

## The Cold War, Bipolarity Structure and the Power Vacuum in the East and South East Asia after 1945

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### Abstract

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This paper discusses the origin of the Cold War, the creation of the new polarity after Second World War and the political development in the East and South East Asian region. Three approaches were useful in explaining the origin of the Cold War, the traditionalists, revisionists and post-revisionists. Post-revisionists approaches argued that both sides of powers, the US or SU could not be blamed to the conflict after the war ended in 1945. The action taken by the both powers were right in the new bipolarity structure, which was totally different with the multipolarity structure before the World War. The regional political development and power configuration in the East and South East Asian were the result of the new bipolarity structure that was emerged after 1945. Without such new polarity the power configuration in that region would be different.

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**Keywords:** Cold War, traditionalists, revisionists, post-revisionists, Soviet Union, the United States, bipolarity structure, East Asia, South East Asia

### 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the development in international relations structure after the end of World War II in 1945. International relations structure was characterised by the bipolarity structure<sup>2</sup> (the relations and rivalries between the two great powers, United States and Soviet Union) after the end of World War II. Bipolar structure is referred to the condition of having two poles in the distribution of power in international politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Bipolar structure is referred to the condition of having two poles in the distribution of power in international politics. See Viotti, P.R., & Kauppi, M, V., (1993), *International Relations Theory*, p. 575.

International relations and political structure after 1945 were different from the political structure before World War II started in 1939. Before World War II, the international structure was a 'multi-polarity system'<sup>3</sup> where there were seven great powers; the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Soviet Union, Japan, France, and Italy. Multi-polarity is referred to the condition in international system with more than two poles. Some scholars use multi-polarity to the condition with more than three poles. The author prefers to use the terms 'multi-polarity' to the condition where there are more than three poles. If there are only three poles in international system, we called it 'tripolarity' structure. After World War II ended in 1945, the power configuration in international relations was dominated by the only two great powers, i.e. the United States and Soviet Union. Only these two great powers remained strong in military and economic terms after the end of World War II 1945. The other powers were relatively very weak compared to their position before of the breaking of World War II in 1939.

This paper will discuss the two scenarios; first, the international relations development after Second World War and the causes of the struggle between two great powers. Secondly, the great powers struggle and international relations development in East Asia and Southeast Asia, and the impact of both great powers policies on East and Southeast Asian region. What caused the conflict between the two great powers after 1945? There are three approaches in explaining the cause of the conflict; traditionalists, revisionists, and post-revisionists.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these approaches gives different answers and different argument in explaining why the struggle between two great powers broke out after the end of World War II.

## **2. The Traditionalists Approach and Soviet Union Foreign Policy**

From the traditionalist approach, the factors that contributed to the conflict between the two great powers were the roles played by the President Stalin and the

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<sup>4</sup>. Nye, J. S. (jr), (1991). *Understanding International Conflict: An Introduction to Theory and History*, p. 98; Deighton, Anne, (1996), 'The Cold War in Europe, 1945-1947: Three Approaches,' in Woods, Ngaire, (1996), *Explaining International Relations since 1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 81-84; Boyle, Peter, (1993), *American.-Soviet Relations; From Russian Revolution to the Fall of Communism*, London and New York; Routledge.

Soviet Union external policy after the end of the World War II.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the World War II, according to traditionalist approach, the United States diplomacy was defensive but the Soviet Union was aggressive and expansive.<sup>6</sup> The United States only awoke gradually to the nature of the Soviet Union threat. Immediately after the Second World War, the United States put up a proposal for a universal world order and collective security through the United Nations Organisation. The Soviet Union did not take the United Nations Organisation seriously. The Soviet Union wanted to expand her influence and dominate the countries in the Eastern Europe. After the war, while the Americans demobilised her troops, the Soviet Union left large armies in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union did not allow free elections in Poland that was under its care.

Soviet Union expansionism was further confirmed when the Soviet Union refused to removed her troops from northern Iran after the war.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet removed her troops only later after pressure from Great Britain and the United States. The Soviet Union foreign policy and her interference in domestic politics of Eastern Europe in late 1940s and early 1950s awoke the Americans to the Soviet Union threat.<sup>8</sup> In 1949, the Soviet Union gave strong support to Mao Tse-tung in the Chinese Civil War. In 1950 with Soviet Union support, communist North Korea's armies crossed the 38 degrees border into South Korea.

