

New cold war, new world order

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The Lost Peace

How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War

Richard Sakwa

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Sovereign Internationalism

Lobster readers may already be familiar with the work of Richard Sakwa, whose *Frontline Ukraine* was reviewed in the summer of 2019.¹ That book discussed the growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine during the period from 2004 until 2014, leading to Moscow's move into the Crimea and to conflict between the two countries over the future of Donbas. This was set in the context of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, and argued that the crisis contained within it all the makings of a new Cold War. In *The Lost Peace*, Sakwa builds on and extends the arguments deployed in *Frontline Ukraine*, analysing what led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war.

It will not be a surprise to those familiar with Sakwa's work that *The Lost Peace* is as persuasive as its predecessor, full of detailed analysis, very well-informed, crammed with salient facts and displaying a full knowledge of international relations going all the way back to 1945. It is worth spelling out his case in some detail, since it has hardly been discussed at all in mainstream press and broadcast media treatment of the war in Ukraine. He argues that Cold War 2, beginning in earnest with the crisis of 2014, developed from the failure after 1989 of what he calls the 'political West' – namely the NATO powers and the EU led by the USA – to agree with Russia on a new strategic settlement covering the future geopolitical configuration of Europe. Russian leaders from Gorbachev onwards envisaged a new international order characterised by ongoing disarmament supervised by multilateral organisations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Strategic

¹ See Scott Newton, 'An "Unhelpful" Contribution?': Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* in *Lobster* 77, 2019. <<https://shorturl.at/egII3>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/77/frontline-ukraine-crisis-in-the-borderlands-by-richard-sakwa/>>

Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Agreement (INF). The regional blocs – NATO and the Warsaw Pact – which had dominated Europe since the 1950s would be dismantled and replaced by one organisation dedicated to the principle of indivisible security, meaning that no state should seek to protect its strategic interests by joining pacts deemed to be threatening by another power. Moscow was willing for NATO to be the principal genesis of what would become this new organisation. However, they also argued that Russia should either become a member, or that new international structures should be established allowing for close and permanent consultation between themselves and the political West. The whole arrangement was to be enshrined in a Mutual Security Treaty and this strategic partnership would be paralleled in the economic sphere. There would be close co-operation in trade, all the way from the Atlantic to Vladivostok, between Russia, the countries of the former Soviet bloc and the European Union. The entire project was designed to create a 'Greater Europe', with Ankara, Brussels and Moscow as the key centres. Russia would therefore remain a great power in a multi-polar world characterised by politically and economically diverse regimes. It would be committed to working with other states in the United Nations on environmental protection throughout the globe, on the fight against climate change, and on the eradication of poverty and disease. Sakwa names the philosophy and discourse underpinning this project 'sovereign internationalism', or the 'Charter international system', its roots being located in the most important features of the UN Charter as agreed between the victorious powers in 1945. Commitment to these principles meant support for the UN and, as Sakwa writes, 'its associated body of international law, norms and practices' focused on national sovereignty, self-determination and human rights, with conflicts between nations to be peacefully resolved via co-operation between the great powers in the UN Security Council – a contemporary version of the nineteenth century 'Concert of Europe'.

Liberal Internationalism

Set against this was the West's vision of the international scene after the conclusion of the first Cold War. The philosophy and discourse underpinning it is called 'liberal internationalism' by Sakwa. It owes much to the Victorian liberalism of Richard Cobden and the American version of this promulgated by Woodrow Wilson.² This model was, however, refined by the thesis of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*,³ which famously argued that, with the end of the Cold War, humanity's long era of struggles over what form

² Discussed in my 'Historical Notes on the Four Freedoms' in this edition of *Lobster*.

