

The Cold War, Old and New: A Preliminary Comparative Study of Polarity, Polarisation, and Elements of (In)stability

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the term ‘new Cold War’ has become popular among the media and in academia as a description of contemporary world politics, in general, and major-power relations. Despite the connotations of its name, the Cold War period, sometimes referred to as the long peace, was associated with stability and the avoidance of an all-out world war. This study offers a preliminary examination of the extent to which 21st-century world politics reflects the features of the old Cold War. The findings show that the polarity and polarisation inherent in the current international system are similar to conditions of the early Cold War period (1947–1962), which can be classified as both power bipolar and cluster bipolar. Theoretically, this systemic condition is neither most nor least prone to war. However, similar to the pre-1962 Cold War period, when the implicit rules of the major-power game had yet reached maturity, little consensus on the proper conduct of American–Chinese relations has been reached at present, making current major-power politics highly uncertain and prone to conflict that may lead to war.

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INTRODUCTION

Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) triumphalist work *The End of History and the Last Man* captured the post-Cold War *zeitgeist* and the imagination of the American

intellectual class. In this book, Fukuyama heralded the triumph of liberal democracy, the market economy, and the end of the great power rivalries, which had been the major framework through which international relations scholars understood geopolitics. Fukuyama and other Western intellectuals' hubristic reactions to the end of the Cold War were, however, short-lived (Bunyavejchewin, 2012). Whereas many liberals expected perpetual peace to be the result of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the renowned political scientist John Mearsheimer (2014) argued, "... the possibility reminds us that the threat of great-power war has not disappeared" (p. 2). Accordingly, the notion that great-power competition has been consigned to the ash heap of history is simply not true. Rather, this competition is an obvious characteristic of international relations today. The occurrence of conflicts among major powers, which are caused by the changing structure of the international system, has opened the debate on new resonances of the old Cold War.

As a matter of fact, there is a wide range of explanations for major-power competition and the brink of a new Cold War. For instance, Allison (2017) warns that the United States and China are on the verge of falling into the Thucydides trap. In this perilous scenario brought about by the ongoing rivalry between the Americans and Chinese, war would be inevitable (Allison, 2017). Similarly, Mearsheimer (2014) asserts that "[t]here are no status quo powers in the international system, save for the occasional hegemon that wants to maintain

its dominating position over potential rivals" (p. 2). In other words, states inherently have revisionist intentions and, certainly, China has an incentive to shift the international balance of power in its favour.

In his debate with the former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Mearsheimer argued that China can transform its economic wealth into military power and has constantly been attempting to dominate Asia (Brzezinski & Mearsheimer, 2005). Further, China's attempts to dominate this region will leave the United States with no choice but to "... behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War" (Brzezinski & Mearsheimer, 2005, p. 48). In a similar comparison of China with the Soviet Union, Westad (2019) writes, "China's determination to hack away at the United States' position in Asia is more tenacious than anything Stalin ever attempted in Europe" (p. 93). Further, he notes that "[e]ven though the United States currently enjoys far greater military superiority over China than it did over the Soviet Union, Beijing has the potential to catch up much more quickly and comprehensively than Moscow ever could" (Westad, 2019, p. 90).

Recently, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2020) observed in his *Foreign Affairs* article that "... the pandemic is exacerbating the U.S.–Chinese rivalry, increasing mistrust, one-upmanship, and mutual blame. This will surely worsen if, as now seems inevitable,

the pandemic becomes a major issue in the U.S. presidential election” (p. 63). Further, many renowned political scientists like Stephen Walt (2020) have highlighted the impact of unit-level factors, such as domestic political institutions in major capitals, on the strengthening of the new Cold War.

The new Cold War narrative, which is becoming increasingly prevalent today, is not limited to the American–Chinese rivalry. Russia’s role in world politics, particularly after Moscow’s use of force against Ukraine in Crimea and Donbass, became a key issue in the debate over the new Cold War (e.g., Fisher, 2019; Legvold, 2014; Lucas, 2008). Although most discussions focus on the Sino-Russian axis, some analysts mention the possibility of the establishment of a new *modus vivendi* between the United States and Russia to counter China (e.g., Blackwill, 2020; Miller, 2020; Sokolsky & Rumer, 2020).

This discussion indicates that the debate over the new Cold War has not led to a consensus on the use of this historical analogy. Arguably, the Cold War period was relatively peaceful, since a third world war was avoided during the four decades of superpower peace (Gaddis, 1986). Therefore, is it correct to describe the current state of affairs as a new Cold War? This study examines the extent to which the events shaping 21st-century world politics are the modern resonances of events that occurred during the early Cold War period. For this purpose, we address two questions:

- Is the contemporary structure of the international political system analogous to either the pre- or post-1962 periods of the Cold War?
- Do Cold War–like factors that increase stability currently exist in international politics?

