

EAST-WEST RELATIONS: A NEW COLD WAR?

The Cold War bipolar order was characterized by two camps isolated from each other, competing along four dimensions: global governance, security, economics, and ideology. The end of the Cold War, with the Soviet Bloc collapsing, did not produce a U.S.-dominated unipolar but a multi-centered world. The Americans, losing power and influence and the Russians to restore their superpower status have been trying to reconstruct bipolarity. If reconstructed China, not Russia, would likely constitute the other pole, an outcome Russia does not want. Economic relations and Chinese disinterest currently prevent a bipolar world like the one we have left behind. We may be moving toward a multi-centered world with many unpredictable aspects, including armed conflicts such an order may entail.

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*Keywords: Bipolarity, China, International Order,
International Security, Post-Cold War.*



TPQ

Winter 2022

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When the Cold War ended, the world rejoiced that a problematic state of international relations had ended. The competition between the free world characterized by politics of liberal democracy and economies driven by market forces and the socialist world run by authoritarian single-party regimes and state-operated economies had been concluded in favor of the former. Presumably, all countries would now gravitate toward competitive politics and market economies.

Two major developments brought about the conclusion of the Cold War. First, the Warsaw Pact that had been established under the leadership of the Soviet Union collapsed, thereby ending the “perceived” threat of Soviet expansion toward Western Europe. Second, the Soviet Union itself collapsed, with many of the republics constituting the union declaring their independence. In this way, the USSR came to an end, to be replaced by the Russian Federation which experts predicted would be occupied with internal questions for many years to come.

Under these conditions, questions were raised regarding what kind of an international order would emerge to replace the bipolar order that had evolved after the Second World War. Some initial evaluations suggested that the bipolar world was now being replaced by a unipolar system in which the U.S. would be the dominant power. In retrospect, such prognoses appear to have been based on continuing to use the Cold War analytical framework where the disappearance of one pole was predicted to lead to the prevalence of the other. However, the collapse of the bipolar order led all actors to review how they related to the world, the extent they would accept the leadership of a single country to prevail in global politics and the kind of global order they aspired to build. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War stimulated domestic debate in the U.S. as to whether foreign and security policies that had been developed during the Cold War calling for substantial investments in the security domain should be continued under such widely altered conditions.

Soon it became clear that the world would not head in the direction of becoming a uni-polar system. As the most powerful country in the world, the U.S. would naturally play a major role in shaping what happens. Still, it was not in a position to become the leader of a single pole, determining what others would do in multifarious ways. Instead, regional groupings and power centers began to emerge, leading to assertions that a multi-polar world was being born. Before offering judgments on whether we are headed toward a world order characterized by multi-polarity, it may be useful first to take a look at the concept of Cold War and the bipolarity it represented and then how this has changed after the Cold War came to an end.

Polarization and the Bipolar World

The concept of polarization was initially employed to describe the nature of relations that came to prevail between the Socialist and Western Blocs that emerged as the Second World War was coming to a close. The term continued to be employed after the war as long as the nature of those relations retained the basic characteristics that had initially come to define it. The world or regions had been divided into competitive camps in earlier parts of history¹ but the state of relations between those camps had not been described as polarization, suggesting that we were faced with a phenomenon that we had not witnessed before.

“Initially, the Alliance adopted the doctrine of massive retaliation whereby Soviet encroachments, irrespective of the level they were committed, would be countered by a nuclear response. In a highly contentious security environment, however, as the Soviets eventually developed means of delivering nuclear weapons with the capability of directly reaching the American continent, the U.S. felt the need to modify this defense doctrine to avoid becoming a direct nuclear target in case hostilities commenced.”

What was meant by polarization? As WW II was coming to a close, the countries that had been fighting each other began to assemble, in part voluntarily and in part by coercion by the victorious powers, around two major countries that engaged in a multi-lateral competition with each other. These configurations that began to be referred to as “poles” were competitors and often adversaries along four dimensions: politics, security, economics, and ideology. Their cooperative interactions were minimal. It may be useful to take a brief look at these dimensions to comprehend the nature of the competition in each domain.

Politics of Global Governance

As the War was coming to a close, the victors including the U.S. and Russia agreed that a new organization called the United Nations would be established as the proper instrument of global governance. This would be a more comprehensive

¹ A good example is the recent work by Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

organization than the League of Nations that was narrowly based and did not have the U.S. as a member. Furthermore, the new organization would address almost all questions of global governance through a comprehensive set of organizations whose functions extended from questions of collective security to economic and social development and even cultural cooperation. There would be a two-tiered decision-making structure with presumably² global powers of the time serving as permanent members of the major decision-making organ called the Security Council that also included elected members from among the members of the General Assembly that was, again presumably,³ in the nature of a world parliament.

Initially, the UN was dominated by the U.S. while the U.S.S.R. could only use its veto to restrain the Americans. Yet, at a time when they were boycotting the meetings of the Security Council, the Soviets were taken by surprise as the Council decided to extend military support to South Korea that faced a Chinese-backed invasion effort by North Korea. Throughout the Cold War, the Americans and the Soviets competed, Americans to prevail upon the institution and the Soviets to prevent it, which meant that the U.N. could only pursue meaningful actions in limited areas where the two major countries could reach agreement. This meant that the international organization that would be the pillar of global governance was reduced to an ineffective organization that could not address any of the major international questions in which the leaders of the two poles had substantial interest but disagreed.

