

**Odd Arne Westad, *La Guerre froide globale*, Paris, Payot, 2007, 492 p.**

## **The real Cold War : global and bloody**

**Jean-Yves Haine**

University of Toronto

Asked to offer a brief summary of the second part of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, a student of international affairs may feel entitled to underline two major forces, the Cold War at the centre between the two superpowers and the decolonisation process at the periphery. As obvious and well known as they are, these two factors have been rarely studied together in a global and systematic way. Although independent, the first fundamentally shaped the process, the forms and the means of the second. This crucial argument is brilliantly made and illustrated in details by Prof. Westad in his wide-ranging and impressive study, covering nearly five continents throughout the entire period. Taken separately, these two forces already represent a daunting challenge for the historian or the political scientist. Together, it may have seemed impossible to offer a comprehensive analysis of the two phenomena, yet this exactly what *The Global Cold War* so successfully achieved.

The fundamental assumption that the Cold War confrontation heavily influenced the development and the legacy of the decolonization process may sound obvious but it somehow constitutes a paradox in Cold War politics. Very rapidly after the end of World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States outranked any other power in terms of military and economic resources. Indeed, even the United Kingdom reluctantly but inevitably came to realize that it could not compete with this two members only league and that its empire, -the very element of its world influence-, will have to be abandoned. The bipolar distribution of power at the end of the 1940s meant however that the Cold War confrontation became the very essence of world politics and that everything depended on this dynamic at the centre. But precisely because Moscow and Washington were so powerful, it didn't crucially matter to them whether this or that remote country in the Third World aligned itself with one or the other.<sup>1</sup> The central balance of power, to which nuclear weapons gave its overarching significance, could not be disturbed neither by specific alignments at the periphery nor by the never achieved prospect of an autonomous and converging third force which, although covering immense population, did not aggregate significant and sufficient resources in regard to those in the hands of Moscow and Washington. In other words, the bipolar structure of World Politics meant firstly that the Cold War

---

<sup>1</sup> The main argument is developed by Waltz Kenneth N., "The Stability of a Bipolar World", *Daedalus*, Summer 1964, Vol. 93, n°3, pp. 881-909. As one of his critics pointed out: "We can only conclude that if bipolarity is a distribution of power such that the two most powerful countries have no need for allies, then, far from explaining the cold war, bipolarity renders it inexplicable". Wagner Harrison R., "What was bipolarity", *International Organization*, Winter 1993, Vol. 47, n°1, p. 96.

was unalterable without transformation at its core and secondly that it was relatively stable, given the unlikelihood of such changes.

Why did the Americans and the Soviets thus found themselves intervening all over of the Third World if none of these interventions had a chance to unsettle the central equilibrium? Three main factors explain why the bipolar world invested so much time, money, resources and lives in the Third World. First and foremost, the Cold War was a competition for ideas, a confrontation of two ideologies, a contest for primacy in status and influence. Since their origin, the United States and the Soviet Union had envisaged themselves as models for the rest of the world and had articulated a genuinely anti-colonial ideology. But as the frenzy for alliances intensified at the end of the 1940's, the competition for allies became one of the key features of the Cold War. As Prof. St Walt has argued, "more than anything else, the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union has been a competition for allies... The impressive stability of postwar alliance networks contrasts sharply with the perennial belief that alliances were relatively unimportant in a bipolar nuclear world".<sup>2</sup> In Europe, strategic stakes and interests were real, even if some were more constructed than real. After all, both Superpowers could afford to loose France on the one hand and China on the other, without dramatic impact to the overall balance between Moscow and Washington. Once the core interests were taken care of, -NATO and the Warsaw Pact were created partly to fulfil that role, the competition broadened slowly but inevitably all over the world. Kroutchev's investments in the Third World, following a period of failures, and the US NSC 68 of 1950, broadening the competition against Moscow, illustrated, each in their own way, the global and ideological nature of the Cold War. As Prof. Westad points out, seen from the South, this global expansion was remarkably similar to former colonial enterprises. Seen from Maputo, Manila, Havana or Managua, the Cold War was not very different from the Berlin conference of 1878 where parts of the world were divided between colonial powers. Superpowers' conflicts and domination were indeed rather familiar: American and Soviet methods to project their own version of modernity by imposing, even by force, drastic changes on societies were not different than those used by the French and British colonisation efforts.

Second, the messianic and global image of the US and the Soviet Union is only a part, though important, of the story of Washington's and Moscow's interventions in the Third World. The bipolar confrontation generated similar but mistaken strategic beliefs in the White House as well as in the Kremlin. They can be summed up in two words that influenced the lives of millions: domino theory. This perception, more than any other, helped to understand why suddenly, remote areas became so important for the two superpowers. Articulated in the US when the Korean War broke out, it never really left the official circles in Washington. The conviction that if one zone falls to the other camp, the rest will inevitably follows, justified interventions in areas where there were no real strategic interests. It played a crucial role in Vietnam, in Central America and Africa.<sup>3</sup> In Moscow, the fear of encirclement was as old as the Soviet Union itself. It increased dramatically after 1945, all the more

