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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL PROBLEMS IN WORLD POLITICS DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract: The second half of the twentieth century represented one of the most consequential periods in the history of international relations, defined by the structural confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, the collapse of colonial empires, and the emergence of a global system organized around two competing ideological poles. This article examines the principal dynamics of world politics between 1945 and the early 1990s, analyzing how the bipolar order shaped diplomacy, security, and the distribution of power across continents. It argues that the geopolitical problems of the era — nuclear deterrence, proxy conflicts, decolonization, and the contest for the developing world — were not isolated phenomena but interlocking expressions of a single systemic rivalry. By tracing the evolution from early Cold War tensions through détente and ultimately to the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the study demonstrates that the period laid the structural foundations of the contemporary international order. The analysis draws on the realist and liberal traditions of international relations theory to interpret the strategic behavior of states and the persistence of geopolitical instability.

Keywords: international relations, Cold War, geopolitics, bipolarity, decolonization, détente, nuclear deterrence, world politics.

1. Introduction

The conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 did not usher in the durable peace that the architects of the postwar order had envisioned. Instead, the dismantling of the fascist threat exposed a deeper and more enduring antagonism between the two states that emerged from the conflict as superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Within a few years, the wartime alliance dissolved into a global rivalry that would structure international politics for more than four decades. This rivalry, commonly designated the Cold War[1], was distinctive not merely because of the military capabilities of the two protagonists but because it fused ideological conviction, geopolitical ambition, and technological competition into a single, world-spanning contest.

Understanding the international relations of this period requires moving beyond a narrow focus on diplomacy between Washington and Moscow. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the near-total collapse of the European colonial empires, the entry of dozens of newly independent states into the international system, and the formation of a non-aligned movement[2] that sought to resist incorporation into either bloc. These developments transformed the geography of world politics and introduced new actors whose interests could not be reduced to the logic of superpower confrontation. At the same time, the advent of nuclear weapons fundamentally altered

[1] John Lewis Gaddis, The Cold War: A New History (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 5–10.

[2] Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97–110.

the character of interstate conflict, imposing a sobering caution upon the great powers even as they competed fiercely through proxies in the developing world.

This article advances the argument that the geopolitical problems of the late twentieth century are best understood as manifestations of a structural condition — bipolarity — that simultaneously stabilized relations between the superpowers and destabilized the periphery of the international system. The following sections trace this dynamic across its principal dimensions: the establishment of the bipolar order, the process of decolonization, the period of détente, the proliferation of regional and proxy conflicts, and finally the structural crisis that culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The analysis concludes by considering the theoretical implications of these events for the study of international relations.

2. The Cold War and the Emergence of a Bipolar World Order

The bipolar structure that defined postwar international politics did not appear instantaneously but crystallized through a series of crises between 1945 and 1949. The disagreements over the political future of Eastern Europe, the economic reconstruction of Germany, and the spread of communist influence in the Mediterranean rapidly hardened into mutual suspicion. The articulation of the Truman Doctrine[3] in 1947 committed the United States to the containment of Soviet expansion, while the Marshall Plan sought to anchor Western Europe within an American-led economic and political orbit. These initiatives, far from being purely defensive, signaled the consolidation of two rival spheres whose boundaries would remain remarkably stable for decades.

The institutionalization of this division proceeded through the creation of opposing military alliances. The establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization[4] in 1949 formalized the Western security community, and the subsequent formation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955 provided its Eastern counterpart. Germany, partitioned into two states embodying the rival systems, became the symbolic and strategic epicenter of the confrontation. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 rendered the division of Europe brutally concrete, transforming an ideological boundary into a physical barrier patrolled against its own population.

Theoretically, the bipolar order exhibited a paradoxical quality that has occupied scholars of international relations ever since. On the one hand, the concentration of power in two superpowers introduced a measure of predictability and discipline into great-power relations; each side understood the other's vital interests and generally refrained from directly challenging them. On the other hand, the very rigidity of the bipolar structure[5] displaced competition to the margins of the system, where the superpowers pursued advantage through intervention, subversion, and proxy warfare. This dual character — stability at the center, volatility at the periphery — constitutes the central geopolitical signature of the era.