Security

The area in which the American-Soviet competition became most manifest was in security. Early on, the U.S. organized much of Western Europe into a defense organization under North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO.⁴ The alliance's goal was to stand in the way of Soviet expansion toward Western Europe. It was

² France was included as an act of courtesy since it had been occupied by Germany early in the war and did not contribute in any significant way to Germany's defeat and the conclusion of the war. China, on the other hand, was embroiled in domestic conflict that ended with the victory of the Communists in 1949. But Taiwan, the small republic on the island of Formosa to which the Nationalists had retreated rather than the Communist government of the mainland, represented China on the Security Council. The People's Republic replaced the Republic of China (Taiwan) in 1971 after President Nixon changed American policy toward the People's Republic.

³ Again, while all independent countries could theoretically qualify for membership, up to 1954, countries that were judged to be pro-Soviet Union were not admitted to membership inviting a potential Soviet veto of prospective candidates judged to be pro-Western, leading to a situation of non-expansion. After 1955, a *modus vivendi* allowed countries to be admitted in pairs, that is, one more sympathetic to the U.S. and another closer to the Soviet camp. The U.N. became a more genuine universal organization only as the Cold War began to thaw and then come to an end.

⁴ Some countries that had not come under Soviet domination did not join NATO for different reasons. Sweden, Finland and Switzerland preferred to maintain their neutrality. The fate of Austria was still being negotiated at the time NATO was established. Eventually, it was agreed that it would have neutral status. Spain, under Franco's fascist rule was found to be ill suited for membership in an alliance that brought democracies together, although Portugal possessing a similar regime at the time, was made member since its location was judged to be important for Atlantic security.

judged that, unless resisted, the Soviets would try to expand their domination of Europe with military means starting with West Germany. NATO's goal would therefore be to deter the Soviets from pursuing such a course of action. Accordingly, the doctrine of containment was developed aiming, as the name indicates, to prevent Soviet expansionism and if possible, to push them back from areas they had brought under their control. Greece and Türkiye, both fearing that they might constitute targets of expansionary Soviet moves, received American support to join the Treaty in 1952.

“The efforts in the nuclear field were cemented by efforts to reduce conventional forces in Europe that faced each other. Conventional Forces Europe talks and agreements eventually led to the founding in 1973 of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.”

The Soviets eventually responded to the establishment and expansion of NATO by establishing a rival security organization in 1955, the Warsaw Pact, as a reaction to the inclusion of the German Federal Republic in NATO, which the Soviets interpreted as the final confirmation of the division of Europe. The founding treaty is almost a replica of the North Atlantic Treaty with the USSR playing a role comparable to that of the United States in NATO. Ironically, the formalization of the division of Europe into two security blocs with a country leading each paved the way for an increasingly stable relationship since trying to change it would open the way to a conflict of major proportions that might prove hard to contain and possibly lead to a nuclear holocaust. The rival sides had established nuclear parity because they would still have the capabilities to inflict unacceptable harm on the other side even after they had been the target of a first strike. An uneasy but reasonably stable balance of terror was established, promising *mutually assured destruction* (MAD) if any party attacked the other. The major concern was ensuring minor incidents, or skirmishes would not escalate into more comprehensive and unstoppable clashes.

The Americans had initially hoped that they might get the European members of NATO to develop large conventional armies to stop the Russians. It soon became apparent, however, that the latter not only gave priority to post-war reconstruction but also felt that the only way the Soviets could be stopped was by relying on the American nuclear deterrent. Such conceptualizations of European defense gave

the U.S. the privilege of planning the defense of the alliance by itself with other members becoming passive recipients American provided security. Initially, the Alliance adopted the doctrine of massive retaliation whereby Soviet encroachments, irrespective of the level they were committed, would be countered by a nuclear response. In a highly contentious security environment, however, as the Soviets eventually developed means of delivering nuclear weapons with the capability of directly reaching the American continent, the U.S. felt the need to modify this defense doctrine to avoid becoming a direct nuclear target in case hostilities commenced. Massive retaliation gradually became replaced first by “graduated deterrence” and finally by the more systematically formulated doctrine of “flexible response,” meaning that any Soviet military action would be met at the level it is committed.⁵ While other NATO members depended on the U.S. as the leader of their pole for their security, the U.S. was concerned that its allies would not drag it into conflicts against its will or fight among themselves, a contingency that would weaken the alliance. For example, when France and Great Britain launched an invasion of the Suez Canal after Nasser nationalized it, the U.S. that had not been consulted simply gave an ultimatum to its “allies” to terminate their intervention. Similarly, when Türkiye appeared to be planning a military intervention in Cyprus in 1964 to protect the Turkish community, was told by President Johnson that it would not receive NATO protection if the Soviets became involved. More generally, the U.S. tried not only to manage conflicts that might emerge among the Alliance members but also to ensure that any other interests that other members might have should be rendered subsidiary to those pertained to NATO.

