

BARRY BUZAN

Interview by Brian Kot

In February, STAIR's Managing Editor spoke with Barry Buzan, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the LSE; honorary professor at Copenhagen, Jilin, and China Foreign Affairs Universities; a Senior Fellow at LSE Ideas; and a Fellow of the British Academy. A leading figure in international relations for several decades, Professor Buzan has shaped debates across Global IR, the English School, and the Copenhagen School. This issue's theme was partly inspired by his March 2024 International Politics article, "A New Cold War? The Case for a General Concept," in which he argues that today's international system can be meaningfully analysed through the lens of cold wars. This interview delves deeper into those arguments and reflects Buzan's broader interest in global order, civilisational dynamics, and conceptual innovation in IR theory. Read alongside the interview with Professor Jennifer Lind in this issue, Professor Buzan challenges the view that the Cold War was a unique historical case that defies comparison, arguing instead that contemporary international politics can be meaningfully analyzed through the general concept of cold war. This conversation was edited for clarity.

Can you tell us more about the background for your International Politics article? What motivated you to write the piece, and why did you think 2024 was the right moment to write it?

I was at a workshop in Princeton discussing a whole range of current affairs. I used the phrase "Second Cold War" in my remarks and immediately got pushback from historically minded scholars like Arne Westad, which surprised me. I hadn't thought it was controversial.

That triggered my interest, and I thought I needed to make a case for the term because a lot of people, mainly historians, don't like it. They tend to reject it because today's world doesn't resemble the first Cold War exactly. This struck me as, frankly, a poor way to think about historical comparisons because historical events are never identical. So I started asking How can we approach this conceptually? To make the term useful analytically, I realised we had to give it theoretical grounding.

My starting point was the phrase itself, cold war. The obvious opposite is hot war. This means we can split the category of war into two types. It's not peace—not cold peace or warm peace—but a distinct type of war. That was the basis for the article I ended up writing. I initially submitted it to International Affairs, thinking it was a good fit—some theory, some current relevance, useful for policymakers. But they almost desk-rejected it; I got a couple of very brief, negative reviews. My argument had a more receptive audience at International Politics, and that's how the piece came to be.

What were some of the major criticisms against your argument, and what would be your counterargument?

I haven't seen any direct criticisms of the article. It hasn't been out very long, so there hasn't been much time for people to engage with it deeply. It has had some acknowledgment, especially in discussions about the Cold War that have come out since. But ultimately, I think the disagreement comes down to perspective. Some people insist that any discussion of cold war has to start with the original Cold War as the reference point. So they focus on whether there's ideological competition, economic interdependence or separation, and all the other hallmarks of the First Cold War. And sure, you can take that approach—but to me, it's a dead end. If you peg a concept too tightly to one historical case, you remove it from theoretical analysis altogether.

What are the analytical benefits of making cold war a general concept?

Any conceptual framework aims to create general categories that let us compare things based on shared conditions. Then you have a choice do you subdivide those categories? In this case, the choice is whether to distinguish between hot and cold wars. I think we should because there's a historical boundary, specifically around 1945, after which the fear of great power war created a different kind of conflict. My argument is that the Cold War is a relatively new phenomenon, tied to the advent of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons made all-out great power war irrational because it is too dangerous and too costly. If great powers engage in an all-out war, there's a serious risk that all of the participants will be destroyed. Therefore, whilst we might not have needed to differentiate between hot and cold wars before 1945—because all wars were hot—after 1945 we need to split this category because we're in a different set of global conditions. The old meaning of war is not irrelevant, but no longer sufficient to describe the strategic reality for great powers today.

How does the Second Cold War differ from the first?

Broadly speaking, I think this current Cold War is less dangerous than the first one. The first Cold War was driven by a zero-sum ideological struggle over who would control the world. That dynamic doesn't define today's great power relations. From an English School perspective, you could even say the challenge now is the opposite—that no one wants to take responsibility for the world. As a result, international society is becoming seriously under-managed, especially in the face of pressing collective problems.

Today, the great powers appear to assume a more defensive posture, seeking to secure their own spheres of influence rather than project universal ideologies. There's more of a civilisational tinge to this. You see it most clearly in relation to China. The whole mantra of "Chinese characteristics" is basically saying, China wants to be China and resists universal values peddled by someone else. Russia and others express similar sentiments. This makes today's rivalry less about global domination and more about carving out space for different systems. It is potentially more amenable to negotiation, though not necessarily easy to resolve.

