

What makes Cold War II different from the previous one?

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Richard Sakwa, *The Culture of the Second Cold War*, Anthem Press, London and New York, 2025.

Few international relations researchers would dispute that the world has, for some time now, been in the midst of a new cold war, with the U.S.-led Political West on one side and Putin's Russia—and increasingly China—the other. In his latest book, Richard Sakwa builds upon his extensive body of work, picking up where his previous book (Sakwa 2023) left off. While the earlier volume examined the question of responsibility for the Second Cold War, the new one proceeds into analyzing its distinctive culture—characterized by an extreme polarization, “unprecedented outside of wartime”—that distinguishes it from its predecessor (Sakwa 2025, 5–6). Sakwa reiterates many of the key arguments he has put forth before, but—as always—demonstrates his skill in refining and rearticulating them, introducing new terms and conceptual distinctions along the way. The book arrives at the critical moment. Although Sakwa only sporadically references the second Trump administration (the manuscript was evidently completed before the most recent U.S. elections), his insights take on even greater significance amid the transition in the White House. Moreover, the book's concise format (fewer than 200 pages) allows readers to absorb its arguments quickly, keeping pace with the profound shifts in international politics.

Sakwa (2025, 3) argues that the world has “sleepwalked” into a new cold war. This suggests that the so-called “cold peace” phase between the two cold wars was merely a brief interlude—a short “nap” before reawakening to renewed confrontation between the (in the meantime expanded) U.S.-led Political West and its Eastern alternatives, for which Sakwa (2025, 49–52) introduces a new term: Political East. As in his previous book, he sees an exit from this cold war dynamic in the existing framework of international law, i.e., a revival of the UN Charter-based system established back in 1945. Before such a resolution could be realized, a thorough analysis of the specific culture of Cold War II is needed. Analyzing Cold War II to transcend it is exactly the purpose to which Sakwa (2025, 159) dedicates

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the book. Although this culture rests upon the same fundamental “Manichean clash” of world orders outlined in his previous work—between Western “democratic internationalism” and Eastern “sovereign internationalism”—the author now offers a more detailed exploration of its defining features.

One of these features is militarism, evident in inflated military budgets, eroding concept of neutrality, and a definition of national security as preparing for war rather than maintaining peace, without the constraints to the use of force which were in place during Cold War I (Sakwa 2025, 60–65). Another is the suppression of dissent within the blocs, but—absent a clear ideological divide—on much blurrier terms (Sakwa 2025, 65–69). Then, there is the phenomenon of “hermeticism”, defined as “inability to process information, views and perspectives coming from outside the system”, whether from the other side, or from those seeking to understand it (Sakwa 2025, 74–75). Next, there is “anti-diplomacy”—a complete demise of dialogue based on the respect for the sovereignty of others (Sakwa 2025, 75–81). Within this feature there is “democratism”, or “the instrumental deployment of values in pursuit of geopolitical goals” as the ultimate outcome of Western democratic internationalism (Sakwa 2025, 80). Finally, there is the widespread use of economic sanctions. Intended as an alternative to war, they have increasingly replaced diplomacy itself, undermining the liberal order they intend to protect (Sakwa 2025, 83–91).

A dedicated chapter of the book explores the issue of “communicative conflicts”, highlighting miscommunication as one of defining characteristics of Cold War II. According to Sakwa (2025, 99–100) and the scholars he cites, the adversaries are unable to understand each other’s logic, or view their conflict from a more holistic perspective. Not only are “culture wars” waged between societies, but also within them, with “cancel culture” or “woke wars” as the most prominent examples in the United States (Sakwa 2025, 100–101). Externally, “the enemy is no longer an ideology (communism) bound up in a state (the Soviet Union), but states (Russia, China and some others) opposing the hegemony of the West” (Sakwa 2025, 102). Sakwa (2025, 115–126) extensively writes about the “censorship-industrial complex” in the West, detailing the various actors—from media to think tanks—responsible for the “anti-disinformation campaign” against Russia.

Although much of the book, as in his previous works, focuses on Russia as the West’s primary rival in Cold War II, Sakwa (2025, 9) does not overlook China, which, as he puts it, “came late to the Cold War II party”. Furthermore, unlike in Cold War I, where China played “a relatively small part”, the Beijing-Washington clash “ultimately became the main line of division in Cold War II” (Sakwa 2025, 10). Like Russia, China is seen as a “neo-revisionist” power—one that challenges Western hegemonic practices while simultaneously upholding the UN Charter-based system

and promoting its own “win-win” agenda for “positive peace”, a “community for common destiny” (Sakwa 2025, 38–41).

This is Sakwa’s second book since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War in which he has maintained his position that the Political West’s bears primary responsibility for Cold War II. While he does analyze Russia’s actions within the framework of the aforementioned features, his perspective remains heavily skewed toward understanding Moscow’s behavior while attributing much of the causes of the conflict to the West. A key example of this bias is his failure to adequately address Russia’s own imperialist ambitions toward Ukraine, as if Putin’s 2022 invasion was merely a reaction to Western policies and Ukrainian nationalism. Although Sakwa (2025, 10) is correct in stating that the invasion was “far from unprovoked”, unlike in one of his earlier works (Sakwa 2014), he does not offer a deeper historical analysis of the conflict that might explain Russia’s longstanding obsession with controlling Ukraine. Also, one of the most authoritative studies on the subject (Plokhyy 2015), which Sakwa (2023) cited in his previous book, is absent from this volume’s bibliography. The only real acknowledgement of Russia’s imperial aspirations comes when he concedes that “Russia presented the war as an existential struggle for security, but also for civilisational identity and traditional ties between the Eastern Slavic peoples and the Russian Orthodox communality, broadly defined as the *Russkii mir*” (Sakwa 2025, 131), yet he places this on equal footing with the “ontological insecurities” of the two remaining parties to the conflict (as he sees them): the Political West and Ukrainian nationalists.

Furthermore, Sakwa appears overly optimistic about both the alignment of Russia/China policies and the UN Charter system and the potential of this system itself to resolve the current Cold War edition. It is quite difficult to reconcile Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and Chinese actions in the South China Sea with Sakwa’s (2025, 155) assertion that these two states are “conservative status quo powers” that “defend Charter principles” and that “the emergence of a Political East does not threaten the Charter International System but strengthens it”. While he is highly critical of the U.S. concept of a “rules-based order” as an alternative to UN-based international law, Sakwa overlooks the fact that China’s “community for common destiny” serves as Beijing’s own alternative for “completing” international law, and fails to acknowledge that Moscow has put forward its own alternative in the shape of “genuine multilateralism”, which seeks to reinterpret international law to justify Russia’s claimed “right” to a sphere of influence and its desired global standing (Trapara and Jović-Lazić 2024, 164–168). The reality is that nearly every major international actor advances its own alternative to the UN Charter-based system in theory while violating international law in practice. This widespread

dissatisfaction underscores the need for reform—one that takes into account the diverse visions and interests of all actors (Trapara and Jović-Lazić 2024, 169–172).

Despite these critiques and the suggestion that Sakwa should try to revisit some of his arguments in future works in order to present more convincing ways of resolving the Second Cold War, it is beyond doubt that this book can be considered a valuable addition to his bibliography. It is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the current West-East political divide and, by extension, the broader landscape of contemporary international relations.

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