The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times

Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Jerald Combs, William Hitchcock, David Painter, Natalia Yegorova

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5 October 2007
The publication in 2007 of a paperback edition of Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, two years after its initial publication, serves as an additional stimulus for the continuation of discussions about the concept and the content of this fundamental work by a well known expert in history of the Cold War and its specifics in Asia.

From the very beginning it should be mentioned that this is a rather successful attempt to realize one of the main principles of the new Cold War history—writing it as international history. In spite of the fact that Westad focuses his attention on the confrontational condominium of the two superpowers—the United States of America (U.S.A.) and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.)—his analysis of their interventionist policy in Asia, Africa and Latin America in close relationship with internal events in these regions takes the Cold War out of the traditional framework of the Soviet-American conflict. That gives the opportunity to represent a wide panorama of the globalization (internationalization) of the Cold War, which was, according to the author’s interpretation, the “conflict over the concept of European modernity” (4), and in which the so-called Third World countries were involved since the end of the 1960s.

Singling out the clash of the two contrary concepts of modernization (with the accent on liberty in the U.S.A. and social justice in the U.S.S.R.) as the influential factor in the formation of the bilateral system of international relations after the Second World War, Westad emphasizes the ideological constituent of the superpowers’ confrontation in the Third World and their messianism. He underlines the fact that each of the parties believed that its ideological values in particular as well as its model of development would be conductive to the progress of the Third World countries.

The accent of ideology in studying the postwar confrontation is by no means new, but a distinctive feature of Westad’s approach is that he examines the Cold War in a linkage with the pan-European colonial and neocolonial experience, and connects this interpretation to the active interventionist policy of the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. in the Third World in 1970s-1980s. It is this period that is at the center of the author’s attention. At the same time in
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the book there are retrospective historical essays devoted both to the formation of the U.S. interventionist ideology and policy under the pretext of the spreading of democracy (aided by anticommunism since 1920s) and the imperial past of tsarist Russia, inherited by the U.S.S.R after 1917. These introductory chapters demonstrate the sources of superpowers’ interventionism and the territories of their early geopolitical interests which partly coincided with the regions of future rivalry for the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R in the Third World. Most likely this similarity of regional policy may excuse the fact that the author considers the first collision of superpowers after the end of the Second World War in Iran and Turkey as the beginning of their confrontation in the Third World, though his own definition of this term, born in the 1950s, implies former colonial or semicolonial countries as well as the process of decolonization after the Second World War (2-3). The same element of presentism is apparant in Westad’s history of American and Russian interventionism, where the author uses the term ‘the Third World’.

The novelty of Westad’s monograph (in comparison with many other books, devoted to the collapse of colonial empires after 1945, the Non-Aligned Movement, crises in the Third World etc.) is not only in his thesis about the extension of the Cold War into the Third World and its great influence on this part of the world. Relying heavily on a large corpus of scholarly works, new documentary materials, including Russian archives, as well as oral history, Westad presents a comparative analysis of each superpower’s interventionism in the Third World.

As it is shown in the book, the dynamics of the American interventionist policy since 1945 have been undulating. Under the administration of Harry Truman it was of limited character, excluding the Korean War. President Dwight Eisenhower initiated global covert interventions. The administrations of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were in favor of the “battle for hearts and minds” in the Third World (27), inasmuch as they considered development intervention (the activity of the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress and others) as an alternative to military intervention. Nevertheless, this did not prevent American involvement in the war in Vietnam. During the years of détente under the President Richard Nixon and partly under Jimmy Carter some reduction of “direct American intervention in the Third World” took place (197). However it was replaced by “renewed dedication to interventionism” (331) when Ronald Reagan came to power.

Westad singles out a counteraction to the Communist threat as the main driving force in increasing U.S. involvement in the Third World. He doesn’t deny that both “before and during the Cold War there have been occasions when concrete business interests have had a direct and decisive role in American interventions” but emphasizes that the role of the market in American foreign policy was a component part of its comprehensive ideology (28). Besides, the author supposes that during the Cold War the United States was a “reluctant economic imperialist” (30), and investments in the Third World were not highly profitable. At the same time the United States, as a leading economic superpower, strove to assume a responsibility for the development of the world economy, including new independent states, that would ideally follow the American pattern. As a result, along with the expansion of democracy this factor should have contributed to the containment of Communism in the Third World countries. Thus Westad tries to bind U.S. ideology with the
development of the free market, modernization and intervention, but ultimately, in his analysis, anticommunism remained the dominant feature of American policy in the Third World.

