

THEME SECTION INTRODUCTION

“The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: Now is the time of monsters.” This famous quote by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci seems apt in describing the critical juncture faced by today's world. The markers of the old, post-Cold War order are eroding across multiple dimensions. The United States achieved unipolarity after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, but U.S. supremacy is rapidly ceding ground to a more complex multipolar world. Regional powers like China, India, and a resurgent Russia are creating alternative international groupings, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, to challenge Western-led norms and institutions. The “rules-based” international order is under tremendous strain, proving toothless in restraining great power politics. The economic pillars of the Western liberal order are also under duress, with the United States, its primary architect, turning its back on globalisation with punishing tariffs. Meanwhile, democracy, once seen as an ascendant political model, is under attack from both the left and right, primarily due to its perceived inability to address economic dislocation and rising inequality.

While the decay of the old order is evident, a distinct new order has yet to emerge. With a history of excellence in regional studies and social science, St. Antony's College—the home of this journal for twenty years—has long contributed to envisioning the future of the international order. In St. Antony's College's inaugural Margaret MacMillan North American lecture, Richard Haass, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, outlined several possibilities for how Gramscian “monsters” would jostle in a world beyond Pax Americana. These included a U.S. attempt to restore its primacy, the transition of global leadership to another power, the division of the world into spheres of influence, or descent into chaos and disorder. These possibilities offer much to consider as we anticipate and shape the new world we are entering.

Still, scholars struggle to define and agree on precise analytical categories to summarise these concurrent dynamics. Among the labels applied, the “New Cold War” framing has been invoked so frequently that it has its own Wikipedia page. Its most recent rendition refers to the increasingly contentious relationship between the United States and

China. This pairing parallels certain dynamics during the Cold War: two superpowers have deep disagreements over economic order, international security, and political system, but their sizeable nuclear arsenals prevent them from engaging in a direct military conflict. While the historical comparison has obvious deficiencies—such as its failure to capture today's complex interdependence in the global economy—it is a good starting point for making the present moment somewhat tractable. The theme of this issue, *The New Cold War?*, was designed to help organise debates about the current geopolitical moment around a common, albeit contested, set of analytic tools developed from a critical period of world history. Recognising that this framing is in no way perfect or uncontested, we have chosen to add a question mark to this issue's title to avoid asserting this reality and to invite a genuine debate on whether a contemporary cold war is in fact happening.

The research articles in this issue capture different dynamics of this emerging geopolitical reality, covering nuclear stability, technological competition, trade, ideology, and maritime security. To varying degrees, they adopt the “New Cold War” analogy while contending with its benefits and limitations. Linda van der Horst and Qiyang Niu argue that traditional and reformist strategic stability frameworks are no longer adequate in today's new geopolitical climate. The former, rooted in a bipolar context, fails to account for today's multipolar dynamics, while the latter overcorrects by focusing too heavily on non-traditional threats. Compounding these theoretical issues, the erosion of arms control agreements and the rise of disruptive technologies have rendered old approaches untenable. Van der Horst and Niu take a pragmatic approach to managing strategic stability, proposing that practitioners focus on factors like timing, dialogue formats, sequencing, diplomatic orchestration, and inclusivity. In taking this practitioner's perspective, their contribution paves the way for a new generation of great-power arms control.

As van der Horst and Niu allude to, the rise of new technologies has become a major vector of instability in today's age. In particular, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a focal point of U.S.-China competition, especially after Chinese developer DeepSeek released large-language models with capabilities rivalling those of U.S. counterparts earlier this year. Richard Heeks and Yujia He's contribution tackles head-on the role of AI in shaping today's geopolitical order. They organise the scholarly discourse on global AI development into two broad camps. On the one hand, affirmative uses of the “AI Cold War” framing are driven primarily by an understanding of AI innovation as indispensable to national security. On the other hand, opponents of the “AI Cold War” narrative warn that the framing is exploited by tech and defence firms to discourage government AI regulations, reinforce militarisation dynamics, and undermine international research and regulatory cooperation. To overcome the deficiencies underscored by critics, future research, Heeks and He argue, should extend beyond the binary U.S.-China framing, devoting more attention instead to the AI development strategies of third-party countries, including those from the Global South.

