening move and will probably lead to an increase in their military spending to compensate for the Russian presence. The result will be disadvantageous for Russia, for which confrontation with the European Union is not the ultimate or even intermediate goal. Instead of improving its strategic position, Moscow will provoke an increase in European countries' military spending and the growth of their navies. This will lead to the emergence of an area of viscosity, a deterioration of relations with Europe, and its further drift towards the United States. So, Russian efforts will be countered with minimal distraction of American resources.

A similar strategic viscosity area for China is the Indian Ocean, where, at first glance, the Chinese naval buildup looks quite logical. In fact, it ensures the security of supplies to China from the Gulf countries and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the main maritime trade route from China to Europe. The rise of Chinese naval power as such poses a hypothetical threat to the United States and forces Washington to pay special attention to the Pacific Ocean, strengthening its position and building up its forces there. If China starts increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean, this will immediately create strategic viscosity there: India, historically suspicious of China, will begin to quickly build up its own navy and strengthen relations with the United States as a power hostile to China.

In both cases, intensified naval efforts in a particular region create a strategic viscosity area, with the opposing country spending minimal resources to counter these activities, and doing so at the expense of the local players. For the United States, a strategic viscosity area is the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea: it forces the U.S. Navy to maintain the constant presence of its strike group in the region, distracting ships from solving the main task—confrontation with China.

### **RUSSIAN OPTION**

Developing a Russian naval strategy in the unfolding Cold War is a rather difficult task for several reasons.

*Firstly*, Russia is in a weak position in the new Cold War that is getting underway. Unlike the major players, China and the United States, it does not have a strong economy. Although it has managed to achieve defense sufficiency and its armed forces do not place a heavy burden on the economy, an escalation of confrontation with any of the superpowers will increase this burden. In addition, the possibility of Russia's political maneuvering is significantly limited due to the ongoing conflict with the United States and the EU.

*Secondly*, there is a risk that the general public and the political elites will identify a defensive foreign policy with a defensive strategy, especially now that the country has achieved defense sufficiency. Such identification must be avoided: *a non-aggressive foreign policy does*

*not mean that the country must assume a strategic defensive posture.* On the contrary, for a country in a weak position, the main task is to strengthen itself, which can only be done through a strategic offensive.

**Thirdly**, Russia has historically paid insufficient attention to the development of its navy, which is largely due to a lack of interest in maritime strategy as such. During the last century, Russian strategic thought twice demonstrated a serious breakthrough in understanding the role of the navy: before and immediately after World War I (works by Boris Zherve, Major General Nikolai Klado, Captain Nikolai Petrov) and at the height of the Cold War (Admiral Sergei Gorshkov). They defended a key postulate: the navy is not a means of protecting the shores or supporting the army, but, in the words of one of the colleagues, *a political tool and a strategic weapon of the state*. This is the only approach that makes it possible to develop a concept of using the navy in a particular strategic configuration.

The following can be named as Russia's strategic imperatives in the medium and long terms:

1. Friendly neutrality towards China with a view to forming a “neutral alliance of understanding”<sup>2</sup> in the Pacific as far as the Cold War against the United States is concerned.
2. An independent policy in other regions and other areas of international cooperation.
3. Improvement of relations with third countries and expansion of its own resource base.
4. Strengthening of the national economy and political authority in the world.

On the one hand, Russia needs to derive maximum benefits from the available resources in the short term, facilitating China's position in the conflict with the United States and weakening American forces, that is,

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘neutral ally’ was introduced in 1965 by Norwegian historian Olav Riste, who in his work *The Neutral Ally: Norway's Relations with Belligerent Powers in the First World* thus defined Norway's policy towards Britain in the final stage of World War I. Not officially a warring party, Norway made a great contribution to the Allies' victory: having one of the world's largest trading and fishing fleets and rich mineral deposits, Norway helped Britain survive the underwater blockade.

waging, in fact, a *coalition Cold War*. On the other hand, this should be done in such a way as not to cause a retaliatory strike from the United States tempted by the prospect of quickly eliminating China's partner from the game. In all cases, China should be the main threat for the United States, and attempts to quickly crush Russia using Cold War tools should carry the risk and danger for the United States itself. Thirdly, during a coalition war, Russia should spend resources very carefully: the Cold War will go on for a long time, the configuration of alliances may change in the future, but Russia's ultimate goal is self-strengthening.