The stability in Europe was also threatened by eruptions of anti-Soviet mass movements such as the Hungarian revolution in 1956 or the Prague Spring in 1968. While such events generated much sympathy in Western Europe, NATO members treated them as internal affairs of the Soviet Bloc. They did not use them as occasions through which the Soviet domination of either these countries or more broadly Eastern Europe would be questioned. Until the end of the Warsaw Pact and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both sides moved slowly, searching for ways of building mutual trust, developing instruments of cooperation, and constructing a predictable environment. But the nature of the relationship was always characterized by a sense of competition and an understanding that the rival systems were not compatible if not fully mutually exclusive.

Economics

The U.S., assuming the Western Bloc’s leadership as the bipolar world was beginning

⁵ In this discussion, I have relied on my *NATO İttifakının Stratejik ve Politik Sorunları* (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1971).

to take shape, also developed a framework within which the international economy would operate. The institutions of global economic governance that the American leadership envisioned, included the creation of several institutions that would work to ensure the smooth functioning of the international economic system. First, there would be the International Monetary Fund or the IMF whose mission was to ensure the stability of exchange rates. It would function in a way that is reminiscent of central banks. Increasingly it found itself promoting economic stabilization programs in societies that ran into balance of payments problems. Second, a World Bank would be established that would extend credit to infra-structural investment projects, mostly in countries that could not finance such projects on their own. These two organizations got established and quickly began to perform the functions that were expected of them. A third instrument, the World Trade Organization or WTO that would work toward standardizing and reducing barriers to international trade proved somewhat more difficult to establish. Until the end of the Cold War, a series of global meetings under the title General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade or GATT for short, served to fulfil somewhat more modestly the functions that were expected of the WTO. The WTO was finally established in 1995.

“The lack of trust in the U.S. and the economic benefits that accrue from expanding trade relations have guided both European and Pacific actors to maintain a moderate relationship with China.”

Understandably, the instruments of global economic governance developed by the U.S. as the leader of the so-called “Free World” were based on the idea of operating market economies in which private enterprise prevailed. It assumed that member societies in Western Europe and North America would be trading extensively with each other and open to international investments. The economic order envisioned by the Soviet Union, on the other hand, constituted marked contrast to that preferred by the Americans. In the Soviet Bloc, the state rather than the private enterprise would be the primary economic actor; the driving force behind economic development would not be profits but other values such as achieving full employment, meeting the minimum economic needs of all citizens, and more broadly, achieving the welfare of the public. To summarize, the West promoted equality of opportunity while the Socialist Bloc subscribed to achieving equality of condition. Although there is little question that higher levels of prosperity characterized the Western Bloc, each side treated its model as superior, serving the needs of societies better, and pursued

propaganda wars against each other. What is important to note from the perspective of bipolarity, however, is the reality that the two blocs each tried to build a world onto themselves and engaged in limited economic interaction with the other. Each bloc tried to advance its internal economic integration to meet its needs internally and not become dependent on the other. They carried their economic competition to regions and countries that were not a part of the two blocs.

Ideology

At the root of the conflict between the two blocs, the factor that led to alternative conceptualizations how societies would be organized, governed and the societal goals they would aspire to achieve was ideology: liberal democracy and market economy versus “scientific” socialism. Each side claimed to possess a superior ideology and competed intensely with the other to persuade its own citizens, the citizens of the rival pole and those not a part of the bipolar system that they possessed the proper answer to constructing a society that would respond best to human needs and aspirations. This constituted the background on which propaganda wars raged between the two poles. These wars were more than just an open rivalry of ideologies. Each camp tried to indoctrinate its people to believe in the virtues of their system and the shortcomings and failings of the other.

Among many members of the Western camp, propagating communism was controlled and limited in various ways, from limiting the content of public education to placing limits on the freedom of expression and organization. More broadly, for example, in societies where Communist parties were allowed as part of the package of liberal democracy, measures were taken not to allow them to become partners in national governments. In the Socialist Bloc, ideological controls were even more strict and anyone who tried to extol the virtues of the rival ideology was branded as betraying the socialist system and suffered a variety of deprivations imposed either by government or the Communist party that enjoyed a monopoly of power in politics and ensured, among other things, ideological conformity.

The ideological competition was also carried to societies that were not a part of the bipolar system. In fact, as the relations between the two blocs stabilized, the inter-bloc competition for being more influential in other parts of the world only intensified. The Soviet model that promised industrialization, a goal that a typical leader of a developing society craved to achieve was often found to be rather attractive in less developed parts of the world. But many also needed economic assistance that the Soviets could meet only to a limited extent in contrast to the Western Bloc that generated and therefore had more access to economic resources

that could be allocated for development purposes.

The Sources of Discord in the Bi-Polar System

We have now seen that the bi-polar system that emerged after the Second World War involved competition between the two rival camps in politics, security, economics and ideology. Polarization, as may be inferred from the preceding discussion, was a state of affairs where the congregation of states that constituted one pole tried to maximize competitive relations with the other. In each pole, the leading state mobilized other members to form a unified front against the “adversary,” an approach that served two related purposes. First, such an approach not only enhanced the bloc’s solidarity but also strengthened the sense of dependence on its leader. Second, the approach rendered it costly and difficult to entertain leaving the bloc. In summary, the bi-polar system, in its heyday, had led to the division of Europe into two irreconcilable worlds competing with little common interactions among them.

