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COMMENT

# The Cold War against the Cold War

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The Cold War was not the only large-scale geopolitical struggle to play out on the global stage in the decades after World War II. This was also the era of decolonization, when some of the world's largest empires were forced to recognize the sovereignty of their captive nations. Decolonization was, strangely, not a wedge issue differentiating the main camps of the Cold War – both the United States and the Soviet Union supported decolonization, at least when they saw it as suiting their interests (Mark and Betts 2022; Ryan and Pungong 2000). The United States could draw on Wilsonian ideals of self-determination (Simpson 2012); the Soviet Union could draw on socialist ideals of national liberation (Louro et al. 2020). Hypocrisies were associated with these ideals on all sides, and actual American or Soviet support for anti-colonial movements was inconsistent at best. Still, decolonization, one of the defining features of the Cold War era, was not sharply divided along Cold War lines. The last months of Frantz Fanon, one of the most prominent proponents of decolonization, provide an illustration. When Fanon fell ill with leukemia, both the Soviet Union and the United States offered medical assistance. Fanon was treated first at a Soviet hospital in Moscow, then at a US military hospital outside Washington, D.C. (Meaney 2019; Shatz 2024: 340–44).

One of the first foreign policy priorities of many newly independent nations was to reject the Cold War, as George Steinmetz observes in his article in this special issue. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, articulated this vision just after World War II: "We propose, as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another, which have led in the past to world wars and which may again lead to disasters on an even vaster scale" (Prasad 1983: 300). This was the vision of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, when 29 national leaders pledged "abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defense to serve any particular interests of the big powers" (Asian-African Conference 1955: 119). This was the focus of the Non-Aligned Movement, established by leaders of 25 countries in Belgrade in 1961 (Mišković et al. 2014). Of course, there was hypocrisy in the non-aligned movement too – some of the countries were in fact heavily aligned, many succumbed to conflict with neighbors instead of a spirit of solidarity, and almost all of the governments associated with the movement abused their power through periods of dictatorship and disastrous social experiments (Gassama 2017; Özsu 2017; Prashad 2007).

In effect, there was a second cold war in the decades after World War II, a cold war to escape the Cold War. Many countries of the "Third World" – a conceptual

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grouping that emerged at this same historical moment – attempted to prise sovereignty from the grip of Great Powers. This other cold war, like the better-known Cold War, was not always cold. Escape attempts were punished with invasions, proxy wars, coups, and other forms of violence (Westad 2005).

Mohammad Mosaddeq, the prime minister of Iran, was an early and exemplary case. He sought an independent path that he called "passive balance" (often translated as "negative equilibrium") between Western and Soviet influences (Katouzian 2009: 56). To reduce exploitation by the West, he nationalized the monopolistic Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum) while maintaining economic ties with Western oil companies and banks. He allowed the communist Tudeh (Masses) Party to operate legally in Iran, but within limits – there was little danger that the communists would take power, as even the US government acknowledged (privately) at the time (Painter and Brew 2023: 149, 164). Publicly, the US government claimed the opposite – that Mosaddeq was either a pawn of the communists or vulnerable to a communist take-over. In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency placed an unsigned article in *Newsweek* under the headline, "Iran: Reds ... Taking Over" (Gasiorowski 2004: 245). The following week, US and British agents launched a coup against Mosaddeq. The coup failed, and plans were being developed to smuggle the conspirators out of Iran when they learned that their Iranian partners, refusing to concede, had begun to seize government buildings on their own (Wilber 1969: 64–67). Mosaddeq was arrested, and Iran was forced into line with US Cold War priorities.

Around the world, the Cold War drew countries into alignment like magnetic filings. But the polar attraction was imperfect. At times it backfired – Soviet demands pushed Turkey into NATO, for example (Hasanli 2011); US threats pushed revolutionary Cuba toward communism, as Andreas Glaeser notes in his article in this special issue; and interventions of various sorts sometimes generated blowback when proxies went rogue (Johnson 2001). Notably, the Cold War never fully managed to capture the two most populous nations, India and China, although both countries made large sacrifices to remain nonaligned. India missed out on the rural transformation that might have followed from closer alignment with the Soviets (Drèze and Sen 2013), and on the trade and investment that might have followed from closer alignment with the West (Baghwati and Panagariya 2013). The People's Republic of China sacrificed millions of lives during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution to rid itself of supposedly pro-Soviet and pro-capitalist tendencies (Lüthi 2008; Walder 2021). As Kristin Plys notes in an article in this special issue, Maoism inspired militant movements around the world, though it is not clear that China actively supported these movements – rather than forming a third pole in Cold War geopolitics, the People's Republic seems to have turned inward, abandoning aspirations for leadership of the Third World that it had proposed at the Bandung Conference (Garver 2016), and only reaching out to the world again as the Cold War was ending.