Soviet Union also gave support to Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Chairman Aidit and President Sukarno in Indonesia in 1950s in strengthening her communists influence in the Southeast Asian region.

According to the traditionalists approach, the events in North Iran, Eastern Europe countries, China, Korean Peninsular and Vietnam gradually awakened the United States to the threat of Soviet Union expansionism, and then launched her counter-attack on a global scale.

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<sup>5</sup> . Deighton, Anne, 'The Cold War in Europe' in Woods, Ngaire, 1996, *Explaining International Relations since 1945*, Cambridge; Oxford University Press, p. 83

<sup>6</sup> . Spanier, John, (1985), *American Foreign Policy since World War II*, chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> . Woodby, S. & Cottam, M.L., *The Changing Agenda: World Politics since 1945*, chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> . Boyle, P.G., (1993), *American- Soviet Relations: from The Russian Revolution to The Fall of Communism*. London and New York; Routledge, see chapter about the origin of the Cold War 1945-1950, pp. 54-70.

### **3. The Revisionists Approach and the United States Foreign Policy**

The revisionists approach has a different answer to the outbreak of the struggle between the two great powers. To the revisionists approach, the Cold War was caused by the United States factor, rather than Soviet Union expansionism. They argued that at the end of World War II, the structure of international relations was not really in the bipolarity structure. The Soviet Union capabilities were much weaker than the United States. The United States was strengthened by the war and already possessed nuclear weapons by the end of the World War II. The Soviet Union did not possess nuclear weapons and needed time to repair and restructure her economy that was severely damaged by the war. Revisionists argued that Stalin's external behaviour in the early years after World War II was quite moderate. In the Chinese Civil War, Stalin tried to restrain Mao Tse-Tung's communists from taking power in mainland China. In the Greek Civil War, Stalin tried to restrain the Greek Communists. Stalin also allowed the non-Communist governments to exist in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Finland.

The revisionists' arguments that the Americans are more responsible for the outbreak of the great powers conflict can be seen in the role played by President Harry Truman and the nature of United States capitalism. Roosevelt's death in April 1945 was a critical event in American foreign policy. President Harry Truman who replaced Roosevelt, was a staunch anti-communist. In May 1945, the United States cut off the lend-lease programme of wartime aid to Soviet Union. At the Potsdam Conference in August 1945, President Truman tried to intimidate Stalin by mentioning potential use of the atomic bomb that was possessed only by America then. In 1948 President Truman fired his secretary of Agriculture (Henry Wallace) who urged for better relations with the Soviet Union. President Truman's new secretary of defence (James Forrestal) also took a very anti-communist stance.

Revisionists also argued that the nature of the United States capitalism had also contributed to the outbreak of the Cold War. The United States capitalism economy and open international trade required political expansionism. The American economic hegemony could not tolerate any competition that might challenge the American economic expansion. Soviet Union tried to expand her influence in the entire European continent, East and Southeast Asian region. The United States leaders feared repetition of the international economic situation in 1930s, because without a secured international trade, there would be another great depression.

The United States as a great power should play an effective role in international politics and economy. Without effective roles played by the American hegemonic power, it would pave the way to international instability in economics and politics. The Marshall Plan of aid to Europe, Japan post-war Economic recovery Plan (e.g. Yoshida Doctrine), and the United States economic policies towards the Middle East and Southeast Asian regions were the means to expand the American economy and a process of creating stability in the international structure.

#### **4. The Post-Revisionists Approach and Power Vacuum after Second World War**

The post-revisionists approach has a different explanation for the outbreak of conflict between two great powers. They argued that the traditionalists and revisionists approaches are both wrong in explaining the causes to the outbreak of the conflict. Both the Soviet Union and the United States could not be blamed for starting the conflict after World War II.

The great powers conflict was inevitable because of the emergence of a bipolarity structure in the international relations system after World War II. It was different with the situation in the 1930s. In 1939, there was a multi-polarity structure in international relations with seven major powers, i.e. the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, Germany, France, Japan, and Italy. After World War II ended in 1945, there were only two superpowers left, the United States and Soviet Union.

The bipolarity international relations structure after World War II created a power vacuum into which the United States and the Soviet Union were both drawn. Both powers were bound to come into conflict.

To the post-revisionists approach, it is pointless to blame either the United States or the Soviet Union for starting the great power conflict.