Within the context of his analysis of the American reaction to a dangerous “challenge” on the part of the Third World at the end of the 1970s, Westad criticizes a point of view, which still exists in historiography, that all revolutionary movements in Asian, African and Latin American countries were inspired by the U.S.S.R. He argues that to a considerable degree these processes were not the result of Soviet involvement, but a cause of it (332). On the basis of his study of abundant concrete materials about events in Cuba, South-East Asia, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Angola, South Africa etc., Westad demonstrates the large influence of regional factors, related to the processes of decolonization, the formation of new independent states, the aggravation of ethnic issues and the struggle of national elites for power. These factors served as a starting-point for revolutionary changes and civil wars in the Third World. But Westad simultaneously notes that the revolutionary forces were often headed by the Left, which were under the influence of Marxism and “the general leftward trend of the 1960s” (97). Viewed from this ideological position, the Soviet experiment seemed more attractive, than the capitalist way of development burdened by the colonial past. Besides, the Left opposition took into account the principle of the proletarian internationalism, which was proclaimed by the U.S.S.R. and other countries of the Soviet bloc, and was interpreted as a wide support for national-liberation movements.

Turning to Soviet foreign interventions, Westad finds their roots in the expansionism of the tsarist empire and the activities of the Comintern with its dominant idea of the world revolution. The author believes that it is possible to characterize the Comintern’s policy toward countries in the East in 1920s as the first phase of Soviet interventionism in the Third World (51, 168). This phase ended with Stalin’s coming to power. Westad underlines that Stalin, unlike Lenin, “refused to believe that Africa, Asia, or Latin America had any short-term potential for socialism because the historical conditions for the creation of the proletariat Communist parties did not yet exist there” (55). This led to the decline of the Comintern’s influence in the Third World between 1928 and 1943. As a result of the analysis of Stalin’s relations with Mao Zedong during the Chinese communists’ struggle with Chiang Kai-shek’s Guomindang as well as the support of the Soviet leader for Kim Il Sung’s plan for reunification of Korea by military force in 1950-1953, Westad concludes that after 1945 Stalin continued to have doubts that “social processes in the Third World by themselves would lead toward socialism”. For this reason the Soviet leader supposed that Third World Communism should have as its main aim the serving of “Soviet purposes in the global Cold War” (66). This great-power chauvinism brought together the Soviet Union with the United States which also believed that what was good for America was good for other countries.

The beginning of the second phase in Soviet policy in the Third World Westad connects with the activity of Nikita Khrushchev, who rejected Stalin’s negative attitude to the national-bourgeois movements and advocated more assistance to the Communist and working parties of the Third World irrespective of their prospects for coming to power. “By the early 1960s,” the author writes, “Soviet ideology had already reached a stage where
the competition for influence in the Third World was an essential part of the existence of socialism” (72). The first years of Leonid Brezhnev’s leadership were, however, marked by some lack of attention to the Third World countries because of the serious influence on Soviet policy of the Sino-Soviet conflict, events in the Congo, the Cuban Missiles Crisis as well as defeats of radical regimes in Ghana, Algeria and Indonesia in 1965-1966. Examining the reasons for a new raise of Soviet interventionism in the 1970s—1980s, which, contrary to the Soviet desire, delivered a blow to the détente policy, Westad emphasizes that the Communist victory in Vietnam and the radical turn in many liberation movements were estimated among many Kremlin’s advisers “as creating an international arena in which their zeal for socialist transformation could be realized” (202).

Besides the Congolese crisis in the beginning of 1960s a lot of attention in the book is devoted to the main directions of the Soviet battle for Africa in 1970s -- from the support of Ethiopia in its revolutionary transformation and a conflict with Somalia to the Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola. As with the Soviet invasions in Africa Westad scrupulously analyses Soviet policy in Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Mohammed Daoud regime in April 1978. Relying on documents from the Russian archives, Westad shows, step by step, how within the conditions of the unfolding civil war as well as the increasing split among Afghan Communists the CPSU Politburo’s decision about intervention of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan came to fruition in December 1979.

In view of the above it should be noted that in comparison with the chapters of the book that are devoted to American interventionism, Westad’s analysis of the complicated mechanism of the Soviet decision-making process concerning the key decisions on the Third World is more comprehensive. Having at his disposal a number of very interesting documents from the CPSU Central Committee’s International Department (which at present are reclassified) as well as interviews with former officials of the Central Committee apparatus and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Westad reveals noticeable differences among the Kremlin advisers in their approaches to the broader Soviet Third-World engagement. He underlines that such advisers from the party apparatus as Vadim Zagladin, Georgii Shakhnazarov, Karen Brutents, Alexander Yakovlev, and Vadim Medvedev, who later found themselves in the front line of Perestroika, were not in favor of limitless Soviet intervention and “stressed the need to be careful and to evaluate each situation on its own premises” (205). As Westad shows, in these very circles the skeptical attitude toward possibility of building socialism in Ethiopia, Angola, South Yemen and other countries of the Third World was wide-spread. Among the members of the Politburo, who worried that the Soviet intervention in the Third World caused damage to the U.S.R economy, Westad singles out Alexei Kosygin and Andrei Kirilenko. Nevertheless, he argues that not until after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in April 1985, and only two years later, did Soviet active interference in the affairs of the Third World countries began to decrease. The withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, begun at the end of 1988, symbolizes this process.