The comparisons between the contemporary period and Cold War era, especially the post-1962 years, will help us anticipate future events. By understanding the characteristics of the earlier system, which has been described by renowned historian John Gaddis (1986) as the ‘long peace’, we can better understand the complexity of the new system and clarify whether the near future will hold vestiges of past stability.

Definitions, Concepts, and Assumptions

This study draws primarily on Wayman’s (1984, 1985) concept of power and cluster polarity to describe the relationship between the distribution of power in the international system and states’ war-proneness. Gaddis’ (1986) concept of the long peace is also used to describe the conditions that brought about the relative stability of the Cold War. This section begins by looking at the distribution of power in the international system.

The distribution of power within the international system coalesces around major powers, or poles. It is not constant over time; variations in the polarity, or the number of poles, within the international system can help us explain states’ behaviour and changes in the international system itself (Waltz, 1979). Two definitions of polarity is relevant

to this discussion: power polarity and cluster polarity. Each gives a different picture of the international system. Power polarity refers to the concentration of capabilities within the international system—that is, whether power is concentrated in relatively few states or diffused across several states. Using this definition, we can identify two distinct configurations of the international system: a bipolar system (in which such capabilities are concentrated in the hands of two major powers) and a multipolar system (in which such capabilities are more evenly distributed among three or more major powers).

By contrast, cluster polarity refers to the presence of mutually exclusive blocs or clusters of aligned states in the number of poles within the international system. From this perspective, polarisation arises when

there are coalitions within but not across clusters. By this definition, we can identify two more mutually exclusive configurations of the international system: cluster bipolarity (in which almost all states in the system are tightly aligned with considerable and mutual hostility), and cluster multipolarity (in which the system is made up of multiple blocs with overlapping membership).

Garnham (1985) and Wayman (1985) suggest that we should combine these definitions. Doing so yields a two-by-two matrix containing four different configurations of the international system (detailed in Figure 1):

- Power multipolar and cluster multipolar, a system in which multiple major powers form

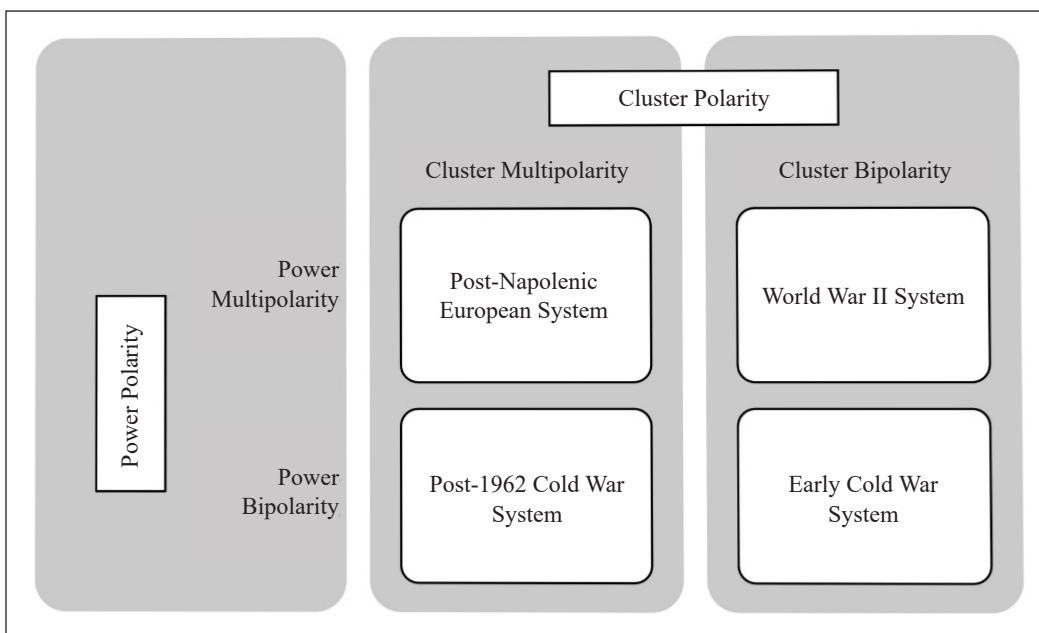


Figure 1. Types of international systems based on the conceptual combination of power polarity and cluster polarity proposed by Wayman (1985)

- multiple blocs of alliances (e.g., post-Napoleonic Europe);
- Power multipolar and cluster bipolar, a system in which multiple major powers are aligned into two hostile blocs (e.g., World War II);
 - Power bipolar and cluster multipolar, a system in which there are two superpowers, but some nations are aligned in a third, separate bloc (e.g., the post-1962 Cold War system);
 - Power bipolar and cluster bipolar, a system in which there are two superpowers and the rest of the world is divided into respective, opposing blocs (e.g., the pre-1962 Cold War system).

However, these configurations of the international system do not include true unipolarity, as a system is not completely unipolar when counterbalancing by other states is feasible (Wohlforth, 1999).

