

Introduction

by *Francesco Bechi**

Has the world entered a second Cold War? It is hard to answer this question, which has vexed Western academics and political elites for some years now. Perhaps it is only fear, a worry to hide from ourselves because we do not want to re-open a chapter considered to be closed with the victory of the Western bloc. As the Harvard political scientist Stephen Walt wrote in *Foreign Policy*, reducing the new competition for power to an analogy with the past risks “laying the basis for a disastrous foreign policy.”¹ There is something to Walt’s argument. Indeed many of the most fascinating writings of the last century, whether intentionally or not, succumbed to reality, from the prophecy of the “end of history” by Francis Fukuyama, to the inevitable decline of the United States of America predicted in the writings of Paul Kennedy. Yet in reading the pages of this book it seems that the symptoms of a sort of second half of the Cold War are indeed present. Powers such as Russia, China and Iran are acting to demonstrate that their place in history and in the geography of the world is not at the margins of the United States of America. Moscow, despite an apparently more accommodating line from the Donald Trump Administration, is threatening the Americans on multiple fronts, from the Near Abroad (the territory that includes the former Soviet republics) to the Middle East. Beijing and Washington are in turn engaged in a military escalation in East Asia and in the South China Sea, as well as a no-holds-barred

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¹ S. Walt, “I knew the Cold War: This is no Cold War,” *Foreign Policy*, 12/3/2018, www.foreignpolicy.com.

trade war. The United States must limit the regional hegemony of Iran in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and even Qatar. It is a hybrid war, very different than the one that for 40 years saw the Soviet bloc as a counter to the Atlantic bloc. The cybernetic revolution, as this book explains well, has radically changed the rules of the game, opening a new front in which it is difficult to distinguish lone wolves from the military units of their respective countries. Spies with coats, ties and briefcases have given way to much more effective cyber-espionage. The influence of television has been replaced by the penetration of *trolls* on the web and in social media.

The United States and Europe designed the system of multilateral institutions that guided international relations for 50 years, and continues to do so. They created the United Nations and also NATO, the largest and longest-lasting military alliance in history. They decided the rules of the international economy, imposing the dollar as the reference currency and laying the foundation for what would become the World Trade Organization. They at least won the battle, if not the war, of ideas in the twentieth century. To say it with Joseph Nye, Western *soft power* won in global media and culture. Today precisely this primacy is called strongly into question. The rediscovery of national identity and the search for geopolitical repositioning that does justice to a country's historical weight unites all of the countries that were defeated by, or surrendered to, the Cold War. This desire for *révanche* takes on very different forms depending on the state in question. Those who wish to reduce it to a simple Hobbesian struggle for power are wrong. Behind the rediscovery of identity of these peoples and the return of conflict with the West there are very solid cultural references and deep historical roots.

The heart of the Russian project of hegemony is in its leader: Vladimir Putin. A former KGB official stationed in Dresden, East Germany, Putin saw the collapse of the Soviet Union with his own eyes, from a European perspective; it is no surprise that he called it "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." The path outlined by the secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, based on *glasnost* and *perestroika* did not succeed in opening Russia to the rest of the world. The confused and dramatic transition entrusted to Boris Yeltsin aggravated the implosion of what remained of the old Soviet empire, and still today is an open wound in the collective memory of Russia. In this tragic interval of history, Putin's dream was born to transform Moscow into a Third Rome, a point of reference not only for the Slavic world but

also for Eurasia. This is a mission that the Czar still feels today, and that dusts off the design of a great Eurasia from Ukraine to Manchuria, of a “land power” that counters a “sea power,” to paraphrase Carl Schmitt. This design had already been endorsed in the 1990s by former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, the teacher of the current Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and a great supporter of the Russian presence in the Middle East, and then structured in the thinking of the Eurasian movement of Alexander Dugin, an intellectual very close to the Russian president. Today this has become a specific foreign policy line, that is producing results. Putin’s Russia has extended its sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics, finding in the Visegrad Group an ally that is increasingly aligned with the Kremlin. The invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the intervention in the Syrian civil war are additional pieces of a challenge to “Euro-Atlantic hegemony” – they are convinced of this in Moscow – that will have to be launched by a Great Russia able to fulfill its historical role as a superpower.

Unlike Russia, China and Iran share the wound of being past victims of Western colonialism. They are still today the spokesmen for the political legacy of the Conference of Bandung of 1955 and the non-aligned movement born in Berlin in 1961. It is sufficient to listen to a speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to understand how vivid the wound of the “century of humiliation” is in Chinese historical memory: from the British domination of the nineteenth century to the Japanese invasion in the first half of the twentieth century (it was Xi Jinping who in 2014 proclaimed a national day of mourning for the Nanking Massacre of 1937).