The fact that under conditions of intense polarization, members consent to the pole’s leadership should not be interpreted as the absence of conflict between the leader and others. After all, the poles are comprised of nation-states, each having its own interests, some of which may hardly be in harmony with those of the leading state. In fact, as an example of within-alliance or pole conflict, we have already alluded to American displeasure and intervention in the Suez Crisis in 1956 that forced the British and the French to suspend their operation. We also made a brief reference to America’s subverting Turkish plans in 1964 to extend protection by military means to Turks of Cyprus. Other conflicts of interest have included the deployment of nuclear weapons on the territory of a member country, the amount a member country should spend for its defense or even the status that should be accorded to the American forces deployed in a Western European country.

We may now look at inter-pole conflicts of interest in a somewhat more systematic way. Generally speaking, what happens when a member of the pole has a conflict of interest with the pole’s leader and how the conflict is resolved has been determined by the way and the extent to which the member is dependent on the latter. For example, Türkiye and Germany, as two states directly exposed to the “Soviet threat,” were more accommodating to American security considerations and policy preferences than some other members such as France. Also at the time, Türkiye was dependent on the U.S. for economic assistance and its military modernization, two factors that invited it to conform with American preferences. On the other hand, France could afford to behave in ways that ran counter to American alliance leadership. Germany constituted a security wall on land before Warsaw Pact forces would reach France.

On the Atlantic side, security was provided by Great Britain and the U.S.. Since France was in a position to free ride on security that was provided by NATO, it felt it could even withdraw from the military wing of the alliance without exposing itself to unacceptable risks as it did in 1966.

As already noted in the case of Portugal, being important for NATO's security gave member countries some leeway in not conforming with all the imperatives of the alliance. In the Portuguese example, the authoritarian nature of its system was overlooked first under Salazar and then under Caetano since the country was considered important in ensuring Atlantic security. Franco's Spain was kept out not only because it was not democratic but also because Spain was not deemed to be important for western defense. Spain joined NATO only after it became a democracy. Also tolerated were the temporary military interventions occurring in Türkiye.

Stabilizing the Bipolar System

Since a conflict between the poles could unintentionally escalate into a nuclear holocaust, pole members, particularly pole leaders, wanted to avoid such a contingency that would at minimum threaten their well-being and possibly their existence. This concern led them pursue policies that would render their competitive relationship predictable. Two different paths were followed to that end. First, the poles moved their "struggle" to third areas outside the geography of the poles and second, they tried to render the inter-alliance relationship more predictable.

Moving the "Struggle" to Third Areas

As the Cold War commenced and intensified, many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America that were not members of the blocs adopted neutralist foreign policies, meaning that they would not take sides in the Soviet-West conflict but interact with both sides and develop beneficial relations. Many of these countries were in need of development, some of them had acquired independence from colonial powers only after the Second World War. The two blocs perceived these areas as targets to attract to their side in their competitive relationship to dominate the world. They extended economic assistance, funded infra-structural investments, and tried to develop lasting economic links to ensure that a target country would not become closely linked with the other side. The inter-bloc competition did not preclude the conduct of proxy wars where each bloc, hoping to achieve a dominating position in a particular locale, would extend support to one side of what might otherwise have been a local conflict. If the locale were perceived to be strategically important, "polar" involvement was likely to be more comprehensive. Afghanistan may constitute a case in point. In some instances, on the other hand, the conflict was instigated by the Soviet side as a

deliberate effort to unify divided countries under the banner of communism as was the case in Vietnam.

The two sides conducted propaganda wars that targeted not only third areas but also each other's publics. Propaganda appears to have constituted an exception, remaining outside those relations where there was a deliberate effort to achieve greater predictability to avoid escalation.

More Predictable Inter-Alliance Relations

The ever-present fear that an armed conflict might break out either accidentally or by making mistaken judgements about the intentions and actions of the other side and escalate to the nuclear level, guided pole members, particularly pole leaders to search for ways of developing mutual trust and creating mechanisms to prevent armed conflict. Such a search began rather early when the Cold War was still raging. It gained speed and grew more comprehensive as the sides recognized that they would have to get used to the idea of peaceful coexistence. The first step was the Nuclear Test Ban treaty that banned nuclear tests in the atmosphere (1963) which was followed by the Non-Proliferation Treaty that aimed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons while allowing peaceful uses of nuclear energy (1968). Then came SALT 1 or the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (1969), followed later by a second. The idea of limiting the size of the nuclear stockpiles received an additional boost with START 1 or the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (1991) between the U.S. and the USSR. These treaties contained verification procedures, actual monitoring mechanisms and instruments of consultation. Not all were rendered formally binding but they were observed in practice. The Americans and the Soviets also cooperated in space research, establishing space stations where international crews carried out exploratory work.

