



## Book Review

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

David E. Sanger with Mary K. Brooks,  
New York: Crown, 2024

Reviewed by: Paul Sigler

The dust jacket of *New Cold Wars* draws the reader in by recounting a point in October 2022 when President Biden warned a group of supporters about Russian threats to use of a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. The event itself came at the height of the first Ukrainian counteroffensive against demoralized Russian forces in the Kherson region. Biden's concern was that once the Ukrainians crossed the Dneiper River and directly threatened to cut off the land bridge to Crimea, Russia—facing a strategic reversal—might choose to escalate to nuclear employment.<sup>1</sup>

The vignette—designed to attract both eyeballs and book sales with its sweeping references to both the Cuban Missile Crisis and Armageddon—might leave the casual browser with a perception that Sanger and Brooks are writing about a return to a bygone age of bipolar brinksmanship in which the future of the world rested on the edge of a knife.

The pages of the book tell a very different story. This is a contemporary history of the closing of the post-Cold War era, and the dawn of a global order more complex, more chaotic, and certainly more uncertain than the Cold War had been at its zenith. In this telling, bipolar competition has evolved into multipolarity; globalized commercial interests straddle international conflicts wielding capabilities once confined to nation states; and a fractured, Balkanized information dimension confounds traditional attempts by Western nations to control strategic messaging.

Like the famous three-body problem in Newtonian physics, the strategic triangle between the West, Russia, and China is fundamentally chaotic, meaning

that it may be occasionally modeled, but never solved with any level of precision. This is especially true when cast upon an increasingly globalized economy and a transparent, raucous information dimension. Despite the persistent failure of efforts to bring both countries into the Western rules-based order, policymakers across much of the last two decades continued to pursue engagement with both nations—right up until the time when “the cognitive dissonance between the future we expected and the reality we confronted” finally forced a shift in the West's strategic approach.<sup>2</sup>

Sanger's time as a White House and national security correspondent across the administrations of five Presidents allows him to explore U.S. policies toward both Russia and China across a broad arc of time and with detailed first-hand accounts from high-ranking diplomats, defense and intelligence officials, members of the national security council, and from interviews with the Presidents themselves. While many insider accounts tend to traffic on their access within a particular administration to grab headlines, Sanger and Brooks leverage interviews with a broad cross-section of officials across a thirty-year timespan to paint a picture of policy evolution over time.

Many of these policy decisions have not aged well. To the authors' credit, however, the Clinton and Bush administration overtures toward China that opened the door toward its gradual usurpation of global supply chains and rampant commercial and government cyber theft are treated in the same manner as the Obama administration's “reset” on Russia and its tepid response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In each case, the future each

administration expected was based on a fundamental misapprehension of the core interests of Putin and of the PRC Communist Party leadership.

If there is a villain in this story, it is the stubbornly resilient strategic assumption of China's "peaceful rise" or of Russia's "turn to the West". And if there is a hero, it is the phalanx of national security officials across five administrations attempting desperately to place the West on firm strategic footing despite ever-shifting sands.

The book details numerous occasions where the White House ignored warning signs and overrode policy recommendations that might have steered the West into a stronger position today. No administration escapes unscathed in this telling, but to their credit, Sanger and Brooks take pains to explain the strategic calculus underlying their choices. In the case of the Bush administration, their decisions were colored by preoccupation with military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan combined with a determination—per the National Security Advisor, Steven Hadley—not to be the administration that "lost" the chance to bring China into the international community by being overly aggressive.<sup>3</sup>

For the Obama administration, their envisioned "pivot to Asia" was primarily confined to the military element of national power, and even this half-measure was undercut by a surge of troops in Afghanistan and the rise of ISIS in Iraq. Rampant Chinese cyber thefts and buying sprees in the United States that created vulnerabilities across a range of critical infrastructure were never fully reflected in the administration's dialogue with Chinese officials; efforts by the Pentagon to elevate concerns about the renewal of "great power competition" were quashed by a White House embargo on the term—especially with relation to China.<sup>4</sup> DOD strategic documents from the time spoke in tortured coded language—*Joint Operating Environment 2035*, published in 2016, referred the future threat as "antagonistic geopolitical balancing by capable adversaries".<sup>5</sup> It wasn't until the 2018 National Defense Strategy that the DOD finally began openly referring to the "re-emergence of long-term strategic competition" with revisionist powers.<sup>6</sup>

The first Trump administration, deserving of credit for finally recognizing the gradual undermining of the established international order within its *National*

*Security Strategy*, was slow to address the exponential growth of sophisticated Russian and Chinese influence operations across all corners of the internet and did little to counter growing vulnerabilities to American supply chains and basic infrastructure to coercion and cyberattack.<sup>7</sup> These vulnerabilities became painfully obvious as COVID shut down global supply chains in 2020, and as cyberattacks against the Colonial Pipeline crippled east coast gas supplies in 2021.<sup>8</sup> While neither of these events was directly tied to competition with Russia and China, both exposed the fragility and complexity of a global supply chain within a world where the rules-based order was increasingly under threat.