Which of these systems is most stable—that is, which can best preserve the status quo without recourse to war? Although stability does not equal peace, a stable system makes crises less likely and conflicts less dangerous (Cashman, 2014). Wayman's (1985) statistical study showed that power multipolar and cluster bipolar systems are more war-prone than power bipolar and cluster multipolar systems. For instance, the Cold War international system after 1962 was power bipolar, which reduced great powers' uncertainty (Quackenbush, 2015), and cluster multipolar due to the Sino-Soviet split, which made international alliance

commitments somewhat unambiguous and reduced the likelihood of war (Singer et al., 1972).

Wayman's picture of the Cold War is similar to Gaddis's (1986) concept of the long peace. Gaddis identified seven factors that contributed to the relative stability of the Cold War, especially after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: (a) bipolarity, (b) the mutual independence of the US and the Soviet Union, (c) the restrained domestic politics of each superpower, (d) their nuclear arsenals, (e) the presence of reconnaissance technologies (because they made surprise attacks impractical), (f) the moderation of each side's attempts to restructure the international order, and (g) the rules of the superpower game (Gaddis, 1986). The rules of the superpower game included implicit rules that became norms over time, such as (a) mutual respect for one another's spheres of influence, (b) avoiding direct military confrontation, (c) determination to use nuclear weapons only as last resort, (d) a preference for predictable anomalies over unpredictable rationality, and (e) a tacit agreement not to undermine the other side's domestic authority (Gaddis, 1986, 1989). Those rules, however, evolved over time. Because of such rules, which became more efficacious after the 1962 crisis, the actions each side could expect from the other were implicitly defined, and this encouraged stability. The lack of stability in the early Cold War might be explained by the fact that the rules took years to become embedded (Gaddis, 1989).

Using the concepts discussed earlier, we make the following assumptions:

Assumption 1: A system that is power bipolar and cluster multipolar will most likely be stable, as the probability of warfare tends to be minimal. By contrast, a power multipolar and cluster bipolar system is least likely to be stable, as the probability of serious warfare is greatest in this scenario.

Assumption 2: When the major powers adhere implicitly to more rules of the game, the chance of systemic stability increases.

Assumption 3: The post-1962 Cold War system was characterised by a very stable international structure, which reduced the probability of large-scale wars.

METHODS

This study uses case study methods, specifically the combination of over-time case comparisons and explanatory typologies, to address the research questions (Bennett & Elman, 2007). In this study, the unit of analysis is the international system; that is, we compare certain systemic attributes for three different periods: the present (2000–2020), the pre-1962 Cold War (1947–1962) and the post-1962 Cold War (1962–1989).

Building on Wayman’s (1985) framework, we categorise the structure of the current international system using an explanatory typology with two dimensions, power polarity and cluster polarity. The

rows and columns of the matrix classify the system’s polarity dimensions, and each cell in the space is associated with predicted values of stability as per Assumption 1 (see Figure 1). Then, quantitative data from the Correlates of War (COW) Project datasets (Singer et al., 1972) are used to locate the contemporary structure of the international system within the typology to determine how similar it is to the Cold War era.

The study used two measurements of power concentration. One is the concentration index of major-power capabilities (CON) developed by Singer et al. (1972). Capability concentration affects the uncertainty in the system; higher concentrations mitigate a decision-maker’s uncertainty (e.g., fear of misperception), whereas lower concentrations increase it (Singer et al., 1972). This index is calculated using the standard deviation of the capabilities of nations within the major-power system, as classified by the COW Project. The formula for the index is as follows:

$$CON = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (Si)^2 - \frac{1}{n}}{1 - \frac{1}{n}}}$$

Where,

n = number of major-power nations

Si = nation i ’s share (from .00 to 1.00) of major-power capabilities

The CON value is 1 when one major power holds 100% of the capabilities. CON values are calculated using Composite Index

of National Capability (CINC) scores from the COW National Material Capabilities v5.0 dataset (Singer et al., 1972). CINC scores are calculated using six variables: the total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military expenditure of all states.

Since the number of major powers is an important aspect of CON, it is worth noting that the term ‘major power’ refers strictly to a state designated by the Correlates of War Project (2017) as a major power. According to Sarkees and Wayman (2010), major powers are defined as “... states with especially high levels of material capabilities, so that their military reach is global; they are also those that are informally treated as great powers by the other members of the great power club” (p. 34). The great-power club is also termed the major-power subsystem, which is treated as a subset of the international system, in the COW database. Hence, some states, despite recording high levels of capabilities, are technically not considered major powers. Some examples are Australia and India.

The second power concentration index, which is derived from the foregoing dataset, is the percentage of major-power capabilities owned by the two mightiest nations (TWOCON). The two indices are used to compare global bipolar power concentration. Since the earlier COW dataset covers only the duration 1816–2012, we also examined qualitative evidence, particularly on coalitions and alliance bonds, to clarify the tendency of polarity

changes. Further, qualitative inquiry may be particularly beneficial in cluster detection, which is very difficult (Ray, 1990).