The efforts in the nuclear field were cemented by efforts to reduce conventional forces in Europe that faced each other. Conventional Forces Europe talks and agreements eventually led to the founding in 1973 of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

These measures were intended to render the relations between the two camps more predictable. Interestingly, the stability achieved in East-West relations also allowed ordinary members of the Alliances, particularly NATO members, to enjoy greater flexibility in their relations with the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact. For example, the moderation of inter-alliance conflict allowed Federal Germany to develop the idea of Ostpolitik aspiring to closer relations between the

two Germanies. Similarly, Türkiye began to develop closer economic relations with the Soviet Union. However, it should immediately be added that such moderation of relations was not what brought the Cold War to an end.

The End of the Cold War

The bipolar world and the Cold War which was an expression used to describe how the poles interacted with each other collapsed in 1990-1991 mainly because the Soviet Union, leading the Socialist pole did not possess an overall equality with the U.S. but only matched it in the field of armaments. True, the balance of terror and the nuclear parity it represented guaranteed the security of the members of the Warsaw Pact. Still, it hardly provided sufficient compensation for the deprivations all felt they were suffering due to economic failures of their alliance. The Soviets, while aware of problems in the economic domain, were concerned that changes needed for improving economic performance would undermine not only their domination of their allies but also challenge the domestic monopoly of power the Communist Party of the Soviet Union enjoyed domestically. Therefore, in response to claims for economic betterment, they mobilized security-related arguments.

It is generally thought that two developments led to the economic exhaustion of the Soviet Union. The first is its involvement of in Afghanistan. The Soviets entered Afghanistan in 1979 ostensibly to extend support to a pro-Moscow government that had achieved power more than a year earlier but was experiencing difficulties maintaining its rule. The intervention lasted almost a decade. During this interim, the Soviets had to devote much energy and resources to fighting a civil war in which varieties of Islamic opposition supported by the West, mainly the U.S. This involvement that became more comprehensive over time as they failed to achieve control of the country, proved to be a major drain on Soviet material resources and conventional military capabilities. In 1989, they decided they could no longer sustain their intervention in Afghanistan. Economically exhausted and impoverished, they departed.

The other development that is judged to have imposed unbearable burdens on the Soviet budget is the decision of the Reagan administration in 1983 to develop an anti-ballistic missile system that operated in part with satellites that would neutralize missiles directed at the U.S. before they reached their target. Named the Strategic Defense Initiative but quickly dubbed the Star Wars project, this undertaking did not reflect an achievement but an inspiration toward which research efforts would be directed. The project would have transformed the nuclear parity that included both weapons and delivery systems. If the Americans could prevent the delivery of Soviet

weapons to their territory, the idea of the balance of terror and the accompanying concept of mutually assured destruction would be invalidated. The Soviets felt pressured to meet the challenge and start working toward developing their own systems. Again, the burden, combined with that generated by Afghanistan proved too big to bear by the Soviet economy.

The deterioration of economic conditions was accompanied by a loss of faith in Communist ideology. Communism had failed in achieving the results it had promised to achieve. It had created a privileged class of political elites who displayed incompetence in addressing the economic woes of the general public. Many among the elite lost their faith in the system in which they occupied a privileged position. Eventually the proponents of glasnost and perestroika (opening and restructuring) defending a comprehensive revamping of the system achieved power but could not contain the societal pressures for change. First, as then the Soviet Union could no longer hold it together, the Warsaw Pact disbanded. The USSR itself came to an end as many of its constituent republics declared independence.

Developments did not stop there. The newly independent Baltic republics along with East European and Balkan members of the former Warsaw Pact quickly joined NATO to defend themselves against the possibility of a Russian effort to reconstitute its influence in the region. They also proceeded to join the European Union, stating clearly that they did not look forward to being incorporated into a Russian zone of influence as they had been obliged to do after WW II. Russia tried to maintain its influence in its former republics both to its West (Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova) and in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia) and (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan) by leading several economic and political cooperation and security arrangements. None proved successful enough to reconstitute the Soviet Empire. All the newly independent states, no matter how close they felt to Russia or depended on it for economical or security reasons, tried to maintain their independence and pursue courses of actions that did not always conform with Russian preferences. Russia proved not sufficiently powerful economically or militarily as most recently substantiated by the difficulties it is encountering in Ukraine, to restore its superpower status and constitute a rival pole to that led by the U.S.. The bi-polar world had come to an end.

The Post-Cold War Period: From Unipolarity to Multi-Polarity

I presented a rather detailed account of the Cold War and the bipolar world. If we are to analyze whether a new Cold War is in the making, we have to have a clear idea of what the original bipolar system was like, how it was born, how it operated and

finally how it came to an end.

When the bipolar world came to an end somewhat abruptly (since no one including the experts on the USSR had predicted the ease with which the Warsaw Pact would disband and the Soviet Union break up into its constituent units), questions as regards what kind of a system the world would head toward began to be asked? Would the world now be unipolar under American leadership, or would it evolve in a multi-polar direction?

A Unipolar System Did Not Emerge

The initial response to the breakdown of the bipolar world was to suggest that if one of the poles had disappeared, the other pole would come to dominate the global system, leading the system in a unipolar direction. What was meant was simple: The U.S. was the dominant power and the strongest country in the world. It could use its position to define the features of a new global system. There was no competing center of power that could resist the Americans or offer an alternative to shape the global system according to their visions and in ways that would serve their interests. Yet, such expectations were not borne out. Why?