This critical review of the “AI Cold War” literature reminds us that just as the Cold War was never only about the US and the Soviet Union, today's emerging world order also involves third countries trying to secure their own interests amidst competing

demands from the two superpowers. Based on this crucial insight, Daniel Thumpston approaches understanding the U.S.-China cold war from the European Union's (EU) perspective. He argues that the "strategic triangle" concept can illuminate the logic of interaction between the US, China, and the EU. The US-Japan-EU Trilateral Meeting of Trade Ministers (TMTM) and the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) are best understood as efforts to bind the US and EU together in their common strategy to counter China's strengths in global trade. Crucially, the EU was not simply bandwagoning with the US's preferred policies; it has developed a sophisticated strategy to hedge against a potentially unreliable transatlantic partner and retain avenues of economic cooperation with China.

In addition to third-country agency, ideology is another salient dimension of today's geopolitics that deserves further research. Observers may assume that the current U.S.-China dynamic, even if framed as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism, lacks the same universal, ideological grandeur of the first Cold War. Mark Juergensmeyer's insightful contribution challenges this assumption by highlighting that the conflict is not a retreat from ideology, but a shift in its nature. As he notes, the liberal order is founded on "secular nationalism," a political model that separates state and religion. The rise of "religious nationalism"—which uses religious worldviews to anchor the modern nation-state—represents a direct challenge to this foundation. If the new Cold War is a contest between autocracy and democracy, then religious nationalism "plays a significant role in buttressing the power and providing the mobilising force of dictatorial regimes in the emerging global conflict of the present." This is seen in Vladimir Putin's reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in Iran. The influence of religious nationalism is even felt within democracies, with Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism in India and Donald Trump's strong support from U.S. evangelical protestants challenging the centrality of secular democracy to a modern state.

Maritime security is a highly contested theatre in today's fraught geopolitics. China's naval expansion and increasing assertiveness in maritime affairs threaten to challenge US primacy as a Pacific power. Much of the conversation around the motivations behind Beijing's build-up relies on two common theories: threat environment theory and economic security. In his contribution, Owen Au complements these theories by utilising the concept of "naval nationalism:" the use of naval power not just for deterrence or trade protection, but as a tool for domestic legitimacy and nationalist identity. Au argues that while threat-based and economic theories capture important elements of China's motivations, they fail to appreciate the symbolic and political weight that Beijing assigns to its navy. Au's discussion provides a powerful lens for understanding how China envisions its place in the world and how it seeks to assert that vision in the maritime domain.

Alongside the peer-reviewed articles, our Interview section adds greater depth to the issue's theme. In the Interview section, we are grateful to Professor Barry Buzan and Professor Jennifer Lind for their thoughts on today's international order. Whereas Professor Lind favours viewing today's world through the lens of polarity rather than the Cold War analogy, Professor Buzan believes there is value in applying the "cold war"

as a general concept. Professor Buzan's discussion of the English school perspective—arguing that the main story today is not U.S.-China power transition, but “the end of the Western-led world order and the emergence of a second round of modernity”—provides a useful corrective to the fixation on great power competition prevalent in academia and the media.

Last but not least, we are immensely honoured to publish an address by the Honourable Dr. Kevin Rudd on the 20th Anniversary of the Department of Area Studies at the University of Oxford. A former Australian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and diplomat, Dr. Rudd provides a compelling analysis of how the academic study of international affairs can be harnessed for both its descriptive and prescriptive value. He argues that area studies is the “natural academic bedfellow” of foreign policy practitioners, helping them understand how other nations view the world by synthesising insights about a country's geography, history, culture, and political systems, as well as the domestic agendas of its leaders. Dr. Rudd then demonstrates how this discipline offers insights into Xi Jinping's worldview and actions, and consequently, the trajectory of U.S.-China relations. Highlighting the promise of education and learning, Dr. Rudd inspires our confidence in navigating what he calls a “decade of living dangerously.”

While the articles and essays in this issue do not offer a conclusive statement on how to characterise this emerging international order, it is our sincere hope that they will contribute to the ongoing debates and continue the tradition of St. Antony's College of not just engaging in scholarly analysis of the past and present, but also in actively shaping our understanding of the future. We hope you will find it illuminating.

Brian Kot and Noah Smith

Managing and Theme Section Editors