³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

of ideological, political and economic regime was best for society had come to an end. It was a full stop, following which a new age would come, marked by the 'universalization of the Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.⁴ The Soviet Union's repudiation of Marxist-Leninism under Gorbachev, followed by its dissolution in 1991, appeared to demonstrate that the project of liberal internationalism – namely the creation of a global political and economic order of states all committed to self-determination, liberal democracy, open markets and free trade – was an idea whose time had come. US President George Bush announced that these were to be the principles underpinning what he called 'a new world order'. However, this was not to be based on the resolution of international disputes through co-operation between the members of the United Nations Security Council (though that would be acceptable to the USA, as long as they were all of the same mind as Washington). Instead it was to be founded on commitment to a 'rules-based international order', in which universality trumped regional blocs and balance of power arrangements. The principle of national freedom of choice eclipsed indivisibility of security, so that states would have the right to join the strategic pact of their choosing, regardless of the impact this decision might make on neighbouring powers. The legitimacy of regional, national, political and economic diversity across the globe had been a principle that was baked into the original UN Charter. But it was now overridden by the requirement that all countries embrace liberal capitalism and western-style models of representative democracy. Gorbachev's idea of greater Europe gave way to Bush's 'Europe whole and free', in which the institutions and politico-economic principles of the post-war Atlantic Alliance – NATO, the EU and free markets – were to be generalised across the continent. For Europe and the wider world, this was a new order based on what Sakwa calls the 'great substitution', with the USA – backed by the EU and an increasingly global NATO – replacing the UN in attempting to resolve international crises. This process started with the Serbian intervention of 1999 and then extended to Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), Syria (2012) as well as to Asia and the Pacific in a show of strength against China.

The second Cold War

Sakwa argues that there was no engagement between 'sovereign internationalism' and 'liberal internationalism'. The USA regarded itself as the victor in the Cold War. Russia, the designated and internationally recognised successor to the USSR when it came to the nuclear deterrent and membership

⁴ This sentence appears not in the book but in the article upon which the book was based: Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), p. 4.

of all international organisations, was regarded and treated as a defeated power. Its economic and social collapse during the 1990s, which was brought on by a disastrous experiment with free market capitalism, encouraged by the West, led Western governments to regard Russia as possessing no serious influence and as presenting no military threat. As a result, Western influence steadily expanded eastwards in Europe as the former Soviet bloc states embraced capitalism and joined both the EU and NATO. Verbal commitments given to Gorbachev in 1989 and 1990 that NATO would not approach the Russian border, were conveniently forgotten. Moscow's warnings about this, notably its repeated comments that Ukraine's integration into NATO was a 'red line', were ignored.

This grim process led to the breakdown of co-operation between Russia and the West in Europe; and a proxy war – a second Cold War – developed, sparking the globalisation of tensions between Russia and the West. This has now turned hot in Ukraine – with potentially catastrophic consequences for us all.

The second Cold War shares some of the features of the first, notably political and ideological confrontation between Russia and the West, led by the USA. But it is, in fact, different from the first because it is not occurring in the bipolar conditions of Soviet-American rivalry which applied after 1945. Sakwa points out that what marks the current era as different is, first, the arrival on the scene of China as a great economic power in its own right. China's growing military strength and diplomatic influence – throughout not just Asia but in Africa and Latin America – has allowed it to develop closer relations with the 'Global South', whose emergence is the second new feature. These closer relations are founded on its willingness to avoid linking substantial trade and aid initiatives to any preconditions about the kind of political economy recipients should adopt (unlike the USA).⁵

These countries, many of them former colonies of the Western powers, take a non-aligned position regarding the new Cold War. They are creating their own international organisations, sometimes joining with Russia and China in the process. The second Cold War is occurring against the background of an emerging global political and economic order which, for all the efforts of

⁵ See for example Jude Woodward, *The US and China: Asia's new Cold War?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 51-7 and 241-3; Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order: Second Edition* (London: Penguin 2012) and Nancy Qian, 'The Case for Chinese Foreign Aid', *Project Syndicate: the World's Opinion Page*, 8 November 2021, at <<https://shorturl.at/owGM7>> or <<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/economic-benefits-of-chinese-foreign-aid-by-nancy-qian-1-2021-11>>.

Washington and the political West to promote liberal universalism, is becoming multi-polar and diverse and slipping away from the grip of US hegemony.