It appears that the bipolarity was a dialectical relationship. The idea that if one of the poles broke down, the other would come to dominate the system missed the essential point that the other side would no longer be perceived as a pillar around which all actors would congregate. In other words, the rivalry between poles constituted the driving force of bipolarity. Once one of the poles collapsed, the other would also become weaker. Let us see how this happened. The end of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, for example, rendered the members of the Western Bloc less sensitive to securing American protection and therefore less responsive to American expectations and requests. Although there were rumors that the United States was intending to lessen its military presence on the Continent, American concerns that the Europeans should bear a bigger portion of the expenses of securing Europe were ignored. When the United Kingdom and France decided to strike Libya during the Arab Spring to remove Gaddafi from power, they did so without consulting the United States. There have been instances where some have questioned whether or not NATO is still necessary.

NATO has chosen to take a more proactive role in overseas operations. It soon became apparent that it was difficult to achieve consensus on what operations would be included. Some members were interested in joining operations while others were either not interested or actually opposed. Two cases in point are the American

intervention in Iraq to end the Saddam regime and the operation in Afghanistan after the 9/11 radical Muslim attack on the Twin Towers. In both cases, the U.S., sensing that there was no consensus on how to proceed, came up with the notion of “Coalition of the Willing.” Those participating in these American led efforts included both NATO and non-NATO members. Although developing consensus was somewhat easier in NATO operations within Europe as in the case of Bosnia and later Kosovo, unity was still lacking,

Equally interesting is the fact that after many years of involvement in global affairs and investing in fights with no clear outcomes, the American public grew tired of being involved in prolonged conflicts here and there where it seemed difficult to identify the specific American interests being served. These frustrations were shared or sometimes capitalized upon by American political leaders. Some talked about bringing the soldiers home while others suggested courses of action that were reminiscent of isolationism (e.g. Trump) that characterized American foreign policy before WW II. The debate regarding how active a role the U.S. should play in global politics is still raging.

While the debate will be influenced by what happens in the world as we shall see later, it is clear that America is no longer in a position to aspire to leading a unipolar world. Undoubtedly, it continues to be the most powerful country in the world. Yet, it is not in a position to impose its will easily on others. Furthermore, American attention is becoming increasingly focused on the rise of a new rival, China. Future predictions on the structure of the international system need to consider this.

The Rise of China: A Return to Bipolarity?

Soon after the end of the bipolar world, the People’s Republic of China began its rise to a prominent place in the international system, second only to the U.S.. It is predicted that it may replace it as the world’s biggest economy in the foreseeable future. China’s rise has immediately led to questions as to whether there will emerge a new bipolar world in which the U.S. and China will serve as the leaders. It is tempting to argue that this will indeed be the case, but caution is in order. After WW II the World was divided into two camps with very clear lines where the emergent camps had minimal relations with each other. This does not seem to be the case concerning China. To answer why, we might return to the four dimensions where the poles diverged from each other. Let us look at them:

Politics of Global Governance

While China is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the

world organization is not divided into American and Chinese camps. Membership in the organization is already universal. The relationship among permanent members of the Security Council is not always contentious. China creates the impression that it favors peaceful instruments of international problem-solving. In its actions in the United Nations, it sympathizes with the developing and underdeveloped countries. Still, it does not assume a leadership role and try to mobilize these countries against the Western World. There may also be questions regarding the extent member countries are ready to united under the Chinese banner to challenge others. Furthermore, Russia is still trying to reconstitute itself as a superpower and does not want to acquiesce to Chinese leadership and accept a subsidiary role.

In contrast to the time of the initial Cold War, where a multifarious set of institutions of global and regional governance was lacking, these days there is a multiplicity of organizations, global and regional through which international relations are conducted, neither the U.S. nor China are involved in all of them. Depending on the subject matter they deal with, there are different coalitions in each, rendering leadership a rather diffuse function. Examples include G-7 and G-20 that bring the major economies of the world together, major conferences on questions of universal concern such as those on climate change as well as regional organizations among which the European Union is particularly outstanding as well as Commonwealth of Independent States, the ineffective organization that aspired to bring states of the former Soviet Union under Russian leadership. This ineffective organization aspired to bring states of the former Soviet Union together under Russian leadership. Under such circumstances, a bipolar configuration appears unlikely to obtain in international politics at this particular time.

Security

China is not the leader of a security bloc like the Soviets were after WW II. In fact, from the perspective of security, China appears to be a regional power trying to consolidate its position in the Eastern Pacific region. It is not in a position to assume the burden of providing for the security and defense of other countries, particularly those that are not in its immediate region. Currently, it does not possess the military power that it could project in various parts of the world. Whether it wants to pursue policies in that direction is also unclear.

In terms of nuclear capabilities, Russia is clearly ahead of China. China has not so far engaged in a competitive relationship with Russia in the nuclear field. Russia is also more advanced in arms production including military aircraft and missiles. This is an area where China needs time to catch up with the U.S. and Russia but seems

not to be in a hurry. In contrast, Russia seems interested in restoring its role as a superpower. It therefore is unlikely to accept assuming a subsidiary role to China in global politics. However, at the moment, the two seem united in their rivalrous relationship with the West, particularly the U.S.. Furthermore, some speculation has been that Russia constitutes a natural area of expansion for China and that their interests will clash in the long run.