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Indeed, if one was looking for what separates the *New Cold Wars* from the original, it is not just the fact that there are now three giant gladiators battling it out within the international arena. It is the fact that the arena itself has fundamentally changed. The West is ensconced within a globalized economy, connected by an intricate network of commercially managed data links, awash with immense volumes of information flowing unchecked across borders and continents. Within this edgeless canvas, corporations and individual power brokers exploit seams in the international market to wield capabilities which rival those of the very governments they provide service to.

The bulk of the book focuses on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and on the manner in which that conflict has laid bare the how proxy battles will be fought in this new era. Sanger and Brooks place special emphasis on the tools being wielded by each side.

One of the most compelling contrasts with prior conflicts lies in the ways intelligence was used in advance of the invasion to both shape international attitudes and to grow the resolve of the Western coalition. While the United States had attempted to use intelligence to shape international opinion in the past (the now-creaky presentation from Colin Powell to the UN in advance of Operation Iraqi Freedom comes to mind), what was now different is that the public has access to commercial satellite imagery that it can use to confirm "downgraded" Western intelligence leaks.<sup>9</sup> Over time, a pattern of selecting,

downgrading, and releasing intelligence information has become a critical method of deterring Russian activity, pre-bunking their false-flag messaging, assuring allies, and shoring-up their political will.

Another example of the new complexion of conflicts to come is how StarLink became a critical means of communication for Ukrainian defense forces after their Viasat links were taken down by the Russian GRU in the first hours of the conflict. Notably, Russia was able to accomplish this via a wiper malware attack that destroyed the hard drives of ground links and network nodes rather than through an attack on the satellite constellation itself. By providing 500 StarLink terminals in the early days of the conflict, Elon Musk became the *de facto* network service provider to the Ukrainian military. This gave a private individual the ability to shape a multinational conflict by unilaterally granting or denying the use of StarLink services to support specific operational goals. What it also taught the West, according to Sanger, is that commercially produced mesh of inexpensive satellites could prove more capable and resilient than government-sponsored satellite constellations.<sup>10</sup>

Along the same vein, as described by Sanger and Brooks, the White House became aware of the cyberattack on Viasat and other elements of the Ukrainian government not only via the national security apparatus, but also from the Microsoft chief of trust and safety, whose team detected a large attack from wiper malware targeting government agencies, financial institutions and the energy sector on February 23, 2022, just hours before Russian forces would cross the border. While this was just one of many indicators of the beginning of the war, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan bluntly admitted that Microsoft “could see things that we could not.”<sup>11</sup>

A final example of the increasingly blurred lines between governmental and commercial interests in the new strategic arena comes from the semiconductor industry within Taiwan—a mere 90 miles from the Chinese mainland. Sanger and Brooks conduct a deep dive into how both the United States and China blundered into a situation where both nations are almost entirely dependent on a small number of semiconductor fabrication facilities distributed across the disputed island for almost all of their advanced technology requiring miniaturized computer chips. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) currently makes approximately 90% of the advanced chips used around the world for everything from iPhones to HIMARs and F-35s. Moreover,

the infrastructure that they developed over two decades to manufacture three-nanometer circuits is fully dependent on advanced lithography machines developed by a company named ASML headquartered in the sleepy Dutch suburb of Veldhoven. Two companies thus stood together astride the global semiconductor industry like a colossus. If written into the plot of a James Bond movie, the critics would have panned the idea as too fantastic to believe.<sup>12</sup>

In the realm of the *New Cold Wars*, decision-makers are left wondering how to craft industrial policies that reduce the crippling reliance on Taiwanese semiconductors while also recognizing that China's shared reliance upon them might be a major factor deterring an armed attempt at unification—an attempt that would almost certainly destroy the very chips that China itself is reliant on to modernize its military.

Two concerns immediately come to light. First, this “Silicon Shield” exists only while China remains unable to manufacture its own advanced chips. Second, while it serves as a deterrent to Chinese aggression, it also highlights a vulnerability for U.S. defense industries who are just as dependent on TSMC (and ASML by extension) as China is.

These are the contours of the wickedly complex global security environment painted by Sanger and Brooks. Deterring an invasion of Taiwan requires use of Chinese reliance on Taiwanese chips to forestall invasion, thus gaining the time required to build U.S. chip manufacturing capability and Taiwanese defense capabilities. Meanwhile, establishment of export control regimes that block Chinese access to advanced lithography machines might marginally extend its Taiwanese dependence. Finally, shoring up Western sanctions on Russia and strengthening U.S. partnerships in the region threatens China with certain economic ruin in the event of an invasion.

Simple enough.

All told, the dust jacket of the book is deceiving. This is not a book about nuclear threats, or about strategic deterrence. It is about strategic adaptation, and how hard that is to accomplish in a nation where administrations change, and attention spans are short. The book makes no predictions about how any of this will end. But it does an outstanding job of explaining how it has begun. For that reason alone, it is well worth a read. ■

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## Notes

1. David E. Sanger with Mary K. Brooks, *New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West*, (New York: Crown, 2024), 296-297.

2. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 20.

3. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 65.

4. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 74.

5. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World*, 2016, iii, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joe\\_2035\\_july16.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joe_2035_july16.pdf).

6. U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

7. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 344-345.

8. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 150-153.

9. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 218-219.

10. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 398.

11. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 13.

12. Sanger, *New Cold Wars*, 320-341.