The aforementioned discussion clarifies our approach to address the first research question. To address the second research question, we engaged in qualitative analysis of the current system to identify rules of the big-power game that might be like the Cold War era, especially the post-1962 period, in accordance with the account of the long peace provided by Gaddis (1986). The behavioural variables that determine whether the game is rule-based are as follows:

- V1: Respect spheres of influence.
- V2: Avoid direct military encounter.
- V3: Use nuclear weapons only as a last resort.
- V4: Prefer a predictable anomaly over an unpredictable rationality.
- V5: Do not seek to undermine the other side’s domestic authority.

Although these are unmeasured variables, the emergence of any rules would reflect the international system’s maturity and a higher likelihood of international stability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of our computations using the COW dataset and the qualitative findings on the systemic features of the current international system. Subsequently, the section discusses whether Cold War-like rules exist in contemporary major-power relations. Finally, it addresses the questions raised by this study.

Polarity and Polarisation

Before describing our analyses, we first discuss the list of major powers. As demonstrated in Table 1, during the Cold War period, there were five major-power nations: (a) the United States, (b) the United Kingdom, (c) France, (d) the Soviet Union, and (e) China. From 1991 to 2016 (the latest year for which COW data are available), Japan had a place in the major-power club, and Russia was also listed as a major-power. However, the COW list of major powers is a static record and, therefore, may not reflect a new dynamism in world politics. For instance, although the roles played by Australia and India in international politics have expanded in recent years and the countries have conducted several military activities, such as joint military exercises, they are not mentioned in the COW list.

As shown in Table 2, the CON figure changed from 0.321 in 2000 to 0.436 in 2012. In addition, during 2009–2012, the figures surpassed the highest CON value

(.409) during the Cold War. Based on this finding, we can reasonably infer that from 2013 onwards, the system's capabilities became highly concentrated in the hands of very few major powers. For instance, from 2009 to 2012, China and the United States together held 74% of the system's major-power capabilities (see Table 3). We will discuss this TWOCON index in detail later. At this point, the consideration of the CON index alone reveals that the fluctuations in systemic capability concentration since the mid-2000s have been comparable to some extent to the fluctuations of the early Cold War years, though with an increasing rather than decreasing trend.

Table 3 reveals a long-term trend of bipolar power concentration in the major-power system for the period 2000–2012. In 2000, China and the United States, the two mightiest powers at the time, held 63% of the system's major-power capabilities; subsequently, in 2012, they held 74%. Based on this trend, we infer that from 2013 onwards, power polarity changed in the direction of a greater bipolar concentration, where TWOCON was higher than .74. Considering this power-polarity dimension alone, we can say that the system that has been prevalent since 2005, the year during which TWOCON was .68, is similar to the early Cold War system. In both systems, capabilities are so unevenly distributed that two hostile major powers are more powerful than all other states combined, which to an extent ensures their autonomy in self-defence. Consequently, using the two indices discussed earlier, we conclude

Table 1
Entry and exit dates of major-power states

State name	Duration
United States	1898–2016
United Kingdom	1816–2016
France	1816–1940; 1945–2016
Germany/Prussia	1816–1918; 1925–1945; 1991–2016
Austria-Hungary	1816–1918
Italy/Serbia	1860–1943
Russia/USSR	1816–1917; 1922–2016
China	1950–2016
Japan	1895–1945; 1991–2016

Note. Data from the Correlates of War Project (2017)

Table 2
Capability concentration

Year	CON	Year	CON	Year	CON	Year	CON
1939	.235	1958	.320	1977	.319	1996	.283
1940	.221	1959	.317	1978	.316	1997	.292
1941	.272	1960	.306	1979	.312	1998	.304
1942	.292	1961	.318	1980	.315	1999	.312
1943	.365	1962	.325	1981	.320	2000	.321
1944	.355	1963	.321	1982	.328	2001	.325
1945	.436	1964	.316	1983	.330	2002	.338
1946	.452	1965	.317	1984	.325	2003	.342
1947	.408	1966	.327	1985	.330	2004	.357
1948	.409	1967	.334	1986	.327	2005	.368
1949	.390	1968	.336	1987	.324	2006	.377
1950	.332	1969	.333	1988	.323	2007	.388
1951	.373	1970	.324	1989	.307	2008	.394
1952	.374	1971	.321	1990	.299	2009	.421
1953	.378	1972	.319	1991	.246	2010	.420
1954	.352	1973	.316	1992	.266	2011	.428
1955	.355	1974	.312	1993	.283	2012	.436
1956	.344	1975	.317	1994	.273		
1957	.341	1976	.319	1995	.277		

Note. Data computed from Singer et al. (1972). CON = concentration index of major-power capabilities.

that the power polarity of the current international system appears similar, but not identical, to the international system of the early Cold War period, since both systems are power bipolar.

