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**A WAR THAT NEVER ENDS. THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM'S  
INABILITY TO EMERGE A STABLE POWER STRUCTURE AND A  
FUNCTIONAL ORDER**

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**Abstract:**

This paper presents the possibility of a new cold war between the West and Russia. The end of the Cold War opened the door to a new era, called to this day in a highly simplistic way - post-Cold War. Aspirations of cooperation on a mutually beneficial basis and perhaps even hopes of cultural unification have been abandoned because of the activation of imperialist reminiscences amid the erosion of Russia's power status in the international security environment. The following aspects should be mentioned as general conclusions of the research. First of all, the relatively unexpected end of this competition fought from antagonistic positions generated a lack of consensus, which has been accentuated as time passed regarding the real causes that determined the event and the moment when it came to a peaceful conclusion. Secondly, the order in an international system is shaped by the power potential of the states and the established power hierarchy, by the way the powerful actors (current, former, or aspiring) define their national interest and fulfill not only their role in the international scene but also the obligations resulting from a common international coexistence.

*Key words: Cold War; agreement; great power; power architecture; international system.*

## **1. Introduction**

In the international relations field of action, changes that are not based on a win-win algorithm are dramatic and generate critical effects for the losing side, all the more so since it occupied a dominant position at the international level and was used to promote its interests through power politics. As time passed, the accumulated grievances and the inability to reintegrate into the system by respecting its rules became acute, culminating in the construction of a revanchard policy, out-of-the-game patterns, and possibly generating an overthrow of the legal order.

Defeated empires or great powers hardly accept defeat and try to write their history by reinterpreting it, looking for causes externally rather than internally. Humanity has known such flashes of hubris, and some have produced catastrophic consequences. This is the case of Germany, which, in the "shortest century" in history (1919-1989), had to know defeat twice in order to be integrated into a system based on the values of democracy and freedom. It is mandatory in this context to mention the amendment that the country given as an example was actually divided in two following the Yalta Conference (February 1945), and that only one-half would benefit from the implementation of the mentioned values, including the state of law. It is equally valid that the process of democratization of the republic with its capital in Bonn required considerable political and economic support from the Western community, two actions being essential: building what



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would eventually become the European Union around the Franco-German binomial (European Coal & Steel Community, 1951), thus causing two traditional enemies to cooperate by identifying common interests subsumed by the great policy of ensuring security and prosperity in a democratic space, and joining NATO (1955), against the backdrop of increasing antagonism between the USA and the USSR (between the West and the East) and the establishment of the Warsaw Pact. The division of Germany and the emergence of two states should be recorded in the history book as lessons learned for a comparative analysis between two opposed types of regimes. Although one might think that it should not be mentioned, although the present reality reveals an image that you could hardly have thought of before 2014, "Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it", as Winston Churchill said [1], the prime minister who led the British to victory in World War II.

Today, Russia is in Germany's position.

## **2. Research Methodology**

In order to solve the research questions on which the paper is built, the following methods were used:

- Comparative analysis.
- Open source research such as public documents and news articles.

The core of the article is structured according to some questions referring to:

- The end of the Cold War – which was the trigger, and how formal was the termination?
- The possible existence of a new cold war today – what is its degree of novelty if we consider that the struggle for power is a constant feature of any international system?

## **3. Findings and analysis**

### **3.1 The end of an era**

Three features mainly characterize the Cold War:

- A relatively bipolar power structure because although the polarization of the world's states was concentrated around the two superpowers involved in the political, military, and geographical competition, there was also a third grouping, that of the non-aligned, which brought together young independent states that did not want joining the circle of allies, friends, and satellites of any of the world's super-competitors.

- Global direct military confrontation has been geographically segmented and delegated to other state and non-state actors, taking place at the regional level in proxy wars.

- Nuclear competition has been the sword of Damocles under which Mankind had lived, with the Missile Crisis (1962) considered the nuclear tension climax. Under this aspect of the nuclear issue, it is believed that the crucial moment that contributed to the end of the Cold War was accepting the idea that no one was going to win it, so it was a war that should not be fought. This realistic approach and pragmatic thinking were enshrined into law with the signing on December 8, 1987, in Washington, of the "Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Elimination Of Their Intermediate-Range And Shorter-Range Missiles" (INF Treaty) [2] which underlined that the parties were "Conscious that nuclear war would have devastating consequences for all mankind".

After 45 years, the Cold War ended "in the victory of one side and in the defeat of the other", said the American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski, in 1992 [3].

Unlike other wars, really "hot", which were ended not only de facto but also de jure by signing treaties that clearly and formally stipulated a new state of peace which was different from



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the existing one at the beginning of the military conflict, the will of the two superpowers was not recorded in any treaty that would enrich the endowment of public international law, except for the one of 1987, signed two years before the wave of revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe (1989) and four years before the demise of the Soviet Union (1991). It could be considered that Mankind changed its course based on a gentlemen's agreement founded on the honor of an American president, a former actor, but with a very significant political flair and well-advised by his team, and that of a young Soviet politician (taking into consideration the tradition of senescence common to his predecessors), coming from the party's second echelon and determined to rebuild Soviet society and economy (perestroika) and to make social life and government decision transparent (glasnost). He certainly did not want the system's destruction, his objective being, as Henry Kissinger stated [4], to revive what he considered a superior Soviet ideology and hastened the demise of the system he was representing by demanding reforms of which the system proved incapable. Political, emotional, financial, and historical speaking.