The lost opportunity

Sakwa's argument is at odds with received wisdom in the political West (to use his term), which attributes most responsibility for the coming of a second Cold War and the explosion of conflict in Ukraine to Russia.⁶ It is, nevertheless, rather more solidly backed by the evidence of the historical record than many Western approaches. First of all, there can be no doubt that by pursuing its own agenda for a new order, and dismissing the diplomatic initiatives launched by Russian leaders from Yeltsin to Putin in an attempt to revive Gorbachev's wider Europe, the political West passed up a historic opportunity to create lasting peace in Europe. These offers, and their serial rejection by the political West, along with the relentless expansion of NATO to the Russian border in the face of Moscow's constant protests and warnings, are all on the record. Sakwa's account of this process is grounded in the facts and it makes for extraordinarily depressing reading. This is especially true given the enormous hopes which grew in the hearts of millions across the European continent at the end of the 1980s. For the disastrous sequence of events after 2000, starting with the chilling of relations between Russia and the West and leading to the outbreak of war over Ukraine, he points the finger of responsibility at the USA and the political West – and he is right. He has no illusions about the *bona fides* of Putin's regime, notes how repressive and ugly Russia has turned over the last two decades, and rightly points out that Moscow's professions of faith in the principles of the UN Charter do not look very convincing in the light of its actions in Ukraine (not to mention its treatment of Putin's political opponents). All the same he makes a convincing case that the West's liberal universalism, an absolutist ideology riding roughshod over the real differences and fractures between countries and regions produced by history, is responsible for the current crisis, one that he feels could well go all the way to nuclear war.

What the Charter says

Secondly, Sakwa's analysis of the two key discourses respectively informing

⁶ See for example the very recent document produced by the Council of the European Union, 'EU response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine', 21 March 2024, at <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/>>; or Peter Dickinson, 'Putin admits Ukraine invasion is an imperial war to "return" Russian land', *Ukraine Alert*, 10 June 2022, at <<https://shorturl.at/gGIRT>> or <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-admits-ukraine-invasion-is-an-imperial-war-to-return-russian-land/>>. The author states that 'Putin has launched the largest European conflict since WWII for the simple reason that he wants to conquer Ukraine. Inspired by the czars of old, Putin aims to crush his neighbor and incorporate it into a new Russian Empire'.

post 1989 Western and Russian diplomacy, namely liberal internationalism and sovereign internationalism along with support for the Charter International system, is accurate. The victorious powers of World War Two, whose efforts were essential to the creation of the United Nations, recognised that the organization would never succeed in its core mission of promoting national self-determination and the peaceful resolution of international disputes unless its structure, constitution and *modus operandi* reflected the existing realities of power in the world. This was achieved via the establishment of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC was built on a fusion between liberalism and realism which amounted to a recognition that global stability required co-operation between the great powers, that these powers had their own national interests and regional spheres of political and economic influence, and that each one had the right to veto any initiative deemed threatening to these arrangements. Moreover, the UN Charter nowhere mentions any requirement that member states be liberal democracies or commit themselves to free market capitalism.

The Charter does, however, make several important statements. It express the determination of 'we, the peoples of the United Nations', to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small. It establishes conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. Finally, one thing it actually stipulates, is that members 'practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours'. These are the values which qualify states for membership of the UN. There is no indication in the Charter that a peaceful and just global order requires international uniformity of regimes. On the other hand there is an acceptance of diversity, in size of populations and in the political, cultural and ideological arrangements within which countries exist. The sovereign internationalism advocated by Russia and China does not always reflect the conduct of these states, especially of Russia, of course. But there is no doubt that both it and the international initiatives launched by Moscow from the time of Gorbachev to the era of Putin, are rooted in the philosophy and constitution of the UN.

The Open Door and unipolarity

By contrast, the political West's universal liberal internationalism does not reflect the spirit of the UN Charter. Successive US governments from the 1890s onwards, backed by vociferous business lobbies and (sometimes) missionary organizations, have taken up the cause of a global order based on the principle of the 'Open Door', namely equal access for all nations to the world's markets and raw materials. In practice this has meant Washington's support for the

international expansion of American capitalism. Only in the period from the 1930s until the 1970s was this process somewhat muted, thanks to a balance of political forces in the USA. This was characterised by the hegemony of Keynesian economics and by the existence of a strong, well organised labour movement committed to backing the New Deal and its successor programmes – Truman’s Fair Deal, Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society. This historic moment ended with the election of Ronald Reagan to the White House, with the backing of banks and corporations concerned about falling profitability, ‘big government’ and (what they saw as) high taxation and over mighty unions. The administration responded positively to this lobbying and set about promoting deregulation at home and overseas. It worked for the removal of barriers to the free flow of trade and money across the globe, often making the dismantling of controls designed to assist national development a condition of American support for assistance to Third World states by the IMF and the World Bank. This turn to what became known as ‘neoliberalism’ by Washington in the 1980s, provided a powerful material basis for its commitment to liberal internationalism. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR opened up a vast new areas for commercial expansion; and reinforced an ideological conviction in the US establishment that there was no better politico-economic order for the world than one based on the open door and free market capitalism. Now its time seemed to have come. With the disappearance of the USSR, the moment of US unipolarity had arrived. Moscow’s model for the new world order may have been truer to the spirit and the letter of the UN, but history and power appeared to be with the American effort to remake the globe in its own image.