In summary, the conditions do not favor the emergence of China as an alternative global security provider, another condition needed for the construction of a new bipolar order.

Economics

Chinese economy is integrated with the world economy in marked contrast to the initial bipolar world where the economies of the two camps had limited interactions. The important role China has assumed as a major producer and importer of many goods derives largely from the fact that the Chinese government is at peace with the idea of private enterprise as long as economic actors do not challenge its monopoly on political power. It does not promote an alternative path to economic development, a line which was the case with the Soviet Union.

The economic interdependence between China and its rivals has a tempering influence on their relations. Attempts to drive China out of the international economy and isolate it, a policy that the U.S. seems somewhat interested in presumably for reasons of security, impose hardships not only on China but also on those who initiate measures to reduce trade with China.

Turning to Chinese investments abroad and international credit policies, these have produced negative reactions. Chinese personnel have experienced difficulties in adjusting to foreign environments and are often found to be arrogant and therefore not well liked in countries where they operate. China has been generous with international credit but when repayment fails, it has insisted on acquiring the ownership of major infrastructures like ports, storage facilities, airports and the like. This has led to a decrease in confidence in taking out loans from China and abandoning several previously agreed upon projects.

The Chinese economy, which was developing rapidly during the recent years, often achieving growth rates of ten percent or more, has slowed down. Xi Jing Ping's policies to give priority to state companies and investments is likely to have contributed to the slowing down. One outcome of this has been the almost

disappearance of references to the Belt and Road project that was intended to link China to Europe through a network of land and sea routes from which many countries on the routes hoped to benefit. Chinese economic activity on the international front is also slowing down.

In conclusion, the integration of China to the world economy, its openness to private enterprise and its abstinence from trying to promote an alternative model of economic development stand in the way of its becoming the leader of a rival pole in a new bipolar system.

Ideology

The Communist Party rules China. It has extended some support to Communist parties in the neighboring countries. But, unlike to USSR, it is not in the business of organizing Communism around the world and creating Beijing modeled parties that submit to China's leadership. It is interesting to note that while China has not actively pursued ideological competition with the U.S. and the West in General, it has been the target of criticism of human rights violations, particularly in Sinkiang and Tibet. Chinese failure to respect basic human rights is likely to continue to be an issue of ideological contention between it and its rivals. It is unlikely, however, to constitute basis for bipolar rivalry.

American Attempts to Bring Bipolarity Back

As already noted, the end of the Cold War had led the U.S. to reevaluate its own involvement and role in global politics, a process during which preferences to reduce it became manifest. It soon became apparent, however, that reducing engagement in global politics would be accompanied by a decline in American power and influence. For example, when Trump cancelled two major economic cooperation projects, one with Europe and the other with the countries of the Pacific (Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership TTIP and Trans-Pacific Partnership TPP) as failing to serve American interests, countries that had relied on the U.S. as an economic and security partner suddenly found themselves abandoned. In the Pacific where competition with China was closely felt, potential members of TPP tried to find ways to develop more cooperative relations with China. In contrast, in Europe, it looked as if America would increasingly become a competitor interested in reducing European access to the American market. Trump's policies led to general erosion of trust in the U.S. and hence reliance on it as a partner.

With Biden's election as president who recognized that the go it alone policies proposed by Trump would lead to a significant decline in America's global power

and influence, the U.S. has tried to make a comeback to the world stage as leader. America's current leadership is well aware that the growth of Chinese economic power is at the expense of the U.S.. It has tried to mobilize allies and friends to organize against the expansion of Chinese influence, arguing that growing relations with China presents a security threat to the Western world and countries in the Pacific region. For the latter, it is clear that China's expansionist proclivities constitute a security concern. China has raised questions about the ownership of islands that currently belong to others, claimed ownership of uninhabited sand bars and built military facilities on them, and insists that Taiwan is an integral part of China that will be reintegrated to the mainland even by force, if necessary. Regional countries are interested in containing China but shy away from forming confrontational relationships with it since such an approach would deprive them of the economic benefits of maintaining good relations. In addition, they are unsure of the extent to which they can confide in the U.S. after the experience with Trump showed them that policies could easily change with the change of president. In short, they are reluctant to become a part of a bipolar world in which a constellation of states around the U.S. and around China are pitted against each other.

The Americans have also tried to reduce the growing relations with China on the European front. An early example was asking major European countries not to become shareholders in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that China established mainly to finance Belt and Road projects. The American advice was not heeded. Later, the Americans warned the Europeans that they should refrain from buying 5G technology from Huawei because it would constitute a security risk, a request that was only partially accommodated. More recently, the Americans have encouraged to move the production of computer chips to the U.S. and barred importing chips from China, causing temporary disturbances in the production of many items since computer chips are used these days in manufacturing almost everything. The effects of such restrictions have been particularly felt in automotive production. Further, there are American based allegations regarding the exploitation of cheap labor, violations of human rights and schemes by which the Chinese would secretly collect intelligence about European societies.