Even within the nations that had been conscripted into the Cold War, many people in the Third World who admired Soviet ideals of egalitarianism and/or American wealth and popular culture were disappointed with the superpowers and with superpower rivalry. Mushahid Hussain's article in this special issue gives the example of Akhter Hameed Khan, a local administrator in East Pakistan (later Bangladesh)

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who ran a pioneering organization dedicated to community development, which Khan viewed as an expansive process of social change that would inculcate rural empowerment. By the 1960s, however, the project's US funders and their local political allies had adopted a less expansive vision of community development that focused on high-yield crops and agrarian capitalism, in keeping with the US's Cold War suspicion of anything that might be associated with socialist collectivism. Khan had thrown his lot in with the Americans – local leftists denounced his organization as "CIA agents" whose "cooperatives were designed only to delude the people" (Khan 1983: 187) – but the Americans and their allies had a limited appetite for social justice projects. As Khan later noted, ruefully, "villagers were willing to accept [his] approach more eagerly than political leaders" (Khan 1983: 282).

Even committed Cold Warriors had to expend some effort to maneuver themselves into alignment with Cold War priorities. Elisabeth Clemens's article in this special issue identifies tensions in US politics, just after World War II, between free-market ideology and big-government interventions into the economy such as the G.I. Bill, the Marshall Plan, and the military-industrial complex. Clemens calls these interventions "anti-statist state-building," a project that aligned itself with anti-communist doctrine by routing much of the public investment through private enterprise and framing government commitments as temporary measures rather than permanent entitlements. On the other side of the "Iron Curtain" – like "Third World," another Cold War epithet – Romania's Communist Party had its own tensions to resolve, as documented in Ioana Sendriou's article in this special issue. The party had come to power through a Soviet ultimatum and fraudulent elections; to hide this unsavory pedigree, it staged show trials of the country's former leaders, accusing them of the very same flaws: subservience to a foreign power (Nazi Germany) and ignoring the democratic will of the Romanian people. Sendriou views this episode as evidence of "sticky" conceptions of the state: having consolidated institutional power over the state, the Romanian Communist Party also felt it had to delegitimize its rivals discursively as well.

In all these cases, the Cold War looks somewhat different when viewed from different positions in the world. To these various earthbound positions, one might add the view from outer space, in the spirit of Isaac Ariail Reed's article in this special issue – or at least the science fiction view projected into outer space by movie studios, popular writers, and defense industry contractors in Cold War southern California. If stable definitions are needed for the purpose of causal inference, as James Mahoney notes in this special issue, contradictory perspectives on the Cold War nonetheless shaped the behavior of the people who collectively enacted the Cold War. To expand on the chess metaphor that Mahoney introduces, the reifying implication of a stable definition reduces actors to pawns in a game whose moves are decided by others. The players of the game are not themselves on the chess board (even kings and queens on the board are pawns, in this sense); yet even the players are not fully free to act as they wish because their moves are limited by the rules of the game. But what happens to our stable definition when the pawns have their own ideas and want to break free from the players who claim the right to move them and the rules that claim the right to limit their moves? If the Cold War was a chess match, it was one in which many of the pawns were struggling to leave the game and had to be physically restrained to play their assigned roles.

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In the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists treated the Cold War as a contest over real issues such as human development and human equality, and also geopolitical rivalry and state building and mass violence and preventing mass violence. As Sendriou and Stevens note in their introduction to this special issue, the post-Cold War generation of social scientists – at least in North America – turned to abstractions such as structure and mechanism and event and narrative to build their explanations. The substance of the Cold War, and the substance of all social scientific subjects, receded somewhat behind formal theoretical concerns. Today, with greater distance, substance may be receding further behind meta-theoretical questions of ontology and epistemology. Perhaps social science, too, is waging a sort of cold war against the Cold War, in which it seeks to escape the realist strictures that the Cold War imposed on social science. If so, let us not lose sight of the real-life hopes and horrors of the Cold War in the shifting patterns our inquiries reveal.

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