3. Decolonization and the Contest for the Third World

Parallel to the consolidation of the bipolar order, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the most extensive transfer of sovereignty in modern history. Between 1945 and 1975, the European colonial empires that had dominated Asia and Africa for generations disintegrated, giving rise to scores of newly independent states. This process of decolonization[6] was driven by the

[3] Melvyn P. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 142–146.

[4] Lawrence S. Kaplan, NATO Divided, NATO United: The Evolution of an Alliance (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 1–15.

[5] Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 168–170.

[6] Prasenjit Duara, ed., Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–18.

exhaustion of the imperial powers after the war, the mobilization of nationalist movements, and the delegitimization of colonial rule within the emerging international institutions. The independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 inaugurated a wave that would crest with the African independences of the 1960s.

For the superpowers, the newly independent states represented both an opportunity and a battleground. The developing world became an arena in which the United States and the Soviet Union competed for allegiance through economic assistance, military aid, and ideological appeal. Many post-colonial leaders, wary of exchanging one form of domination for another, sought to chart an independent course. The Bandung Conference[7] of 1955 and the subsequent founding of the Non-Aligned Movement articulated an alternative vision of international order grounded in sovereignty, anti-colonialism, and refusal to align with either bloc.

Yet non-alignment proved difficult to sustain in practice. The structural pressures of the Cold War repeatedly drew the developing world into the orbit of superpower competition, transforming local disputes into theaters of global rivalry. Economic dependency, the legacy of arbitrary colonial boundaries, and internal political fragility rendered many new states vulnerable to external intervention. The geopolitical problems of the periphery — instability, civil conflict, and contested legitimacy — were thus intimately bound up with the dynamics of the bipolar system, even where local actors pursued their own distinct agendas.

4. Détente, Nuclear Deterrence, and the Management of Rivalry

The most dangerous moment of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis[8] of 1962, paradoxically inaugurated a period of cautious accommodation between the superpowers. Having peered into the abyss of nuclear war, both Washington and Moscow recognized the necessity of managing their competition to prevent catastrophic escalation. The doctrine of mutually assured destruction, however grim its premises, imposed a strategic rationality upon the arms race: because neither side could survive a full nuclear exchange, neither could rationally initiate one. This recognition gave rise to the first serious efforts at arms control.

The era of détente, spanning roughly the late 1960s through the 1970s, produced a series of landmark agreements designed to stabilize the nuclear balance. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks yielded treaties that constrained the deployment of offensive missiles and limited defensive systems, while the Helsinki Accords[9] of 1975 established a framework for European security and human rights. Détente reflected a pragmatic acknowledgment that the bipolar rivalry, though irreconcilable in principle, could be regulated through negotiation and reciprocal restraint.

Détente, however, was neither comprehensive nor durable. It coexisted uneasily with continued competition in the developing world, where the superpowers persisted in supporting opposing factions in regional conflicts. By the end of the 1970s, a series of crises — most notably the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 — eroded the foundations of accommodation and ushered in a renewed phase of confrontation. The fragility of détente revealed a deeper truth about the bipolar order: the structural antagonism between the superpowers could be managed but not transcended so long as the system itself endured.

[7] Vijay Prashad, The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World (New York: The New Press, 2007), 31–50.

[8] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 77–96.

[9] Jeremi Suri, Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 213–230.

5. Regional Conflicts and Proxy Wars

If the central front of the Cold War in Europe remained frozen in a tense but stable equilibrium, the periphery of the international system became the theater of recurrent and often devastating violence. Unable to confront one another directly without risking nuclear catastrophe, the superpowers channeled their rivalry into proxy conflicts[10] across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. These wars allowed Washington and Moscow to pursue strategic advantage while preserving the threshold against direct great-power war, but at an enormous human cost to the societies in which they were fought.

The Korean War of 1950–1953 established the pattern, drawing in the major powers in a limited but bloody confrontation that ended in stalemate and a divided peninsula. The protracted conflict in Vietnam[11] demonstrated both the limits of superpower military power and the capacity of nationalist movements to resist external domination. In the Middle East, the Arab–Israeli wars intersected with superpower competition, while in southern Africa and Central America, civil conflicts were intensified and prolonged by external intervention. Each of these conflicts possessed its own local origins and logic, yet each was also shaped and amplified by the overarching structure of bipolar rivalry.

