

Section I: Research Essays

The Return to a Cold War Bipolar Environment?

Anna Coote

Introduction

The Cold War was a period of tension and hostility between the West, led by the United States (US), and the Soviet Union (USSR). This conflict formed the foundation and structure of world order for the latter half of the twentieth-century. The comparable, but externally unmatched, military, political and economic power of these states is widely accepted as exemplifying bipolarity.¹ Although Cold War bipolarity collapsed following the fall of the USSR, it has recently been suggested that the world is returning to a similar environment. The common justification for this suggestion is the re-emergence of animosity between the US and Russia, driven by Russian attempts to reassert its power. However, I will argue that the return to bipolar world order has implications beyond opposition alone, and therefore the world is not returning to a Cold War bipolar environment. Interrogation of the parallels between the past and present world order have become more important and necessary in recent years. This is a consequence of significant upheavals in the international political landscape. As the world becomes increasingly unpredictable, the past becomes increasingly helpful for providing insight into what the future might hold.

¹ R Harrison Wagner, "What was Bipolarity?", *International Organisation* 47, no. 1 (1993): 86.

Bipolarity refers to a situation in which ‘two states or two blocs overshadows all others’.² This definition is theoretically sound, but has been criticised for its ambiguity and inability to describe the practical manifestation of bipolarity.³ I will compensate for this definitional weakness by exploring bipolarity through the three features of the Cold War with which it was most intrinsically linked: ideological conflict, the arms race, and Third World interventionism. This is not a new definition. Instead, it is an operationalisation of the existing theoretical definition which is designed to illustrate how the concept of bipolarity might manifest in reality. This synthesis of the fundamental definition and key features of bipolarity will thus ensure both theoretical merit and practical validity in my analysis. I will use these features to compare Cold War bipolarity with the contemporary world order, in an attempt to highlight their crucial differences. I will then justify my argument that we should expect the emergence of a new world system underpinned by the rise of China. Chinese military development, and the global interplay of economic and political interests, will form the basis for that justification.

The Cold War Bipolar Environment

Ideology

Cold War ideological conflict initially arose from attempts by the US and USSR to fill the power vacuum left by World War Two.⁴ To contain the other’s ambitions, each state actively promoted their respective ideologies of democratic capitalism and communism.⁵ Each ideology was equipped with powerful economic and political tools. The two states

² Kenneth Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World”, *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 93, no. 3 (1964): 324.

³ Wagner, *What was Bipolarity?*, 86.

⁴ Justin Briggs, *The Cold War: Contested Spaces* (Melbourne: Cengage Learning Australia, 2010), 12.

⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors, “Cold War”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, February 17, 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War (accessed April 2017).

employed these tools to create opposing blocs through NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Characterised by ideology and geography, this division strengthened the bipolar allocation of power. In return for the protection and other commitments which the US and USSR could provide, members of each bloc were heavily encouraged to submit to the practical and symbolic leadership of the superpower with whom they were affiliated.⁶ Formation of these blocs constituted operationalisation of the ideological interests which were central to the foreign policy of each superpower. Although the traditional view places lesser emphasis on this goal, post-modernist scholars have come to conclude that 'the United States' ultimate objective was both to sustain and to reform world capitalism'.⁷ Equally, '[the USSR] sought its legitimacy from pursuit of the teleological goals of the radical left in general and of world communism in particular'.⁸ Ideological division thus ensured that Cold War bipolarity involved 'a contest between competing ways of understanding the world'.⁹ Ideological and political ambitions consequently converged in establishing the foundation upon which the bipolar world order developed in the ensuing decades.

Third World Interventionism

Ideology played a significant role in motivating and facilitating the Third World Interventionism undertaken by both powers. This Interventionism became a major mechanism through which the bipolar dominance of the US and USSR was secured. The European political landscape stalemated into spheres of influence soon after World War Two. Conversely, influence in Africa, Asia and Latin America remained largely fluid

⁶ Briggs, *The Cold War*, 20.

⁷ Ann Lane, "Introduction: The Cold War as History", in *The Cold War*, ed. Klaus Larres & Ann Lane (Edinburgh: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 7.

⁸ Lane, *Introduction: The Cold War as History*, 18.

⁹ Wagner, *What was Bipolarity?*, 98.

throughout the Cold War. As a result, 'the task of influencing the newly emerging states became a priority for both the Eastern and Western blocs'.¹⁰ This was uniquely enabled by decolonisation, which 'challenged the continuation of Western hegemony over the Third World'.¹¹ The consequent diminishment of the British imperial presence ensured that Third World intervention during the Cold War became a solely bipolar race between the US and USSR. From Korea to Cuba, each Third World conflict 'provided a forum in which the two superpowers waged their struggle for political, economic and ideological hegemony'.¹² This expanded and embedded the supreme power of the US and USSR, and their blocs, over and in 'lesser' states.