At the same time, this era introduces new challenges. Technologies like cyberspace, which didn't exist in the First Cold War, have created a kind of permanent clashing frontier—open, low-cost, and accessible to many. A distinctive feature of the Second Cold War is “infrastructure war,” in which states attack each other's social or physical infrastructure below the threshold of hot war. This is different from the First Cold War, where such attacks were less common. The danger lies in not knowing how far such actions can go before triggering a hot war response. Still, there are similarities too. Both Cold Wars involve “half proxy wars”, in which one of the principal great powers is fighting against a proxy of the other side. This was the case for Vietnam in the First Cold War, and Ukraine in the current one.

If the Second Cold War is more about regional dominance, how would you respond to characterisations of China as having a vision for the international order? Critics would highlight the Belt and Road initiative and China's participation in the United Nations and other multilateral institutions to reshape some international norms.

We need to take a few steps back because this raises a much bigger framing question: What kind of world are we actually in? I don't see the current moment primarily as a power transition between the United States and China. That dynamic exists, of course, and it's not unimportant, but it's just one small corner of a much larger picture. The main story is the end of the Western-led world order and the emergence of a second round of modernity. The first round of modernity empowered a small group of countries—mostly Western, plus Japan—which ran the global system for about a century largely unchallenged, because no other regions had yet joined the modernization process.

That began to change in the 1970s with the rise of the Asian Tigers, followed by China and India. This shift is transforming the world from a two-century Western-centric order, where a single civilisation dominated others and shaped global institutions in its own image, to something far more decentralized. I would call this emerging reality “deep pluralism,” a world of multiple centers of wealth and power, each grounded in its own cultural and civilisational vision. The Chinese and Indians, for example, both assert—and I tend to believe them—that they have no intention of exporting or imposing their civilisations on others. In fact, many Chinese would argue that Chinese civilisation cannot truly be adopted by outsiders. You're either Chinese or you're not, which is quite different from American civilisation, which says, in principle, anyone can become American.

China, in this view, represents a more self-contained, inward-looking civilisation. Quite reasonably, it wants the international order to reflect its growing weight in terms of wealth, power, and cultural and political authority. But at present, the global system still disproportionately reflects the legacy of the old Western-dominated world order. It is ridiculous that Britain and France have permanent seats on the UN Security Council, but Japan, Germany, and India don't. I'm seeing a transition from a world dominated by a few Western powers to one marked by a much more diffuse and pluralistic distribution of wealth, influence, and authority. That's the game.

This is a really different framing than the predominant discourse of U.S.-China competition and power transition.

Well, the United States and China like the story that it's about them because it flatters them, just like the Soviet Union and the United States liked bipolarity because it flattered them. But it just doesn't represent what's going on. You would expect most American and Chinese academics to be talking about that, because that's what their audience wants to hear. When you're my age, you get a bit cynical about what people say.

A prominent feature of the first Cold War is the division of nations into blocs. To what extent are we seeing the same development, or is a different dynamic at play?

It's a different dynamic in the sense that there's a great deal of resentment about the Western world order and the way the West has dominated affairs and is still hanging on to it, even though it is now in disarray. Its liberal ideology has become discredited in a way similar to communism.

The world today is not divided into two blocs, with a third non-aligned camp, as it was during much of the First Cold War. BRICS is a very interesting coalition, but it is not an alliance, and it's never going to become an alliance or even a bloc because the members have extremely diverse interests. But BRICS is a useful diplomatic device for the Global South—and for China and Russia—to gather a multifaceted coalition to push against the remnants of Western hegemony and world order. In other words, if the West is no longer dominant, nothing else will hold BRICS together. Its members have their own interests, which don't necessarily line up. For instance, India and Brazil are not interested in putting China into a leadership position. China, for its part, does not seem interested in global dominance. It wants to maintain its own cultural and political space and be left alone within that, while maintaining a sufficient degree of international order to trade.

Then you have to factor in Trump, who is accelerating the destruction of what's left of the West. In that sense, he's hastening the shift towards a more multi-civilisational world, where each civilisation maintains its own sphere of influence. Trump is so unpredictable that no one knows how, if at all, his program is going to add up. But the general drift is in that direction, and there certainly seems to be a strong commitment to breaking up the remnants of the Western World Order—the alliance systems, the trading systems, and all of that.

What options do Western nations have? How should they adapt to this new age of deep pluralism and multipolarity?