The aspirations of these two nations are very different. The Chinese shift is linked to Xi’s rise to the top of the Communist Party. A child of a revolutionary, and currently party secretary and president of the republic indefinitely, Xi climbed the ladder of power with the solemn promise to renew the “Chinese dream”: a China that is a protagonist on a global level, reunited with its communities around the world, prosperous and hegemonic on an economic and military level. It is a *fil rouge* that in recent years has accompanied “Xi’s Thought,” now enshrined in the Constitution, an honor that in the past was reserved only for Mao and Deng. The global scope of the influence of Xi, the former governor of Fujian, has three aspects. The first is cultural. Since he took over as party secretary, Xi has definitively ended the era of technocrats from the Deng Xiaoping era, returning the most dangerous type of people to the Forbidden City: philosophers. Thus, without touching the thought of Mao and Karl Marx,

China has rediscovered its ancient wise men, starting with Confucius, who for years was banned by the Communist Party. The recovery of tradition has gone hand in hand with a strategy of cultural influence abroad to contrast the Western monopoly. The immense network of the Confucius Institutes, the cultural centers inaugurated by Hu Jintao and considerably strengthened under Xi's presidency, is the most evident example of this new global Chinese effort. The second aspect is political. At home, together with a strong grasp on the party cadres and on propaganda, Xi has imposed a personality cult similar to the one centered on Mao; so much for those who thought that globalization in China would proceed hand in hand with political liberalization. On the foreign front, Xi's China is challenging the American presence in Asia and Oceania, although never seeking a direct confrontation, and has almost eliminated the European presence in the Eastern portion of Africa. Lastly, is economics: the goal is to inaugurate an alternative model to American capitalism through the construction of new multilateral institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and direct investment in foreign countries. The greatest challenge to the world economic order today comes from the colossal One Belt One Road project, the New Silk Road by which Beijing wishes to unite Europe, Asia and Africa by sea and land.

The Iran of Hassan Rouhani and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is an assertive player in foreign policies that sees the United States as a sworn enemy. In his messages to the nation, the supreme leader Khamenei frequently defines the United States as the "Great Satan." Rouhani's election as president in 2013, despite bringing with it a hope for changes in foreign policy, did not mark a significant break with the tragic political legacy left by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The former president, who left Rouhani a country that was isolated and buckling under international sanctions, may have been banned by the political elites of Teheran. However, his foreign policy has not undergone great changes. The nuclear agreement signed in 2015 with Europe and the United States of Barack Obama (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) raised hopes for a new era in relations between Iran and the West. When US President Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the agreement, many, starting with the European countries that had worked hard on the deal, including Italy, accused the White House of destabilizing the Middle East. Yet there is no doubt that the Rouhani regime has continued to sponsor an aggressive foreign policy towards the United States and its allies, especially towards

the sworn enemies of the Islamic Republic: Saudi Arabia and Israel. On the other hand, Teheran has succeeded in weaving a diplomatic web that has brought the country closer to both Putin's Russia and Xi's China. The strategy was summarized in the words pronounced by Khamenei during a visit to Azerbaijan at the start of 2018: "In foreign policy, the top priorities for us today include preferring East to West, preferring neighboring countries to far reached locations."

It is not easy to pinpoint the start of this second phase of the Cold War. Historians have long debated what reference point to take for the onset of the first. The Yalta Conference? The Greek Civil War? The Soviet coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948? There is no single answer. The analysis by Paolo Messa seems to favor the period of 2013-14 as the moment of a strategic break that marks the start of a new season in international relations. March 2013: Xi Jinping becomes president of the People's Republic of China. August 2013: Hassan Rouhani wins the elections and becomes president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. March 2014: the "little green men" sent by Moscow invade Crimea. In those 12 months we find the seeds of a resumption of conflicts in the international field, although no longer between only two powers. The clash is based on variable geometries, that does involve the use of military force, but also that of new instruments: information warfare, investments in strategic infrastructure of third countries, and a new battle for cultural hegemony. And above all, cybernetic warfare, to which this book dedicates an entire chapter.

Great changes in history require a rethinking of the categories with which we have learned to read events. The narration of soft power as a method of interpretation of international relations so brilliantly launched by Joseph Nye at the beginning of the nineties succeeded in going mainstream. It entered think tanks, universities and even the constitutions and programmatic documents of some states. But is it really still sufficient, alone, to interpret the struggle for hegemony that characterizes this century? This is the question this book aims to answer, without claiming to be exhaustive. It throws light on a new form of power that seems sharper, quieter and more dangerous, suited to explain the new challenge from China, Russia and Iran to the West: *sharp power*. The expression was first used in November 2017 in a report by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a well-known American think tank founded by Ronald Reagan. As we will see, the NED researchers denounced the attempt by China and Russia to penetrate the political systems of democratic coun-

tries with a new cultural offensive that takes on the guise of unscrupulous political propaganda.

The study has provoked ferocious criticism and a lively academic debate, in which this book aims to intervene, broadening the field of study to other, more intrusive forms of influence in the internal affairs of a state. Investments in critical infrastructure, the use of trolls and bots to spread propaganda and fake news on the web; and then cyberwarfare, the inevitable conclusion of the cyber revolution of the twenty-first century, a reality that involves efforts by both democratic states and illiberal regimes. Finally, the book offers an exceptional panorama of the network of Russian and Chinese influence in Italy. The Eurasian states seek to use Italy as a door to enter the West. We must be conscious of this goal, to avoid gifting foreign powers easy access to western political system and strategic national assets.