The lack of a treaty was compensated by a series of declarations, actions, and institutional constructions, precisely to recognize the end of an era and the readiness of the West to cooperate with Moscow in the sense of building an open and transparent international system. The participation of the Soviet Union/Russia in these enterprises of public international law, which represented the foundation of a new European security architecture, meant in fact the acceptance of a new status quo.

They are worth mentioning in this regard:

- The "Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany" or The Two (West Germany and East Germany) Plus Four (France, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, United States) Agreement (September 1990, the reunification of Germany was confirmed) [5].

- The "Charter of Paris for a New Europe" (November 1990, by which the signatories, including the Soviet Union, recognized that the meeting was taking place "at a time of profound change and historic expectations" and that "The era of confrontation and division of Europe has ended", a fact that paved the way for relationships built on "respect and cooperation") [6].

- The fifth NATO Strategic Concept and the first after the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1991, which mentioned the "profound" political/radical changes, the totally improved security environment, and the political division of Europe which was overcome) [7].

- The "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation" (1997, which announced the establishment of a new relationship between the North Atlantic Alliance and Russia, based on the premise that the two actors "do not consider each other as adversaries") [8].

This was the framework for developing relations between the West and Moscow immediately after the end of the Cold War. The justified hope for that time would, however, consume its substance.

The security environment was to change substantially, sometimes dramatically, through reconfiguring policies and positions and re-designing interests and claims.

The Cold War was a deaf arms race, mainly nuclear, and an ideological confrontation between two superpowers in an ongoing geopolitical competition for expanding spheres of influence. It became "hot" through intermediate subjects, thus being a way of testing weaponry and military equipment and a source of profit from their sale. The economic implosion of the Soviet Union (and thus Moscow's inability to maintain the military-industrial complex at a competitive level) amid widespread domestic weakness and the diplomacy set in motion during the Reagan Administration and after Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power were the causes that marked the end of an era that, paradoxically, operated through what it is commonly known as the "balance of terror".

The disappearance of the Soviet Union, one of the two superpowers that shared their dominance over the world for more than four decades, generated profound consequences on all



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aspects of the international scene, including the geopolitical one. Borders collapsed, areas of influence disappeared, alliances fell apart, priorities were revised, and the geopolitical contexts were changed. The reunification of Germany (viewed not necessarily with optimism in the West and Israel), the abolition of the Warsaw Pact, and the instant reorientation of the foreign policy of the states belonging to the "former communist bloc" towards the "free world" did not mean, by any means, an explanation to "the Russian problem". If for the geopolitical vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe the solution was clear, for Russia, it was not even possible to answer the cultural dilemma - was Russia European?!

Still Soviet, Moscow participated as a signatory to several international agreements. Their content and the various statements made must be contextualized, bearing in mind the factors that shaped the present situation at each moment and the foreseeable future. This is allowed in politics but not in diplomacy. Just as the negotiations are always diplomatic, the decision to initial the agreement resulting from the negotiations is of a political nature.

### **3.2 The new era, between change and continuity**

The Cold War developed a whole body of literature, both during and after its unfolding. Just as its end also raised questions among academics, generating debates and unresolved controversies – is the (c)Cold (w)War really over? If we were to offer a philosophical answer, we would say, like George Santayana in 1922, that "Only the dead have seen the end of the war" [9]. The answer must, however, be found from the perspective of international relations precisely to interpret the present as correctly as possible and foreshadow the future as close to reality as possible. The interpretation of an event is supposed to be done under the rule of critical thinking, of deep knowledge at least of the factors with direct determination (although the context is never neglected in this field), of the correct establishment of the cause-effect relationship and of deciphering the type of relationships between the participating actors.

A one-way answer is not an easy step.

- Have things changed since the Cold War? - Obviously, yes! The main starting point of the argumentation is the dissolution of the Soviet Union, meaning the disappearance of a component of the superpower binomial around which the entire scaffolding was built.

- Is there a continuity of these things in the post-Cold War period? - Obviously, yes! The main starting point of the argumentation is Russia's status as a successor of the Soviet Union and the (re)thinking of Russian foreign policy in balancing American power.

- Is Mankind (re)experiencing the (c)Cold (w)War? Yes, technically, and no, historically.

The cold war is a tense state based on the rivalry between two actors competing for dominance and which, in order to achieve their interests, resorting to political, economic, and cultural instruments, maintaining the military one as an "ultima ratio", i.e., as the ultimate plan of intervention. It is a war based on a conflictual-competitive state and manifested through mutual threats, which extends over a longer period (at least several years) precisely as a result of the relatively balanced power potential the actors involved have. The decision to end such a war is political, and the instruments committed are diplomatic (negotiations that result in agreements that generate a new order from which neither of the two is excluded, but the superiority of one over the other becomes a building block of a new reality). Considering them as old as history, some analysts claim that some cold wars "became hot" [10] but this is not the point of view of this paper – if a state of tension between two international actors turns into a "military" war, then we are not talking about a cold war; it is just a preliminary stage of the armed conflict. What begins as a cold war ends without warming up to be defined as such.