It's clear that both the United States and Europe are facing a deep crisis. They've been running the show in one form or another for the past two centuries. That era is coming to an end, and they have no realistic prospect of regaining that kind of dominance. That's a big dislocation. For the U.S., this is especially disorienting. America's entire institutional setup—its identity even—has long rested on being the preeminent global power, the so-called “indispensable nation.” But that's no longer going to be the case. Adjusting to that reality is going to be very difficult.

Could the U.S. return to its more isolationist roots? Possibly. We're already seeing signs of that in the Trumpian world. But if he wants to do outlandish things like making Canada the 51st state of America or Gaza an American enclave, then it's hard to know exactly where things are heading. This isn't a settled question.

As for Europe, the question is whether it can recover the capacity to defend itself and find an acceptable boundary with Russia. That's what the Ukraine war is about— a civilisational boundary between the Russian sphere and the European sphere. The stakes are high on both sides. Can Europe come together strongly enough to stand off Russia and absorb at least part of Ukraine into its fold? Maybe. Maybe not. I wouldn't bet heavily either way—it's an extremely difficult and consequential issue.

What is clear, though, is that neither the U.S. nor Europe can continue as they have for the last 75 years. For them, this is very disruptive. Can they reinvent themselves as one amongst equals in a multi-civilisational world order? That would mean not only tolerating but respecting cultural differences—including, say, the preference for more authoritarian systems in some societies.

I'm beginning to sound like the Chinese Foreign Ministry here. But just because they say it doesn't mean it's wrong or lacks merit. Like it or not, I think that's the direction we're headed in. How well different actors adapt to this shift will vary. And if the Chinese ever become arrogant enough to think they can take over the world, they'll pay a big price for that hubris, too. I don't think they'll go that route—but that's just my personal reading of it.

How has your previous thinking, such as securitisation theory, influenced the way you see global dynamics today?

It's the wrong question, in my view. I see securitisation as a constant—it's a fundamental social mechanism. I remain a big believer in securitisation theory, but it was never my theory. It was Ole's. I only helped him develop and promote it. It's one of those big theories that applies to all times and all places. Securitisation is always at play. You can see it in families, in states, in corporations—anywhere you look. So in that sense, it hasn't transformed how I see the world today; it's more like a lens that I always have in mind, wherever I'm looking.

If there was a transformation in how I view world politics, it came earlier in my career. For more than 20 years—really up until the late 1980s or early 1990s—I was enthralled by Waltz, neorealism, polarity theory, and the likes. I was deep in the field of Strategic Studies. I found it appealing that you could use a relatively simple theoretical framing to say big things about the state of the world.

But over time, I became increasingly dissatisfied with that framework. I can't say exactly what caused the shift—it's probably too complex for a clear cause-and-effect answer—but during the 1990s, I was drawn more toward the English School and the idea of international society. Various influences pulled me in that direction, and eventually, it provided an escape from neorealism and into a more sophisticated view of global orders, one based on seeing international relations not just as a system, but as a society

or a layer of societies. For me, that was the great escape. It has redefined my vision of world order in a much more coherent way.

How would you apply the English school to seeing the world today, especially with regards to the cold war framing?

BBThere are two ways of looking at it. There's the very big-picture view, which I laid out in detail in *Making Global Society*, published in 2023. That book places the present within a long arc of macro-historical change—essentially as part of the transition between the agrarian era and what we call modernity. Then there's a more specific and immediate angle, which is something I'm actively thinking through right now. The key question I'm wrestling with is What kind of international or global society will emerge?

This is entirely new territory. We've had multiple civilisations in the past, but they were not closely interwoven with each other. We've had periods where one civilisation dominated all the others. But we've never had several major civilisations that are both deeply interconnected and also determined to be separate. What kind of international society can accommodate that order? That's a really interesting and big question that I'm working on.

A sub-theme of that is that the politics of this emerging new civilisational order are fairly right-wing, sharing many qualities with fascism. Whether one can call them—Trump and the Republican Party—fascist is a separate, interesting question. The Fuhrer principle, the Big Lie, and racism are all there, but these features also existed in communism. Still, it seems clear to me that the contemporary right is driving many of the big ideas and myths of our time. One has to look through that filter—what is their grand narrative, and what kind of international and global society does that grand narrative enable? It's unfolding right in front of us, but that makes it difficult to see clearly. But that would be my starting point.