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Hal Brands: The Twilight Struggle

Hal Brands' book begins with the diagnosis that today, the United States is facing "high-stakes, long-term competitions" with China and Russia. For him, Americans are well-advised to take these competitions seriously, as they "will determine whether the twenty-first century extends the relatively peaceful, prosperous world to which Americans have become accustomed or thrusts us back to a darker past" (1-2). Yet Brands' focus is not the current political situation. In this regard, he mainly emphasizes that as a result of the US hegemony characterizing international politics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Americans are not used to thinking in terms of great power rivalry anymore. As a remedy, he aims to demonstrate that the study of the Cold War can provide useful lessons for the formulation of American foreign policy in the present. Despite all the differences between the Cold War and the current international order, both can be framed as protracted rivalries between great powers in the nuclear age. Hence, an analysis of patterns of such rivalries could provide insights for the great power competitions of the future.

The book was written before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and published in early 2022. Yet after more than two years of war in Europe, the questions he addresses have by no means lost their relevance. Considering that support for Ukraine has in the meantime become a contested topic in US domestic politics, and since the outcome of the upcoming American presidential election will have a crucial impact on the future US approach towards Russia and China, a review of Brands' insights still seems to be a timely endeavor.

In ten chapters, Hal Brands deals with different aspects of the Cold War, such as the strategy of containment, the building of the Western alliance, and the impact of the Cold War on US domestic politics. Overall, he portrays US policy during the Cold War in a very positive light, even though he does not omit American mistakes and failures. As a matter of fact, in many chapters, Brands argues for a story of trial and error until the Reagan administration brought together everything that worked in a winning strategy that eventually enabled the defeat of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. In the conclusion, Brands draws twelve lessons from the Cold War that according to him are still relevant for US policy during today's great power rivalry, including the usefulness of political warfare to weaponize repugnant features of enemies; the warning that while ethical absolutism does not work, it is also dangerous to depart too egregiously from one's values; and, most importantly, the imperative of treating great power competition as a way of life.

The most problematic chapter is probably the one on the Cold War in what was then referred to as the Third World. Brands does not conceal the fact that US decisions often violated the moral values American politicians claimed to protect, regularly resulting in disastrous outcomes for the affected regions and strategic setbacks for the United States. But he mainly attributes this to the difficult circumstances Washington faced in

the postcolonial world: allies that were still attached to the colonial project, Third World radicalism, and an expansionist Soviet Union. Even the most ruthless actions - assassination plots, support for coups and authoritarian dictators - are partly excused by stating that they "reflected genuine fears of Soviet breakthroughs." Overall, Brands calls for a strategy that is "aggressive without being hyperactive" (102). Accordingly, he criticizes the limits Congress set in 1975 on support for covert operations against the Marxist government that had emerged victorious after the Angolan civil war (91, 182). Conversely, he praises the uncompromising approach the Reagan administration pursued in Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War (97, 220-221). But would the continued support of the rebels, fighting the internationally recognized Angolan government while being in cahoots with Apartheid South Africa, really have benefited the global position of the West? And were Reagan's refusal to make concessions in exchange for a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and his insistence on continuing to supply arms to the Mujahideen in the long-term interest of the United States? Beyond his assessment of single conflicts, Brands' general perspective on the topic is questionable. He tends to look at Third World conflicts through the same Cold War lens as US politicians did at the time, which prevents him from discussing alternative ways they could have been dealt with, such as attempting to resolve Third World crises before they could become Cold War conflicts in which the United States would be at a disadvantage. [1] Other parts of Brands' reconstruction of the Cold War equally invite criticism. For example, when Brands praises the spread of democracy in the West, he refers to the West German example and states that the United States "purged Nazi officials" (38) without mentioning how many members of the Nazi elite were enlisted in the anti-communist struggle of the "free world." And in the chapter on US-Soviet negotiations and the process of détente, he draws the lesson that negotiations could be a tool to gain a competitive advantage, but could not substantially transform the basic conflict when faced with antagonistic rivals. Thinking of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is difficult to disagree with him regarding the situation in Europe today. But is a strategy focused on absolute victory and defeat really the only option to handle the competition against Russia as well as China in the long term? Yet even if few readers will agree with every argument of the book, it is nonetheless a very valuable contribution to scholarly debate on the current transformation of the international order. In response to the increasing tensions between the United States and Russia as well as China, historians and political scientists have begun to discuss if the present situation could be described as a "new Cold War," analyzing similarities and differences between the Cold War and today's rivalries. Certainly, historians tend to emphasize the differences and the risks false analogies pose for a nuanced analysis of current developments. Yet to reject the idea that we could learn anything from the Cold War might be to miss an opportunity to take a broader view on present-day geopolitical conflicts. Brands' approach to looking at the Cold War as a great power competition in the nuclear age and to analyzing basic patterns of such

rivalries promises deeper insights than the discussion on whether the label "new Cold War" is justified or not. Further research on such patterns could enrich our understanding of the Cold War as well as current great power competitions.

Note :

[1] According to Nancy Mitchell: Jimmy Carter in Africa, Race and the Cold War, Washington, DC / Stanford 2016, the Carter administration successfully pursued such a strategy when dealing with the Rhodesian/Zimbabwean war, resulting in the end of white minority rule in this country - a case not discussed by Brands.