The Cold War is over, but cold war thinking survives

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The Cold War was marked by heightening tensions and suspicions, arms race — especially of nuclear arms — strategic and ideological bipolarity with the world getting divided into two antagonistic camps. However, all of this happened without risking a direct military confrontation. This was the most distinct feature of Cold War that it saw no direct war between the two rivals, USA and USSR, but a number of proxy wars spread all across the globe.

This strategic and military thinking still survives not only between USA and Russia, the successor to USSR, but among other different actors as well. This Cold War thinking can be found at both the international level as well as regional level. This is due to the fact that the world is neither strictly unipolar (dominated by USA) nor multipolar (dominated by many great powers), but somewhere in the middle. Today’s world is a world of complex interdependence where different countries are applying cold war thinking for getting a strategic and military edge over others, without risking a direct war. This is because a direct war in an age of complex interdependence would produce no clear winners or losers but mutual destruction.

At the international level, cold war thinking still exists between USA and Russia. This is because the USA never accepted Russia as the successor of a great empire, but as a defeated nation. This treatment has provoked Russia to constantly challenge and undermine USA’s hegemony. Right from taking mutually opposed stances at global platforms like United Nations Security Council, for instance on Syrian Civil War or Iran’s Nuclear Programme, to getting involved in different theatres of war, for instance in Ukraine, the cold war thinking of pursuing hegemonic ambitions continues.

A special mention needs to be made of the various theatres of conflict where these two great powers are colliding, though indirectly. The system of building strategic alliances via installing regimes friendly and obliging to one’s hegemonic ambitions continues. For instance, in 2008, Russia invaded Georgia to prevent it from joining the US- backed NATO. Russia then ensured that the regime in Georgia would continue to be under the Russian sphere of influence. Similarly, the Ukraine crisis of 2013-2014 was triggered by USA and EU trying to convince Ukraine to join EU as well as NATO. This provoked Russia into directly supporting the pro-Russia rebels in Ukraine, while the US jumped into the crisis to support western sympathizers. The result is that Ukraine has now become Germany of 1761 when the Berlin Wall was erected, dividing the country into two spheres of influence. An “Iron Curtain” has been erected in Ukraine, with Western Ukraine wanting integration with the West and Eastern Ukraine wanting to join Russia.  
Such a proxy war can now be seen everywhere in the Syrian Crisis raging since 2012. Russia, in October 2015, has started direct air strikes against the West-backed anti-Assad Regime rebels. The US has already been going for military air strikes against the Assad regime since 2014, apart from supplying arms and giving training to the rebels.

Apart from USA-Russia rivalry, another rivalry which reminds us of the cold war driven by the same strategic thinking of pursuing hegemonic ambitions without risking war is that between USA and China. Though the USA and China have not come directly in opposition in any conflict like USA and Russia did, USA and China are involved in getting ahead of each other in economic development, military accomplishments and maintaining their influence over other nations of the world.

USA, fearing China’s rise, has started “Asia Pivot Policy” to counter China’s  ambitions in Asia-Pacific by entering into defence pacts with countries in China’s neighbourhood such as India, Japan, South Korea. China, on its end, has begun countering US hegemony by bringing more and more countries into its umbrella by giving them massive monetary assistance, investing in their infrastructure, initiating projects like ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR) and establishing institutions to counter West-backed IMF and World Bank such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS New Development Bank.

Apart from states competing with each other at the international level to achieve dominance in world affairs, cold war thinking is also driving hegemonic ambitions in the regional context.

A nuclear arms race, which reminds us of the cold war era, has been triggered between India and Pakistan. In fact, many believe that a full scale war between India and Pakistan has been prevented because of the “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) that accompanies a nuclear arms race.

Hegemonic ambitions have also been observed between China and India over the Indian Ocean Region. The Chinese policy of “String of Pearls” which encircles India by building Chinese naval bases around it in the Indian Ocean is very much reminiscent of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. India is responding to this by Project Mausam, very similar to Chinese strategy.

Cold war thinking and strategies can even be witnessed in the Middle East. Iran and Israel continue provoking each other. It is believed that both are engaged in an undeclared nuclear arms race. Cold war-like suspicions and rivalries are also said to be simmering between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both are trying to create strategic partnerships with other countries in the Middle East to bolster their clout.

Therefore, it is wrongly perceived that cold war has come to an end. Even though the cold war as an exclusive competition between two superpowers has ended, the ideology of cold war, the strategic and hegemonic thinking has continued and taken more ugly proportions. It is now not only confined also between two powers at the international level, but also between different actors at international as well as regional level.

Though cold war thinking relies on not going for a direct military war, the possibility of the world witnessing a third world war due to heightening tensions and rivalries cannot be ruled out. Thus, the way forward is to realize the futility of such thinking by looking at the cold war between USA and USSR as an example, which had not only finished USSR but also denied USA an opportunity to progress more. We need to remember that we live in a complex interdependent age where wars, conflicts, rivalries would be mutually harmful and deter each country’s progress and development. There is a need to rethink our strategies of attaining stature and clout. The world needs to think afresh to understand that there is enough space for all countries to grow, progress and gain greatness, without entering into ancient cold war thinking calculations and stratagems.