---

<sup>2</sup> Walt Stephen M., "Alliances in Theory and Practice: What lies ahead ?", *Journal of International Affairs*, Summer 1989, Vol. 43, n°1, pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> On this key concept, see Snyder Jack and Robert Jervis (Eds.), *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*, Oxford University Press, 1991; Kauppi Mark V., "Strategic Beliefs and Intelligence: Dominoes and Bandwagons in the Early Cold War", *Security Studies*, Autumn 1994, Vol. 4, n°1, pp. 5-39 and Slater Jerome, "Dominoes in Central America: Will they fall ? Does it matter ?", *International Security*, Fall 1987, Vol. 12, n°2, pp. 105-134.

so because the intrinsic power of the United States was always vastly superior to Moscow's ability to generate its own wealth and growth. Time and again, *The Global Cold War* illustrated how prevalent the belief was throughout the decades of the Cold War. Starting with the Middle East, - the Cold War started in this region, it is a crucial episode to understand firstly the fear of Great Britain that led to US involvement in Europe and secondly the increasing role of Washington in that part of the world-, Moscow's first attempts to gain influence, which failed spectacularly in Turkey and Iran, had immediately triggered an American reaction that led to un-American foreign policy objectives, culminating with the Mossadegh coup in 1953. Three years later, the Suez crisis and the US opposition to the Anglo-French operation, illustrated the pre-eminent and exclusive role of Washington in the region: precisely because Moscow used the Suez crisis to gain, influence and control nationalist movements in the Arab world, Washington's imposed its own priorities to European powers. From then on, the Third World became an area where two and only two players mattered, the US and the Soviet Union.

This leads to a third factor that became crucial to understand the global scope of the Cold War: the confrontation was perceived to be a zero-sum game. A gain for one meant a loss for the other. Every attempt by one would lead to a reaction by the other. The South has thus only two potential mentors, either Washington or Moscow. Some Third World leaders understood this very clearly and tried to play one against the other to receive the biggest aid and assistance possible and most importantly to keep them in power. This helps explain why so many dictatorships were basically left untouched during the cold war: for example, Mobutu, -there are fascinating insights on Kennedy's perception of the new leader of Zaire-, became an absolute dictator but he was, from an American point of view, a "good" dictator, because he was on the right side of the Cold War. Any national movement in the Third World was thus perceived through the lenses of the Cold War confrontation. They became pawns in that zero-sum game, armed, assisted and cajoled not for the causes they fought for, but for the part they represent in the global confrontation. Bandung was indeed a failure: the non-aligned were rapidly, some reluctantly, others more willingly, swallowed by the logic of the zero-sum game. From Indonesia to South America, from Central Africa to East Asia, the creation of a potential outsider to the central confrontation did not hold its promise. The decolonisation process in Africa, most importantly the remnants of the Portuguese empire, embodied this logic. In the myriad of national liberation movements, in Mozambique, Angola and South Africa, Moscow and Washington picked and choose according to the old adage of international relations: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. For Moscow, another factor came into play in this region at the end of the 1960s: the competition with China. This added dimension became considerably important for the Soviet Union, which tried to regain the status of leader of the Communist world. This intra-bloc competition had crucial consequences when the Soviet empire collapsed.

Thus ideology, the domino theory and the zero-sum game nature of the Cold War crucially affected the decolonisation process and the trajectory of the Third World. It also influenced the two superpowers. America was never really the same after Vietnam, and Afghanistan in many ways hastened the demise of the Soviet empire itself. Yet the centre remained crucial, at the beginning and at the end of the Cold War. When Gorbachev initiated a détente, he thought that the periphery was the place to start. Yet, it is only when he made concessions on core issues, -disarmament in Europe-, that the negotiating process produced genuine results. One of the most fascinating contribution of Prof. Westad book deals with the legacy of these

interventions in the Third World and how it affected the lives of millions in Africa, Central America and Central Asia. In particular, his last chapter about the US and Soviet Union's involvements in Afghanistan and the links that were created with Islamist movements helps the reader to understand where the post 9/11 world came from. More broadly, Prof. Westad brilliantly demonstrated how the scars left by the US and Soviet interventions, from Africa to Asia, had crucial consequences not only for these societies themselves but also for the rest of the world. It should also be a must read for Western decision-makers who are currently struggling in Afghanistan. In 1986, Gorbachev found himself in a classic conundrum. On the one hand, US arms supplies, the increasing strength of the guerrilla and the flow of foreign combatants meant that it was impossible to win the conflict in Afghanistan militarily without risking the bankruptcy of the Soviet army and economy. On the other hand, a withdrawal would have a dramatic impact for the status and the image of the Soviet Union all over the world. When Gorbachev came to the decision of withdrawal, the military unreservedly approved. As Marshal Akhromeyev told him, "there is not a single portion of the Afghan territory that was not occupied by a Soviet soldier. Yet, there is no result... we didn't succeed in gaining the Afghan people".<sup>4</sup> General Petraus strategic review of and President Obama new focus on Afghanistan, -with the usual reluctance of Europe to back it-, have learned from past US mistakes in Iraq. The Soviet experience is a sombre reminder of the difficulty of NATO's missions in Afghanistan.

The Norwegian School of diplomatic history has already contributed to the historiography of the Cold War with significant new insights about the nature of the US involvement in Western Europe.<sup>5</sup> This book is even more important: it demonstrated why the Cold War came to become a global struggle and how it affected millions of lives around the world.

---

<sup>4</sup> P. 395. Another crucial source to understand Gorbachev's decision is Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Lundestad Geir, *Empire by Integration: The United States and European Integration, 1945-1997*, Oxford University Press, 1998.