

Review – New Cold Wars

Written by Andrew Latham and Logan Leybold

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review – New Cold Wars

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/12/23/review-new-cold-wars/>

ANDREW LATHAM AND LOGAN LEYBOLD, DEC 23 2024

New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West

By David Sanger

Penguin Random House, 2024

David Sanger's new book presents a timely analysis of the emerging challenges to U.S. foreign policy, framing contemporary tensions with China and Russia as a reincarnation of Cold War dynamics. While Sanger brings a wealth of journalistic experience and insider knowledge to his analysis, his reliance on the Cold War metaphor oversimplifies the complexities of the current global landscape.

In *New Cold Wars*, Sanger aligns with scholars like Hal Brands and Niall Ferguson, who propose that U.S. foreign policy should be informed by Cold War frameworks in order to address the rising influence of China and the resurgence of Russian aggression. Sanger draws parallels between the original Cold War and today's geopolitical climate by pointing to familiar themes: a decline in globalization, the rise of nationalism, the return of proxy wars, and growing nuclear threats. His argument is buttressed by alarming statistics—he quotes former CIA Director Robert Gates, who warns that the nuclear arsenals of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran could soon double the size of the U.S.'s stockpile.

At the heart of Sanger's analysis is the proposition that the U.S. is engaged in a new kind of Cold War, defined by a more dangerous and multifaceted global rivalry. This is not the bipolar contest between democracy and communism that shaped the 20th century but a struggle that pits the U.S. against two adversaries with different, yet overlapping, strategic goals. China, as Sanger notes, is increasingly assertive in the South China Sea and in its global economic outreach, while Russia has pursued military aggression through its ongoing invasion of Ukraine. In Sanger's view, these confrontations are eerily reminiscent of Cold War flashpoints, with U.S. power increasingly challenged on multiple fronts.

However, while Sanger offers an insightful critique of the current state of U.S. foreign relations, his framework falls short of fully capturing the complexities of modern global politics. One of the major differences between today and the Cold War era is the nature of alliances. The rigid ideological blocs that defined the Cold War have given way to far more fluid and pragmatic relationships. China and Russia may be strategic partners, but their partnership is not driven by a shared ideological commitment to remake the world order in their image. Rather, their cooperation reflects mutual interests, especially in countering Western dominance. Similarly, their alliances with countries like Iran and North Korea stem from practical concerns rather than the ideological solidarity seen during the Cold War.

Sanger acknowledges these nuances at times, conceding that the rivalry between the U.S. and its adversaries is more complex than the ideological standoff of the Cold War. For instance, he cites the White House's perspective that U.S. support for Ukraine is more similar to its support for Britain during WWII than circumstances during the Cold War. However, despite this recognition, Sanger often defaults to a Cold War framework, which limits the analytical depth of his work.

In addition to the oversimplification of global dynamics, Sanger's book also underestimates the increasing significance of economic and technological competition. Today's great power competition is as much about

Review – New Cold Wars

Written by Andrew Latham and Logan Leybold

technological dominance—particularly in sectors like semiconductors, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence—as it is about military might. Sanger touches on these themes, especially in his discussion of cybersecurity, but the emphasis remains on traditional military and geopolitical contests.

That said, Sanger does provide a set of thoughtful policy prescriptions for addressing these challenges. He advocates for sensible strategies such as driving a wedge between Russia and China, renewing NATO's strength, investing in cybersecurity, and avoiding unnecessary provocations with China over tariffs and sanctions. These recommendations are grounded in practical concerns and do not necessarily rely on a Cold War framework to be effective.

Ultimately, while *New Cold Wars* is an engaging and informative read, particularly for those interested in U.S. foreign policy, it is constrained by its reliance on Cold War analogies. Sanger's vivid journalistic storytelling brings important details to the surface, but the framework he employs is insufficient for understanding the multi-dimensional power struggles shaping the world today. As the global order evolves into a more multipolar system, dominated by complex interdependencies and pragmatic alliances, the binary Cold War metaphor appears increasingly inadequate. Sanger's analysis captures the stakes of the current moment but fails to provide a new conceptual vocabulary to navigate the challenges of the 21st century.

In conclusion, *New Cold Wars* offers important insights into the strategic dilemmas facing the U.S. today, but it ultimately oversimplifies the nature of modern geopolitics. The rise of China and the resurgence of Russia undoubtedly pose significant threats, but framing these challenges as a "new Cold War" underestimates the fluid, multipolar and multi-aligned nature of contemporary geopolitics. For policymakers and scholars alike, a more nuanced framework will be necessary to address the complexities of today's international system.

About the author:

Dr. Andrew Latham is a professor of international relations and political theory at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is also a Senior Washington Fellow with the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, a non-resident fellow at DefensePriorities, and a regular opinion contributor at *The Hill* newspaper in Washington, DC. Logan Leybold is a researcher at Macalester College.