The identification of cluster polarity, or polarisation, is very difficult and often contested. However, we argue that the present-day international system is deviating from cluster multipolarity, since the nascent trend of big-power competition has shifted closer to alliance bipolarisation. This signifies the clustering of the system into two major-power blocs, one led by the United States and the other by China, which have relatively loose alliance structures. The

clustering of the aligned major-power and medium-power nations is further evidenced by the recent realignment of major-power postures in flashpoint regions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Now, we examine the ongoing alliance bipolarisation in detail.

In the major-power subsystem, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan have historically been US allies. The United States and the three Western European powers have been members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since the Cold War period. Japan has conventionally been considered the anchor of the US hub-and-spoke system in the Indo-Pacific and was designated

Table 3
Shares of the major-power capabilities held by the two strongest powers

Year	1stcap	2ndcap	TWOCON	Year	1stcap	2ndcap	TWOCON
1939	USA	GMY	.50	1976	RUS	USA	.66
1940	USA	GMY	.49	1977	RUS	USA	.65
1941	USA	GMY	.59	1978	RUS	USA	.65
1942	USA	GMY	.60	1979	RUS	USA	.64
1943	USA	GMY	.65	1980	RUS	USA	.64
1944	USA	GMY	.66	1981	RUS	USA	.65
1945	USA	RUS	.68	1982	RUS	USA	.65
1946	USA	RUS	.77	1983	RUS	USA	.66
1947	USA	RUS	.78	1984	RUS	USA	.66
1948	USA	RUS	.81	1985	RUS	USA	.67
1949	USA	RUS	.81	1986	RUS	USA	.66
1950	USA	RUS	.69	1987	RUS	USA	.66
1951	USA	RUS	.72	1988	RUS	USA	.66
1952	USA	RUS	.72	1989	USA	RUS	.64
1953	USA	RUS	.73	1990	USA	RUS	.63
1954	USA	RUS	.72	1991	USA	CHN	.51
1955	USA	RUS	.72	1992	USA	CHN	.56
1956	USA	RUS	.71	1993	USA	CHN	.58
1957	USA	RUS	.70	1994	USA	CHN	.57
1958	USA	RUS	.68	1995	USA	CHN	.58
1959	USA	RUS	.68	1996	CHN	USA	.59
1960	USA	RUS	.67	1997	CHN	USA	.60
1961	USA	RUS	.69	1998	CHN	USA	.61
1962	USA	RUS	.69	1999	CHN	USA	.62
1963	USA	RUS	.69	2000	CHN	USA	.63
1964	USA	RUS	.68	2001	CHN	USA	.64
1965	USA	RUS	.68	2002	CHN	USA	.65
1966	USA	RUS	.69	2003	CHN	USA	.65
1967	USA	RUS	.70	2004	CHN	USA	.67
1968	USA	RUS	.70	2005	CHN	USA	.68
1969	USA	RUS	.69	2006	CHN	USA	.69
1970	USA	RUS	.68	2007	CHN	USA	.70
1971	RUS	USA	.67	2008	CHN	USA	.71
1972	RUS	USA	.67	2009	CHN	USA	.74
1973	RUS	USA	.67	2010	CHN	USA	.74
1974	RUS	USA	.66	2011	CHN	USA	.74
1975	RUS	USA	.65	2012	CHN	USA	.74

Note. Data computed from Singer et al. (1972). 1stcap = the system's largest military power, measured by CINC score; 2ndcap = the system's second largest military power, measured by CINC score; TWOCON = the percentage of major-power capabilities held by the two strongest powers; USA = United States; RUS = Russia/USSR; GMY = Germany/Prussia; CHN = China.

a major non-NATO ally (MNNA) of the United States. In addition, the Big Three, that is, London, Paris, and Berlin, have signed various defence agreements and treaties with one another. However, Russia has arguably aligned itself with China. Both nations signed the Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship in 2001. In the same year, they jointly formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), or Shanghai Pact. There are no major-power bonds across the two main blocs; rather, intra-cluster bonding has prevailed among them. This discussion indicates the presence of bipolarisation within the great-power club.

Further, recent trends in coalitions and alliances, particularly among major and medium powers, focus on cluster bipolarity. As depicted in Figure 2, it is possible to identify two well-defined blocs of big-power allies with many multilaterals within each bloc. For instance, several medium powers with democratic regimes, notably Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, have traditionally aligned themselves with the United States. They have participated in several United States–led multilateral institutions, including the ANZUS Pact; the Five Eyes (FVEY), which is an intelligence alliance; and NATO. In contrast, medium