Arms Race

The Cold War arms race was arguably the main reason the political and ideological opposition between the US and USSR never escalated into direct conflict. The two states were the first nuclear powers, and their military and nuclear capabilities far outstripped those of other powers throughout the Cold War.¹³ However, attempts to safeguard domestic security against external attack with stronger deterrents led to extensive nuclear proliferation, and thus a mutual security dilemma.¹⁴ The threat of destructive retaliation created a new equilibrium of Mutually Assured Destruction, which discouraged each state from attacking the other. However, this delicate equilibrium was equally responsible for prolonging the tension into a decades-long diplomatic conflict.¹⁵

¹⁰ Lane, *Introduction: The Cold War as History*, 6.

¹¹ Mervyn Leffler, *Origins of the Cold War: an International History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

¹² Lane, *Introduction: The Cold War as History*, 2.

¹³ Federation of American Scientists, "Nuclear Notebook", *The Bulletin*, 2014, thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook-multimedia (accessed April 2017).

¹⁴ Briggs, *The Cold War*, 48.

¹⁵ Kier A. Lieber & Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy", *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (2006): 42.

Nonetheless, the arms race served to reflect and reinforce the positions of the US and USSR atop the international power hierarchy.¹⁶

The Contemporary World Order

Ideology

Re-emergence of US-Russian antagonism over the past decade has led some to suggest the world is returning to a Cold War-reminiscent bipolar environment.¹⁷ However, this suggestion relies on the incorrect assumption that opposition equates to bipolarity. Whilst the three salient features of Cold War bipolarity – ideology, arms race, and Third World Intervention – may seem to have re-asserted themselves, their contemporary manifestation pointedly differs from the past. Under the current world order, the most conspicuously absent feature of bipolarity is ideological conflict. Following the collapse of communism, ‘Russia renounced its claims to the ideological leadership of an alternative system to the world capitalist order’.¹⁸ Consequentially, the US no longer needed to actively promote capitalist democracy as a containment tool.¹⁹ Today, ‘no fundamental ideological contradictions’ divide the former superpowers, and the capitalist world order exists unchallenged.²⁰ Under Putin’s leadership, Russia is seeking to become a ‘normal’ power; ‘that is, not claiming to be the centre of an alternative ideological or geopolitical bloc. Russia’s broad aim [is] no longer to set itself up as an alternative to the West’.²¹ This is not inconsistent with increasing Russian involvement

¹⁶ Leffler, *Origins of the Cold War*, 4.

¹⁷ Dmetri Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry* (Carnegie: Carnegie Moscow Centre, 2014), 25.

¹⁸ Richard Sakwa, “‘New Cold War’ or Twenty Years’ Crisis? Russia and International Politics”, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 84, no. 2 (2008): 252.

¹⁹ Briggs, *The Cold War*, 138.

²⁰ Sakwa, “‘New Cold War’ or Twenty Years’ Crisis? Russia and International Politics”, 251.

²¹ Sakwa, “‘New Cold War’ or Twenty Years’ Crisis? Russia and International Politics”, 245.

in American political affairs, which were particularly evident in the 2016 Presidential Election. Russia may have sought to exercise political influence, but did not do so in such a way America continues to fight wars for global freedom, but is motivated by a 'values component' rather than prevailing ideological dedication.²² Additionally, their commitment to these values does not necessarily place America in ideological conflict with Russia. This is true even in contemporary conflicts such as the Syrian crisis. This crisis forms a large component of the justification for claiming the re-emergence of a bipolar environment comparable to the Cold War. However, the conflict between the US and Russia in this instance was driven solely by concerns about political and economic power, rather than any essential commitment to a vision of governance. This distinction may appear arbitrary, but it is fundamental to understanding the subtle differences between the past state of Cold War bipolarity and our current world order. Even if the global power balance shifts, the absence of ideology prevents a wholesale return to a state of bipolarity akin to that of the Cold War. The election of Donald Trump will arguably develop the truth of this assertion, given the dearth of ideology in his approach to governance.

Third World Interventionism

Despite the lack of direct power-ideology conflict, the US fight for global freedom is increasingly placing it in opposition with Russia in the Third World once again. This is the primary basis for the suggestion that the world is returning to a Cold War bipolar environment, as crises in Ukraine and Syria '[usher] in a period of US-Russian rivalry, even confrontation'.²³ The Ukraine crisis represents a Russian attempt to strengthen its

²² Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry*, 4.