The author agrees with the post-revisionists view that the conflict could not be avoided in the bipolarity structure. Both sides were bound to expand their sphere of influence. Neither the United States nor Soviet Union could allow the other to dominate Europe and Pacific Asia region. The role played by the both great powers in the East and Southeast Asian region conflict was one of the series of the international economy and political process in the bipolarity structure.

## 5. Bipolarity Structure & Power Vacuum in the East and South East Asia Region

The struggle and rivalries between the American and Soviet powers that was started in Europe spread to East and Southeast Asian region and dominated the politics and economic relations since in the late 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the December 1991.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese Civil War of 1946-1949 led Mainland China to become a communist state in October 1949 under President Mao Tse-tung. The United States decided in 1949 to try and stop communism spreading down into French Indo-China and other parts of Asia. The Korean War in 1950 then had the effect of extending the 'containment policy' throughout the East Asian region. In Indo-China, Chinese aid had by 1954 enabled communist insurgents to defeat the French in a war of national liberation. The Geneva Conference 1954 then partitioned Vietnam between Communist North and non-communist South. The Vietnam crisis did not end in 1954 with Geneva Conference and divided Vietnam into two parts, North Vietnam communist and South Vietnam democratic. The conflict between North and South Vietnam erupted in the 1960s and remained unsettled until mid 1970s.<sup>10</sup> The Americans faced difficulties in defeating communist attacks on South Vietnam.

In the late 1960s, there were clear signs that the communist North Vietnam would win the war. Finally the North defeated the Americans on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1975. South and North Vietnam were united and became a communist state after April 1975.

The communist victory in China in 1949, the fall of North Vietnam in 1954 and the Korean War 1950-1953 were important events in shaping American policy in East and Southeast Asian region and especially in terms of her military and security architecture in that region.

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<sup>9</sup> . The American foreign economic policy and security towards South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and ASEAN countries had closed related with the political development and ideological rivalry in China, Korea and North Vietnam. It is impossible to understand the international relations in East and Southeast Asia since 1950s without discussing the Cold War development in that region. See, Yung-Hwan J. (ed). (1978). *U.S. Foreign Policy in Asia: An Appraisal of America's Role in Asia*. SantaBarbara, CA; Clio Press; and Fifield, R. H., (1973). *Americans in Southeast Asia; The Roots of Commitment*. New York; Thomas Y. Crowell Co.

<sup>10</sup> . President Richard Nixon once planned troop withdrawal in Vietnam in 1970, but because of Henry Kissinger's opposition, Nixon then changed troop withdrawal to 1975. See Yung-Hwan J. (1978). 'Introduction' in Yung-Hwang J., (1978), *U.S. Foreign Policy in Asia*, p. 5.

The Japan-U.S. Alliance was signed in 1951 soon after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. The main objective was to contain the spread of communism to Japan and prevent Japan from becoming a communist state. The position of Japan was critical after the Second World War. The Japan Communist Party was quite strong and had close relations with the Soviet Union. Further, the Soviet Union also urged the United States to divide Japan into two parts, as had been done to the Korean Peninsula i.e. the North part of Japan to be under Soviet Union control and the South under the Americans. But the Americans rejected the Soviet suggestion. To the Americans, only America had the right over Japan because America was solely responsible for the Japan's surrender in August 1945. Thus the signing of the Japan-U.S. Alliance Treaty in 1951 not only buttressed the American position in Japan but also contained the expansion of communist influence.

The victory of communist North Vietnam in 1954 over the French had a direct impact upon the American political and security planning in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was created in September 1954. SEATO was membered by the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan. The motive was to protect the democratic Southeast Asian countries from becoming communist states.

## **6. Conclusion**

The struggle between American and Soviet powers that started in Europe in the late 1940s dominated the international relations in the East and Southeast Asian region. The bipolarity system; two poles, i.e. the United States and Soviet Union, was influenced by the international relations in East and Southeast Asian region since the 1950s.

In understanding the political and economic relations in the East and Southeast Asian region in the 1960s and 1970s, we need to understand the international relations structure and the power configuration between the great powers, especially the relations between the two great powers; the United States and Soviet Union/China. Without understanding the external policies of the two great powers, it is impossible to analyse political developments in East and Southeast Asian region. The political development in the East and South East Asia were related with the power vacuum and strongly influenced by the two great powers and bipolarity structure.

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