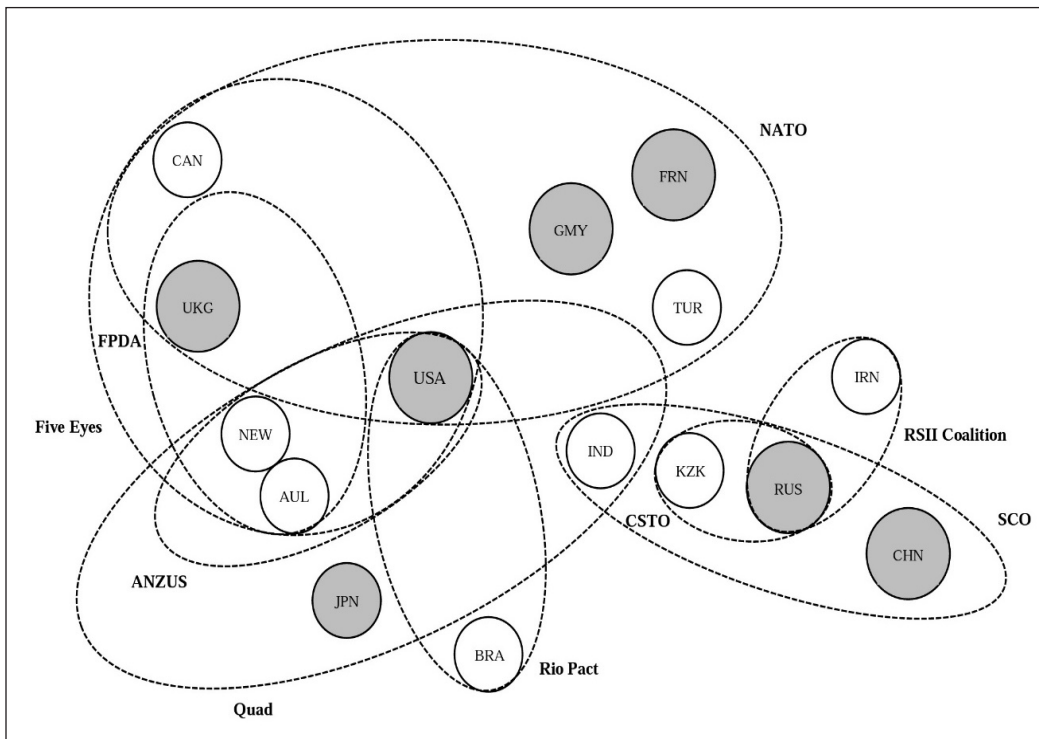


Figure 2. Multilateral coalitions and alliances led by major powers
 CAN = Canada, FRN = France, GMY, Germany, USA = United States, IND = India, JPN = Japan, CHN, China, KZK = Kazakhstan, RUS = Russia, BRA = Brazil, ANZUS = Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty, CSTO = Collective Security Treaty Organization, FDPA = Five Powers Defence Arrangements, NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization, SCO = Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

powers with illiberal regimes, such as Kazakhstan, have always tended to align themselves with the China-led bloc, in which Russia is China's junior partner. Although China has not formed any NATO-like alliances, military cooperation is ensured by the SCO, which has resulted in a loose coalition sometimes called the Shanghai Pact. Unlike China, which has not created any organisations, Russia formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is a formal alliance led by Moscow.

Overall, India tends to support both opposing blocs; accordingly, New Delhi joined the SCO in 2017. However, India's SCO membership appears to be part of Russia's balancing act against the preponderance of China's power in the coalition (Jiang, 2020). Further, since China is India's perennial antagonist, the Indian presence in the SCO cannot be considered a reflection of New Delhi's alignment with the Chinese side. In addition, China's rapidly expanding ties with nations in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, areas that are historically considered to be within India's sphere of influence, have prompted India to align itself, at least tactically, with the American bloc.

India's support for the Americans is evident from the country's decision to advocate the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), or the Quad, along with Australia, Japan, and the United States. The revival of the Quad is expected to deter China's efforts to alter the territorial status quo in disputed areas from the South

China Sea to the Himalayas through military action. Accordingly, the Quad can be considered an anti-China alliance of like-minded Indo-Pacific powers (Heydarian, 2020).

This discussion establishes that the current international system is shifting toward cluster bipolarity, where the alliance configuration is divided into two main blocs led by the United States and China. By considering both the power and cluster polarity of the current period, we argue that today's systemic conditions are moderately similar, but not identical, to those of the pre-1962 Cold War system, where big-power politics was divided into two camps and non-bloc major powers were absent.

Features of the Major-Power Game

Five unmeasured variables, identified by Gaddis (1986), are considered as indicators of the game being played by the implicit rules. The contributions of these variables to international stability were delineated a priori in this analysis. Our findings revealed that—except for avoiding direct military conflict and the use of nuclear weapons—no indications could be observed in 21st-century world politics. The findings derived from the synthesis of qualitative evidence are as follows:

Respect Spheres of Influence. This normative code of conduct was implicitly endorsed by both the United States and the Soviet Union, allowing unnecessary war to be avoided. For instance, in 1968, Washington did not exploit the Prague

Spring to undermine Soviet control of Czechoslovakia (Gaddis, 1989). However, this does not appear to be the case in the 21st century. The denial of *droit de regard*, which is exerted by other major powers, is perhaps best exemplified by NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe, which is traditionally considered to fall within Russia's sphere of influence. In 2014, Moscow retaliated against the United States-led NATO expansion by unilaterally annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and thereby making this region a flashpoint for major-power confrontation (Carbonnel, 2014).