²³ Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry*, 1.

regional and global influence, under the guise of protecting national interests.²⁴ Conversely, Russia's significant continuing support of the Assad regime has turned the Syrian civil war into a 'brutal proxy war that has drawn in regional and world powers'.²⁵ The Obama Administration limited its response to economic sanctions and diplomatic condemnation; nonetheless, US-Russian relations fundamentally deteriorated during his presidency.²⁶ This situation is likely to worsen, as the Trump Administration begins to take increasingly direct military action in Syria.^{27,28} However, just as the ideological stakes are dissimilar, this newest installation of bipolar Third World interventionism falls short of the Cold War standard. The absence of fundamental ideological conflict is compounded by markedly different situational conditions. Most notably, circumstances differ in that 'human contact, trade, and information flows are not completely shut off, and there is a modicum of cooperation'.²⁹ The stakes of conflict are therefore far lower, and less dire for the current world order.

Arms Race

However, a potential increase in diplomatic tensions is not a sufficient basis for claims that the Cold War bipolar environment is reemerging. Perhaps most prohibitive to this suggestion is the fact that an outright arms race no longer exists between the two powers. Of course, Russia and the US both still possess a considerable nuclear arsenal, which they are prepared to tout for leverage. Matthew Kroenig notes that 'Russia ostentatiously

²⁴ Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry*, 1.

²⁵ British Broadcasting Corporation, "Syria: The Story of the Conflict", *BBC*, March 11, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868 (accessed April 2017).

²⁶ Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry*, 4.

²⁷ Nicole Gaouette and Laura Koran, "Syria strike signals a change for Trump", *CNN*, April 8, 2017, edition.cnn.com/2017/04/08/politics/syria-trump-russia/index.html (accessed April 2017)

²⁸ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "Syria missile strike condemned by Russia in firm warning to US", *ABC*, April 8, 2017, www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-08/russia-fires-warning-at-united-states-over-syria-missile-strike/8427456 (accessed April 2017).

²⁹ Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry*, 1.

brandished all three legs of its nuclear triad during the [Ukraine] crisis'.³⁰ Yet the current situation falls short of reflecting the extremities of Cold War bipolarity. First, whereas the Cold War was 'defined by the possession of nuclear weapons',³¹ the successive decades have seen massive reductions in worldwide nuclear capabilities. As a major objective of NATO policy, this has resulted in the virtual elimination of nuclear weaponry in Europe.³² Importantly, largely due to non-proliferation treaties, the combined number of US and Russian nuclear weapons has fallen from 63,000 in 1986 to 9000 today.³³ Second, beyond general upgrades, neither state is actively making the dramatic nuclear and military improvements necessary to sustain an arms race.³⁴ Third, the bipolar positions of the US and Russia during the Cold War were reinforced by their comparable military capabilities.³⁵ Today, however, US military infrastructure and technology have significantly improved, whilst Russia's military power has 'sharply deteriorated'.³⁶

Power Structures Today

In analysing the causes and consequences of this situation, it is necessary to appreciate that the US and Russia no longer occupy equal positions of unquestioned global power in which they overshadow all others. The US, whilst remaining the only true superpower, has slipped from its immediate post-Cold War position of unipolar world dominance.³⁷ Far more dramatic, however, has been Russia's 'precipitate geopolitical decline'³⁸

³⁰ Matthew Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War", *Survival* 57, no. 1 (2015), 55.

³¹ Lane, *Introduction: The Cold War as History*, 5.

³² Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War", 56.

³³ Federation of American Scientists, *The Bulletin*, thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook-multimedia (accessed April 2017).

³⁴ Lieber and Press, "The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy", 46.

³⁵ Lane, *Introduction: The Cold War as History*, 14.

³⁶ Lieber and Press, "The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy", 45.

³⁷ Daniel M. Kliman, *Fateful Transitions* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 99.

³⁸ Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics", 242.

following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Sharp reductions in industrial production and military capabilities (both conventional and nuclear)³⁹ have been significant factors in weakening Russia's influence from a superpower to 'just one among a number of potential great powers'.⁴⁰ Even as President Vladimir Putin is working to reverse this trend, one crucial consequence remains: 'old-fashioned bipolarism is a thing of the past, [because] Russia-American relations are no longer the axis on which world politics turns'.⁴¹ This perspective is becoming increasingly viable in the Trump-era, as countries worldwide further their attempts to look beyond the US for global leadership.

This is not to say that the contemporary world order has collapsed. Rather, it indicates that a new world order has, by necessity, been established. Joseph Nye argues that power today is 'distributed in a complex three-dimensional pattern'.⁴² These three dimensions are military, transnational relations, and economic. Military power remains unipolarly dominated by the US. Power in transnational relations is dispersed between a diverse range of state and non-state actors, which means that 'it makes no sense to speak of unipolarity, multi-polarity or hegemony'.⁴³ Economic power has arguably become the most significant in the contemporary world order, and constitutes a tripolar distribution of power between the United States, Europe (through the European Union) and China.