The actors specific to the Cold War no longer exist – the Soviet Union disintegrated. What remained after the disappearance of the bipolar power structure, i.e., the unipolar structure, became history after 2001 when multipolarism seemed to assert itself as the ideal power structure, as a





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characteristic of a global society marching into full process of democratization. On the other hand, America needs to rebrand its image to become internationally attractive again. America's status as a great international power is no longer contingent on the mobilization of its power potential as a response to an imperialist policy pursued by a rival. It is driven by how America understands rebuilding itself at home.

Technically we may live in a new cold war:

- Armed confrontation does not occur directly between actors aiming at world supremacy.
- The predictable global power structure is bipolar and stratified. There are no longer two actors in the upper part but two parties. Washington provides the leadership of one of them. The other side is defined by the competition between Moscow and Beijing, which are united by a single idea – obtaining a status equal to that of America in the exercise of power at the global level.

Even if there is no sign of a new cold war, the consequences of the Cold War generate an extraordinary impact on current geopolitics. Today we are no longer talking about empires or superpowers but about great powers (between which the difference is made primarily by the nature of the political regime): America, China, and Russia. None of them is perfect; "all three of these great powers face uncertain futures [...] may be even more fragile than they seem" [11]:

- Democracy in America is under siege, but there is hope that the tradition of an open and transparent society can overcome its current shortcomings.

- Russia could not yet define itself as a multinational state and leave behind the imperialist tradition of leading society and exercising foreign policy. The chain of frozen wars, the annexation of Crimea, and the strategic importance given to the Arctic region are the knots on which the web of support for Soviet-style power politics is woven. The war in Ukraine, however, could become the tipping point leading to the demise of the post-Soviet order. This is not similar to building a democratic society which, politically and culturally and considering the geographical scope of the country, could be very late. What is Russia, what could it be? "The final answer is a simple but inevitable axiom: Russia can be an empire or a democracy, but it cannot be both" [12].

- China, the third candidate for bipolar construction, is the "master of the trade rings." However, the economy is reducing its growth rate (a dramatic drop in GDP growth is forecast in 2022 to 2.8%, compared to 8.1% in the precedent year) [13], strategically supports Russia (the Taiwan issue) and wants a legal framework to deploy troops in "non-war military actions" [14]. Moreover, under the Global Security Initiative, the Chinese foreign policy "directly challenges the role of U.S. alliances and partnerships in global security and seeks to revise global security governance to make it more compatible with the regime security interests of the Chinese Communist Party" [15].

#### **4. Conclusion**

Whenever the international system tries to change its structure, building a new status on the foundations of a previous large-scale confrontation, a period of disorder follows until the tectonic plates of winners and losers begin to merge, settling to support the path of a coexistence dictated by new conditions.

The end of the Cold War constituted the beginning of the process of democratization at the global level, without having ended, however. Some countries were outside the rules of the game from the start, and others broke the rules during the game itself.

A possible democratization of Russia will not only be difficult but this process of political transformation with profound implications for the entire social system must be well clarified culturally. This aspect raises two questions: **what will be promoted values, and who will take responsibility for their promotion?** "The integration of Russia into the international system [said Henry Kissinger] is the key task of the emerging international order. It has two components that must be balanced: influencing Russian attitude and affecting Russian calculations" [16].



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Unfortunately, none represent a success to be counted for the Western side. The Russian attitude towards neighbors, partners, and competitors remained under the dome of the same historical requirements and specific geopolitical objectives of the Empire (Tsarist and Soviet) – to rule in a hegemonic way, to dominate. As for the Russian calculations, they were not only made on paper but ended up into practice: the last major warning – 2014. Since then, this calculation, left unresolved by the West, has turned into a "special military operation" that puts the nuclear issue back on the agenda.

**What does the world look like today?** For the sake of symmetry and the ease of parallelism with the way the Cold War is characterized in this work, the answer focuses on three points:

- Divergent geopolitical interests as an expression of the struggle for power and the inability of the international system to generate a stable and functional, or even pacifying, power architecture.
- Perpetuation of the armament policy and supporting the military sector through huge expenditures (with the amendment of the existence of a very large gap at the level of 2021 between the first place, occupied by the United States of America, and China, in the second position: \$801 billion / 293 billion; more than that, the occupants of places 2 to 10 total only \$777 billion military spending) [17][18][19], which only reconfirms the importance of military security amid promoting and fulfilling the national interest, while the nuclear factor remains the ultimate threat.
- The establishment of "international armies" and the reconfiguration of security policies at the international level, i.e., the military globalization of interests.

The complexity of the international situation makes defining the present and planning the future harder and opens the way to numerous options for discussion. That is why we will know the concrete answer regarding the new order only when this is materialized, i.e., by implementing the first rules concerning the international system functioning.

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