A New Global Order?

Thirdly, the evidence supports Sakwa’s claim that a new international order is evolving. There are a growing number of new industrialised and developing states working together outside the post-1945 framework of organizations established by the USA and its Western allies. They regard the ‘rules-based’ order as being hypocritical and arbitrary, usually being invoked (with disastrous consequences) to promote Western interests. Instead, like China and Russia, these other nations advocate the principles of the UN Charter and sovereign internationalism. An example of this is the action of South Africa in bringing a charge of genocide against Israel to the International Court of Justice over its invasion of, and conduct in, Gaza.

There is no question that, as Sakwa argues, the nations of the ‘Global South’ are building new multilateral organizations. Examples are the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa group (BRICS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the

New Development Bank (NDB). These new international agencies exist to facilitate political, economic and cultural collaboration (ASEAN), mutual security and regional development (SCO) and international financial co-operation (NDB, founded in 2017). They operate independently of bodies such as the IMF and World Bank, which are seen as tools of Western liberal capitalism and multinational corporate interests. All provide poles of attraction for a growing number of post-colonial and non-aligned countries. The SCO, for example, established in 2001, was originally composed simply of China and Russia and aimed at the construction of a strategic alliance between the two states. Now its objectives are more ambitious, including the construction of a 'new political and economic order'. Its membership has grown to include India, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia have observer status, and 'dialogue partners' include Turkey (an arrangement which may well have assisted in Ankara's mediation efforts during the course of the current Russo-Ukrainian war), Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Qatar and Sri Lanka.⁷ By 2024 the SCO's members, observers and 'dialogue partners' embraced half of the world's population.

A network of international alliances and organizations, parallel to the Western order constructed after 1945, is being created. There may well be many major issues which keep the members of this emerging order at odds with each other (as between, for example, India and Pakistan and Armenia and Azerbaijan) but one thing they have in common is a desire not to live in the shadow of American hegemony. They also want to shake off the continuing influence of a Western dominance stretching back to the end of the fifteenth century – what the Indian historian K. M. Panikkar called 'the Vasco da Gama epoch of world history'.⁸ They are, increasingly, acting independently of the West. They have not joined in applying drastic economic sanctions to Russia. They are not interested in the conflict in Ukraine, which they see as Europe's war and not their concern. As Sakwa argues, the geopolitical configuration of the world is developing beyond Western control.

And finally....

Reading this book provokes one concluding observation: how badly we in the UK are served by our news media. Both our broadcast and print organizations have tended to cover the Ukraine conflict in crude black and white terms, with

⁷ Sakwa, *The Lost Peace*, pp. 307-9.

⁸ K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: Allen Lane, 1953).

very little analysis of the history behind it.⁹ Many readers of this book will be surprised by what they find. The depiction of what lies behind the Ukraine war will not be familiar, any more than Sakwa's argument that the world is changing fast, not least in its geopolitical configuration, with its balance starting to tilt away from the West. There will be consequences for all of us over time – but how many people are aware of this? The BBC obsesses over political issues on the most superficial level, 'feel-good stories', and parochial trivia. What goes on elsewhere on the planet scarcely gets a mention, with Ukraine and Gaza frequently falling under the radar – unless you watch BBC World News. The other domestic channels, particularly ITV and Sky, are not much better, although Channel 4 News sometimes does a respectable job. Overall, however, it has become increasingly clear, to this reviewer at any rate, that if anyone wants to know what is really happening on this planet, the best place to start is with Al Jazeera.

The BBC's functions, as outlined in its Charter, include informing and educating the public. It does very little of either these days, at least on television. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised, given the revolving door between the BBC News and Current Affairs department and the Conservative Party.¹⁰

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⁹ I tried to cover some of these issues in my, 'Historical Notes on the War in Ukraine', *Lobster* 83 (2022) at <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/83/historical-notes-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁰ Alan Rusbridger, 'How the Government captured the BBC', *Prospect*, 24 January 2024, at <https://shorturl.at/ijwCR> or <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/media/64534/how-the-government-captured-the-bbc>