The Rise of China

Economic interests are increasingly occupying a determinative role in shaping the world order and international relations. Following various recent global economic turmoil,

³⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power in the Global Information Age: From realism to globalisation* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.

⁴⁰ Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics", 266.

⁴¹ Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics", 266.

⁴² Nye, *Power in the Global Information Age*, 98.

⁴³ Nye, *Power in the Global Information Age*, 98.

states are seeking to bolster their economic security by creating strong and stable relationships with economic powers.⁴⁴ Consequently, the Asia-Pacific is benefiting from what Gideon Rachman labels 'Easternisation', the process whereby increasing economic prominence of the East is shifting political influence to the region.⁴⁵ China is the world's largest and fastest growing economy, and is therefore the primary driver and beneficiary of Easternisation.⁴⁶ As the primary export and import partner of 34 and 62 nations respectively, a positive relationship with China is highly desirable for many states.^{47 48} Whilst the US retains significant influence, analysts suggest that '[m]any of the countries that looked instinctively to America will begin to tilt more towards Beijing'.⁴⁹ Indeed, despite fundamental incompatibility between Chinese authoritarianism and the US commitment to global liberalism, the US itself is engaged in a 'pivot' towards the Asia-Pacific.⁵⁰ This further highlights the distance between Cold War bipolarity and the new world order, as ideological concerns are increasingly dispensed with for the sake of economic interests.

It is widely expected that China, and not Russia, will join the US as the new dominant power.⁵¹ Through its Security Council veto power and membership of key international organisations (including APEC, AIIB, and the G20), China already holds significant

⁴⁴ William Norris, "Economic Statecraft as a Tool of Regional Peacemaking? China's Relationships with India and Russia", in *The Political Economy of Regional Peacemaking*, ed. S. E. Lobell & N. M. Ripsman (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 169.

⁴⁵ Uri Friedman and Gideon Rachman, "What a World Led by China Might Look Like", *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2017, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/donald-trump-china-rachman/521055/ (accessed April 2017).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ CIA, "Exports – Partners", *The World Factbook – Central Intelligence Agency*, n.d., www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2050.html (accessed April 2017).

⁴⁸ CIA, "Imports – Partners", *The World Factbook – Central Intelligence Agency*, n.d., www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2061.html (accessed April 2017).

⁴⁹ Uri Friedman and Gideon Rachman, *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/donald-trump-china-rachman/521055/ (accessed April 2017).

⁵⁰ Kliman, *Fateful Transitions*, 111.

⁵¹ Kliman, *Fateful Transitions*, 111.

diplomatic power. As outlined above, China's growing economic influence will further amplify its diplomatic voice and attract other states to its leadership. In turn, China is seeking to strengthen its political position by 'significantly increase[ing] its military spending and enhance[ing] its military capabilities both quantitatively and qualitatively'.⁵² China has 'substantially closed the gap on a number of indicators of national capability',⁵³ despite per capita and absolute defence spending which remains far inferior to the US.⁵⁴ This shows clear scope for continued expansion of Chinese military power. The US Quadrennial Defence Review 2006 assessed that China possessed 'the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States'.⁵⁵ Evidently, it is both entirely possible and highly likely that China will rise to a position of power comparable to the US in coming decades. A crucial question is whether this ascendancy will dictate cooperation or conflict. Definitively forecasting this outcome is largely impossible due to the unpredictability of the US government, and opacity of the Chinese government.⁵⁶ US and Chinese approaches to ongoing and incidental economic, diplomatic and geo-political issues will be vital in determining the new world order.

Conclusion

The unrivalled positions of power enjoyed by the US and USSR during the Cold War was both a product and cause of the bipolar environment of the period, which allowed these states to overshadow all others. The subsequent condition of bipolarity was intrinsically linked to the existence of key Cold War features: ideological conflict, the arms race and

⁵² Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma", *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014), 66.

⁵³ Kliman, *Fateful Transitions*, 100.

⁵⁴ "List of Countries by Military Expenditures", *Wikipedia*, 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures (accessed April 2017).

⁵⁵ Kliman, *Fateful Transitions*, 103.

⁵⁶ Kliman, *Fateful Transitions*, 118.

Third World interventionism. In this essay, I compared how these features manifested in the Cold War as opposed to the contemporary circumstance. I consequently illustrated that, despite a revival of US-Russian animosity, the world is not returning to a Cold War bipolar environment. This is primarily because the US and Russia no longer occupy equivalent and relatively-unchallenged positions of global power. While the aforementioned bipolar features are again somewhat evident, their nature and influence falls short of the Cold War bipolar standard. This essay argued that we should expect the emergence of a world system shaped by China's ascendancy as an economic, political and military power. Precise implications of this are as-yet unclear. Notwithstanding this difficulty, this essay has ultimately sought to demonstrate the importance of seeking to understand the new world order on its own terms, rather than through the prism of the past.

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