China's expansion of its strategic influence in Eastern Europe, Central and South Asia, and Latin America is another example of the countries' disrespect for each other's spheres of influence. Eastern Europe and Central Asia are regions traditionally considered to be within Russia's sphere of influence, whereas South Asia is an area over which India has long claimed political rights (Pande, 2018). The last region, Latin America, which is perhaps the most important among all the regions, has long been a part of the US sphere of influence. Further, the Chinese expansion implemented through massive Belt and Road Initiative projects could be perceived as an attempt by Beijing to alter the status quo in the relevant regions unilaterally; such actions inherently heighten the risk of militarised conflict (Chan, 2020; Nurgozhayeva, 2020).

Avoid Direct Military Encounter. At no point during the post-1962 Cold War period

did the United States and the Soviet Union directly confront each other militarily. Both superpowers were prudent and well aware of chain-ganging, which can cause conflict through ties to third parties (Gaddis, 1989). However, in recent years, the actions of major-power states vis-à-vis one another have appeared to be much less cautious. Arguably, the United States and China, in particular, have been on opposing sides in issues ranging from Hong Kong's crisis to East Asia's maritime disputes (Borger & Graham-Harrison, 2020). The latter issue, which involves the South China Sea, has become the most important flashpoint between the two nations (Stashwick, 2019). The troubled waters of the South China Sea have repeatedly been listed as the fault line with the greatest risk for the start of a third world war (e.g., Farley, 2018). Today, serious displays of force by China and the Quad have created an inherently tense, war-prone situation (Hadano, 2020; Moriyasu & Khan, 2020). Despite being a war-prone pair, there has been virtually no serious armed conflict involving Washington and Beijing.

Washington and Beijing are not the only war-prone dyad. The recent (mid-2020) skirmishes in the Himalayas, which are a continuation of a decades-old boundary dispute, have risked fuelling China-India confrontation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which is an imprecise demarcation line between Asia's nuclear giants. In 1962, Beijing and New Delhi had gone to war over this contested boundary, which ended with a truce that

established the 3,488-km-long LAC border. The international community has blamed China for the most recent border conflict. China's recent moves in the Himalayas were allegedly designed to change the status quo line of demarcation unilaterally (Taneja, 2017). Further, the latest skirmish can be interpreted as being a part of China's efforts to push its territorial claims, including its claims in the East and South China Seas, amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Sibbal, 2020).

In addition, with Russia's annexation of Crimea by force in 2014 and the expansion of the United States and NATO in Eastern Europe, the prospects of a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia have become real. Moscow is expected to react in a hostile manner to the American-led alliance operating at the country's border (Marten, 2017). Moreover, experts say that further unilateral annexations by Russia are distinctly possible. The country's targets reportedly include Georgia and Belarus (Blank, 2019; Goble, 2015). Incidents at the front lines can result in militarised encounters and potentially drag major powers and their alliances to a large-scale war.

Use Nuclear Weapons Only as a Last Resort. After the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in 1962, regardless of the political rhetoric from the White House or Kremlin, both superpowers strictly reserved their nuclear weapons for the worst-case scenario of war. In these countries, the tradition of maintaining a sharp delineation between

nuclear and conventional arsenals evolved following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. The feeling of absolute power engendered by possession of nuclear weapons created mutual fears of conflict escalation. Further, moral sensibilities among US policy elites, which were strengthened by the unprecedented devastation caused by nuclear weapons, played an important role in discouraging their use, particularly during the early Cold War years. This pattern of caution contributed to the development of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was ratified by the United States and Soviet Union. Moreover, the two parties signed the bilateral Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987.

The risk of a nuclear war between major powers is higher today than the early Cold War period (Saradzhyan, 2019). The United States withdrew from the INF Treaty with Russia in 2019; currently, it only adheres to the New START Treaty, which will expire in 2021. Concurrently, China is planning to double the number of its nuclear weapons within the next decade. Further, it has allegedly built nuclear facilities near its disputed border with India (Bhat, 2020).

Despite the risks and uncertainties that are prevalent today, big powers seem to agree tacitly that nuclear arsenals must be used only in the extreme circumstance of a total, rather than limited, war, since the stakes of using nuclear weapons are immensely high for all sides. Hence, a big-power nuclear war is not likely, at least in the near future.

Prefer a Predictable Anomaly over an Unpredictable Rationality. One of the remarkable features of the Cold War era is the extent to which the superpowers and their allies tolerated “a series of awkward, artificial, and apparently unstable regional arrangements” (Gaddis, 1989, pp. 61-62). Several anomalies that appear to be wildly and illogically improvised include the division of Germany, separation of the Korean peninsula, and existence of a Soviet-aligned Cuba approximately 150 km from the US soil. All of these anomalies lasted until the end of the Cold War; this indicates that the superpowers were not interested in trading familiar anomalies for something more rational but unpredictable (Gaddis, 1989).