The lack of trust in the U.S. and the economic benefits that accrue from expanding trade relations have guided both European and Pacific actors to maintain a moderate relationship with China. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has challenged this general approach. The U.S. has tried to capitalize on the opportunity to create a democracy and human rights front to counter the Russo-Chinese alliance of authoritarian states inclined toward military aggression. China's recent shows of military power in the Taiwan Straits, a return to emphasizing state capitalism under Jing Ping and

poor record on the observation of human rights and its accommodating approach to Russian aggression tend to lend some credence to American allegations. However, China has refrained from fully endorsing the Russian invasion and has indicated in clear terms to the American president during a recent G-20 meeting that while their relationship may be a conflictual one, China is determined to limit it to the employment of peaceful means.

One might thus conclude that China has no intention of establishing a bipolar world in which it would serve as the dominant pole. What type of global order can we expect if we are not moving toward a bipolar world?

Where Is the World System Heading?

In trying to identify the direction toward which the global system is headed, it may be useful to remember that unexpected events may easily invalidate predictions in this area. In an earlier part of this paper, for example, we noted that no one predicted the demise of the Soviet Union. However, everyone was aware of the problems it was encountering.

What are some of the data on which we may build our view of the future? First, looking at the European Union, we may note that while it constitutes a center of economic power, it seems incapable of global economic power because of various conflicting interests among its members and its slow and elaborate decision-making mechanisms. In the security field, on the other hand, it is not a security provider for others, its major powers have their own autonomous agendas and possess widely varying outlooks on achieving security. In the final analysis, the European Union continues to rely on American leadership to attaining its own security.

Looking at Russia, we may conclude that it is moving away from constituting a center of power, both militarily and also economically. The Ukraine Invasion has shown that the Russian army is not the powerful force that everyone feared. The invasion has also generated a number of unfavorable economic consequences. First, Western investments in Russia have stopped, a step that will slow down Russian economic growth. Second, Western Europe has discovered that becoming too reliant on Russia's energy supplies is risky and has turned to different ways of reducing its energy dependency. These include among others finding other sources of gas and oil, resuming nuclear power production, expediting programs for generating clean energy from winds, sunshine and waves. It is unlikely that even if better relations are restored, the demand for Russian energy supplies will go back to its former levels. Third, even former Soviet Union countries want to reduce Russia's influence in their

domestic and international relations. Russia's difficulties in Ukraine has encouraged them to practice greater autonomy. Fourth, the balance of terror continues to restrain Russia from using nuclear weapons to advance its foreign policy goals. Finally, China has refrained from fully backing Russia in Ukraine, serving more as an advocate of restraint. Put together, it appears unlikely that Russia will reestablish itself as a superpower in the foreseeable future.

The power position of India has been improving but it is still too weak for it to aspire to a global role. It has difficulties in countering Chinese challenges on its own borders and in its vicinity. It has a wealth of internal problems that need addressing, and there is no indication that it is currently entertaining plans to assume a major and expanding role in global politics. It has resisted American overtures to join the anti-China front. Similarly, Latin American countries like Brazil and Argentina, or African countries like Nigeria and South Africa are too deeply embroiled in their domestic troubles to offer even regional leadership, let alone ascending to the level of a major global actor.

Finally, we must note that globalization as a component of the neo-liberal ideology that prevailed in the international economy in the post-Soviet period is receding. Even countries that were perceived as having been the main beneficiaries have moved away from it. There is a greater emphasis these days in strengthening national economies and protecting them from unfavorable competition. The arguments to buttress national economies are reinforced by those about protecting national culture, limiting migration and defending against child or forced labor.

In view of the data, how does the foreseeable future look to us? It appears that we are moving not so much toward a multi-polar but rather toward a multi-centered world where centers behave reasonably independently from each other. Will this state of affairs gain permanence or whether it is transitory is challenging to say?

It appears likely that, despite American efforts in the opposite direction, America's "weight" in the international system is expected to decline while China's power position is likely to improve, but this is not going to lead us to a bipolar world that resembles the world of America-Soviet Union bipolarity characterized by two rival economic-political-ideological systems constituting two separate worlds competing with each other without significant economic interactions. In this context, it is interesting to note that the Americans have turned to employing economic weapons to penalize rivals and force them to change their policies. These have included measures like freezing the accounts some countries in American banks, denying countries to use the American operated Swift system to transfer money around the

world, depriving citizens of some countries from using locally issued credit cards or limiting their access to the American market. Apart from the fact that target countries always develop means of getting around the sanctions, such measures invite search for ways to reduce the role of the U.S. in the global financial system, therefore possibly reducing in the long run the instruments through which the Americans have come to play a determining role in the operation of the global economic system.

While a multi-centered world may sound attractive, it constitutes an unpredictable environment that is difficult to manage. I would therefore be concerned that we may be heading toward a world in which there will be more conflict rather than less. A bipolar world, despite the many problems it has presented for our societies, was marked by a period of peace among members of the poles. A multi-centered world may not contain elements like mutually assured destruction that made all parties shy away from armed conflicts since they could escalate into conflicts of a higher order. A multi-centered world may not contain the brakes against armed conflicts that were integral to the bipolar world. We are entering a time of great unpredictability.