The coalition nature of the war significantly expands possible strategic options for Russia, but it also sets it a task: without further annoying the United States, to help divert American forces from the Pacific theater, thus facilitating the position of Russia's strategic partner—China. The most promising option in this context would be the strengthening of Russia's presence in three areas:

**1. Western Indian Ocean.** By increasing its presence in this region, Russia will help China avoid getting into an area of strategic viscosity: unlike the Chinese Navy, the presence of the Russian Navy in the region will not cause a negative reaction from local actors, including the key one—India. Russia will thus guarantee the security of supplies to China and at the same time may, depending on the nature of its presence, force the United States to concentrate up to two carrier strike groups in the area to counter this presence. The current power vacuum in the region, the abundance of deep-sea ports, demand among local countries for a security provider, the growth of terrorist activity in East Africa, and the friendly attitude among local political elites are potentially conducive to building up the Russian presence in the region.

**2. South Atlantic.** This is a strategic “black hole” in the U.S.-China confrontation. A huge segment of the ocean that is not structured as a theater due to its remoteness from China and is not regarded by either the Chinese or American leaders as a possible area of confrontation. There is a potential dominant force in the region—Brazil, whose navy is increasingly active near West Africa

and, in particular, in the Gulf of Guinea. The increase in Russia's naval presence in this region is facilitated by the same factors as in the Western Indian Ocean, plus Russia's readiness to interact with Brazil. At the same time, Russia's presence will significantly raise the stakes, turning the South Atlantic into a theater of operations and structuring it, and in the future will cause the U.S. and Britain to increase their presence there too.

**3. South Pacific.** Unlike the aforementioned two regions, there is no power vacuum there. This is a dynamic region, the southern flank of the Pacific theater, where superpowers, local rising players (Australia, Indonesia), and external actors (France, India) are fighting for influence. A presence in this region will significantly raise Russia's importance as a promising partner in the Cold War without escalating the conflict with the United States. But to use this trump card, Russia's regional strategy in the South Pacific must rely not only (and not so much) on China, but on Australia, France, and New Zealand that are equally not interested in getting involved in the Cold War and seeing increased Chinese and U.S. presence in the region.

According to Mahan's formula, control of a maritime region is guaranteed by the navy in the first place, and only then by positions duly selected and distant from each other; the navy uses these bases to get up steam and to realize its strength. The best form of presence in the first two regions is a new type of naval bases, which could be defined as a "maritime fortress." Unlike naval bases in an ordinary war and peacetime logistics centers, a maritime fortress should become the center of not only military, but also economic, and, possibly, tourist activity, acting as both a naval base and a center of economic life of the region. It should have a sufficient number of personnel to provide protection against possible terrorist or insurgent attacks, but at the same time it will fully rely on local resources, which should give it necessary autonomy in case of local conflict. An important advantage of such bases is their continental location, which does not allow the enemy fleet to effectively block them. There where this is not possible (for example, in the South Pacific), they should focus on police and humanitarian operations.

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The world is on the verge of a systemic conflict of a relatively new type, which can be described as a Cold War. To wage it successfully, one must realize that it is a war, and be guided by the rules of warfare. Being one of the great world powers, Russia will be drawn into this war one way or another; the sooner we realize the inevitability of this, the more confidently we will be able to control the process, understand our strategic interests and pursue them throughout the Cold War between the United States and China. The main task is to develop a clear-cut strategy, implement it consistently (over decades), and adjust operational plans in a changing environment. The new world requires both quick tactical decisions and long-term grand strategies. Those who fail to understand this will lose.

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