The Cold War’s unusual political artefacts, for example, the divided Korean peninsula, have become a normality in contemporary world affairs. Therefore, no Cold War-like formulas of major-power toleration appear to exist today.

Do Not Seek to Undermine the Other Side’s Domestic Authority. During the Cold War period, leadership crises occasionally occurred in Washington and Moscow including, for example, Richard Nixon’s resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Still, neither the American nor the Soviet side seriously exploited the other’s domestic vulnerability. This restraint from subverting each other’s regimes was a clear feature that stabilised Cold War politics (Gaddis, 1989).

However, today, such reciprocal tolerance does not appear to be a dominant characteristic of international politics. Rather, major-power nations always seem willing to undermine other states’ internal leadership. This is best exemplified by Russia’s meddling in the 2016 US presidential election (Baines & Jones, 2018). Apart from Russia, China has reportedly attempted to meddle in the US elections and infiltrate big-power parliaments, such as those in Australia and the United Kingdom (Gardner, 2020; Martin, 2019).

Assessment

Our findings show that the international system has become power bipolar since the mid-2000s and has recently been shifting towards cluster bipolarity, characterised by two mutually exclusive blocs headed by the United States and China. Comparatively, the current system tends to be parallel to the early Cold War system. Because of the occurrence of polarity and polarisation, the Cold War analogy of contemporary world politics appears broadly relevant. However, strictly speaking, it is more analogous to that of the pre-1962 Cold War period.

Perhaps the most obvious early Cold War resonance of our time is that the new round of major-power rivalry is a chess game being played with the same pieces as during 1947–1962. Specifically, both periods are characterised by the competition between two opposing blocs, one of which is led by the United States; however, the leader of the opposite bloc has changed from Soviet Russia to China. In contemporary

politics, Russia has been drawn into the Chinese orbit to become China's junior partner within the same allied dyad. Yet, the current Kremlin has greater independence than newly born China did in the 1950s. Its role is, therefore, equally important to the present superpowers.

Our analysis of systemic stability is based on Wayman's (1985) conceptual explanation. We infer that the present-day international system is, at least for now, moderately stable, because a system that combines power and cluster bipolarity is neither the most nor the least prone to war. Nevertheless, this does not mean that contemporary world politics does not involve militarised international disputes. Rather, it simply means that the current system tends to preserve the status quo without great risk of an all-out world war.

Notwithstanding the relatively positive picture provided by the aforementioned discussion, the ongoing major-power game does not appear to be rule-based, due to the limited predictability of behaviour by each side. This, in turn, can lead to a crisis of misperception and mistrust among the major powers, which unavoidably contributes to a higher probability of conflict and, thereby, war. "What stability does require is a sense of caution, maturity, and responsibility on both sides", writes Gaddis (1989, p. 62). However, without adherence to a set of effective, implicit Cold War-like rules of the game, such a requirement cannot be satisfied; therefore, the picture of major-

power relations drawn from the second question appears to be darker and gloomier.

Finally, it should be noted that, given contextual differences between then and now from the number of key players and their relative strengths to globalisation, adopting a holistic approach to analysing major-power politics is hardly possible. We also acknowledge some study limitations, including relying heavily on Gaddis's (1986) decades-old thesis, which is certainly debatable, as a starting point for comparison. Accordingly, our findings should be regarded as preliminary evidence, and further in-depth analyses are needed.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether contemporary world politics reflects the characteristics of the Cold War periods. In other words, it examined whether the popular new Cold War analogy has some relevance to the old Cold War reality. Our answer to this question is a qualified 'yes'.

Today's systemic conditions are similar, although not identical, to the conditions of the pre-1962 Cold War system. In terms of polarity and polarisation, the current international system is power bipolar, and is shifting closer to cluster bipolarity. Additionally, the key players and their allies are almost the same as the players during the early Cold War period. The central differences between the periods are that Soviet Russia opposed the US in the past, but China does so now and that

Putin's Russia is much stronger than Mao's China. This allows Moscow to retain some autonomy from Beijing. Arguably, these systemic power configurations suggest that contemporary world politics does not set the stage for either the best or the worst possibility for international stability.

Still, the power game currently played by major powers is not predominantly rule-based. Sino-American politics has not yet to become mature, although a limited, tacit consensus regarding the non-use of nuclear weapons has been reached. This differs from the post-1962 Cold War period, during which the superpowers adhered to a set of implicit rules, a key ingredient of the long peace. The current situation is thus likely to lead to growing uncertainty and destabilisation. Militarised disputes, particularly in flashpoint regions from the South China Sea to the Himalayas, should be expected. Despite this, a third world war is extremely unlikely to occur in the near future.

Even if history does not repeat itself, the turning point of world politics in the current period, we argue, will be a new Sino-Soviet split. In such a circumstance, the international system will become power bipolar and cluster multipolar, which is arguably the least war-prone situation. Finally, this condition will probably lead to a new long peace, which is the most peaceful scenario that can be achieved in our anarchic world.

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