At the same time Westad draws attention to the important fact that several radical states of the Third World in 1983-1984 (that is before Gorbachev’s reforming of Soviet foreign policy) began to retreat from the ideals of Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism, including a planned economy, and to move gradually “toward market-based economy” as a better
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model for overcoming social and economic difficulties (363). From the point of view of the superpowers’ struggle for the Third World, these changes represented evidence of both the U.S.S.R.’s decreasing influence and the consolidation of the position of the United States, which was not going to abandon its interventionist policy even after the end of the Cold War. Underlining that the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. were not the equal superpowers (having in mind first of all their respective economic power), Westad argues that it was the American vision of development, its repeated interventions and need for raw materials that had not only positive but, to a considerable degree, negative effects on the formation of the Third World (157, 403, 404). Westad’s research of American foreign policy in the Third World clearly reveals that today’s interventionism by the U.S.A. as the only global superpower was not a spontaneous reaction to the challenge of world terrorism. It had a deep historical roots and experience.

As far as the influence of the Cold War ideology and interventions of both superpowers is concerned, the author concludes that they “helped put a number of Third World countries in a state of semipermanent civil war” or made it much harder to settle some conflicts inherited from the colonial period (398). From Westad’s study of the Islamic defiance at the end of the twentieth century another general conclusion is advanced, namely, that the rise of Islamism as a political ideology, stimulated by the Iranian revolution of 1978 and the Soviet military invasion in Afghanistan, represented the peculiar alternative to both Western and Communist modernization in the Third World.

As mentioned above, The Global Cold War is an appreciable contribution to the study of this phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century as international history. In addition to an analysis of superpowers policy, Westad examines in detail the internal and external events in those countries of the Third World which became the objects of American or Soviet intervention. Within the framework of the Sino-Soviet split since the early 1960s and its influence on Third World countries Westad pays particular attention to Vietnam and Cuba as revolutionary examples and as distinct cases. He considers that Fidel Castro’s main reason for his decision to “develop a much more aggressive policy of assistance to other Third World movements as part of its defense of the principle of revolution” was “the Cuban leadership’s disappointment with the Soviet capitulation during the missiles crisis” (175-176). Concerning Vietnam’s revolutionary influence Westad concludes that the military successes of the Vietnamese Communists in their war against the U.S.A. emboldened the Left in Indochina and beyond. But simultaneously he notes that “Vietnam never engaged in the kind of socialist internationalism outside its own immediate region that we see in the case of Cuba” (190).

There is a lot of material about different aspects of Third World history in the book’s chapter devoted to the process of decolonization and the Non-Aligned movement. And the author’s analysis is well supplemented by short biographies of such political leaders as Jawarhalal Nehru, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sukarno, and others. Westad also includes biographical essays in his description of the complicated processes of the formation of new independent states (those about Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Menguisto Haile Mariam, and others). On the whole this offers the possibility of estimating Cold War
influence on the development of the Third World and, on the other hand, understanding the contribution of these countries to the evolution of the superpowers’ confrontation.

However, such a multifaceted a book cannot help provoking a desire to argue against some of the theses put forward by the author. First of all, it is Westad’s interesting but rather controversial assumption that the essence of the Cold War was the contest between superpowers not in Europe or in military-strategic spheres but in the Third World. From this angle Westad also interprets the Cold War “as a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means” (396). Sharing Westad’s opinion that the Cold War had significant influence on the processes of decolonization, the appearance of the Non-Aligned movement and the further development of the new independent states, it is difficult to agree with his attempt to represent the policy of the superpowers and the complicated processes in the Third World as the central direction of the Cold War. In spite of the importance of struggle for the Third World it nevertheless stayed at the periphery of the clash of superpower interests.

One more critical remark deals with Westad’s over-indulgence of the ideological factor. This accent on ideology as the main driving force of U.S. and Soviet policy in the Third World countries excludes from his analysis many other very important factors (strategic, political, economic etc.) which exerted a great influence upon the interventions of these superpowers. The fact that the author nevertheless had to mention the existence of American oil interests in Iran (120, 121), the strategic importance of South Africa for the United States as well as Ethiopia for the Soviet Union (212, 268), or the Soviet leaders’ estimations of the successes of their interventionist policy in the Third World as proof that the U.S.S.R. was a real global power (209, 286) shows that the ideological framework is rather limited. Developing Westad’s remark about the Soviet linkage of interventionism with superpower status, it should be mentioned that this factor is very important for understanding Soviet activity in underdeveloped countries since the mid-1970s. According to Karen Brutents (whom Westad considers as the main dissident in the CPSU Central Committee apparatus), just feeling that the U.S.S.R was a real superpower with global interests compelled it to involve itself more and more into so distant regions as the Central and South Africa, South-East Asia or the Caribbean1. The Third World was the open space for gaining new positions for the Soviet Union not only in its ideological but in its geopolitical rivalry with the U.S.A.

The Global Cold War is a wide-ranging project, which on the whole Westad has successfully realized in spite of the difficulties of his task. The polemical acuteness of the book and a bulk of facts, correspondingly interpreted, stimulate both those who share author’s concepts and their opponents to take a new look at the history of the Cold War, many aspects of which are still disputable or unexplored.