The proliferation of proxy wars illustrates the central geopolitical problem of the bipolar era: the displacement of superpower conflict onto vulnerable societies that became the involuntary battlegrounds of a contest not of their making. The consequences — protracted instability, the militarization of politics, and the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes sustained by external patronage — outlasted the Cold War itself and continued to shape the international landscape long after the superpowers had withdrawn their support.

6. The Crisis of Bipolarity and the End of the Cold War

The renewed confrontation of the early 1980s, marked by an intensified arms race and sharpened rhetoric, masked a deepening structural crisis within the Soviet system. The command economy proved increasingly unable to sustain both military parity with the United States and the consumption demands of its population, while the costs of empire — subsidizing client states and maintaining a vast military establishment — imposed an unsustainable burden. The accession of Mikhail Gorbachev[12] in 1985 brought to power a leadership willing to acknowledge these constraints and to pursue fundamental reform.

Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost, intended to revitalize the Soviet system, instead accelerated its unraveling. His decision to refrain from intervening to preserve the communist governments of Eastern Europe removed the coercive foundation upon which the bloc had rested. In the autumn of 1989, the regimes of the region collapsed in rapid succession, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall[13] in November. The reunification of Germany followed, and within two years the Soviet Union itself dissolved into its constituent republics.

The end of the Cold War transformed the structure of international politics, dissolving the bipolar order that had organized world affairs for more than four decades. The disappearance of one

[10] Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 158–180.

[11] Fredrik Logevall, Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam (New York: Random House, 2012), 690–714.

[12] Archie Brown, The Gorbachev Factor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 89–115.

[13] Mary Elise Sarotte, 1989: The Struggle to Create Post–Cold War Europe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1–24.

of the two poles left the United States as the preeminent power in an international system whose new configuration remained uncertain. The geopolitical problems that the bipolar rivalry had suppressed or frozen — ethnic conflict, contested borders, and regional ambitions — reemerged in altered forms, posing fresh challenges to a world order in transition.

7. Geopolitical Problems and Theoretical Reflections

The international relations of the second half of the twentieth century have furnished the discipline with some of its most enduring theoretical debates. For realists, the period offered a vivid confirmation of the primacy of power and the structural logic of anarchy. The behavior of the superpowers — their preoccupation with relative gains, their reliance on deterrence, and their formation of balancing alliances — appeared to validate the proposition that the distribution of capabilities, rather than ideology or domestic politics, governs the conduct of states. The stability of the bipolar order was interpreted[14] as evidence that a system of two great powers is less prone to miscalculation than the multipolar configurations that had preceded it.

Liberal and constructivist[15] scholars, by contrast, emphasized dimensions that the realist account neglected. The proliferation of international institutions, the gradual emergence of human rights norms, and the role of transnational movements suggested that international politics could not be reduced to the mechanical operation of the balance of power. The very ideas that animated the Cold War — the contest between liberal democracy and communism — indicated that ideology and identity were constitutive of the rivalry rather than incidental to it. The end of the Cold War, achieved largely without direct violence between the superpowers, posed a particular challenge to purely materialist explanations.

Beyond these theoretical disputes, the period bequeathed a set of geopolitical problems whose consequences persist. The nuclear arsenals assembled during the arms race remain a defining feature of international security. The boundaries drawn during decolonization continue to generate conflict. The patterns of alliance and dependency established during the Cold War have shaped the trajectories of states across the developing world. In this sense, the second half of the twentieth century is not a closed chapter but a formative foundation upon which the contemporary international order continues to rest.

8. Conclusion

The second half of the twentieth century constituted a decisive epoch in the history of international relations, an era in which the structural confrontation between two superpowers organized world politics into a coherent, if perilous, system. This article has argued that the geopolitical problems of the period — the division of Europe, the contest for the developing world, the management of nuclear danger, and the proliferation of proxy conflicts — were not discrete phenomena but interconnected expressions of the underlying logic of bipolarity. The bipolar order stabilized relations at the center of the system while displacing violence and instability to its periphery, a duality that defined the strategic character of the age.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought this order to an end, but it did not erase its legacy. The institutions, conflicts, and ideas forged during the Cold War continue to shape the international system in the present century. A careful study of this period therefore offers more than historical understanding; it illuminates the structural forces and recurrent dilemmas that animate world

[14] John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," International Security 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56.

[15] Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246–312.

politics across eras. The international order of the twenty-first century remains, in significant measure, an inheritance of the geopolitical settlement and the unresolved problems of the late twentieth.

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