

Changing Nature of World Politics: From Bipolarity to Multipolarity

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Abstract: *World Politics is undergoing a tremendous change in recent times. The world Political System transformed from a bipolar system to a unipolar system and later to a multipolar system. The history of the cold war and its aftermath has affected the way we look at world politics. There is a dilemma among scholars about the way we envisage world political system. This paper seeks to understand the dynamism of world politics and the phases of transformation from one type of a system to another. The paper draws the conclusion that despite the dilemma that exists between scholars, we can safely conclude that world politics in recent times can be called a multipolar world.*

Key Words: *Bipolarity, Unipolarity, Multipolarity, Super Powers, Blocs.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The nature and content of world politics changed after World War II. Germany and Italy became very weak as a result of their defeat. England and France also became weak due to heavy losses suffered by them. The war destroyed the power system in Europe and a power vacuum appeared. Europe became a continent faced with serious problems of economic reconstruction. Power vacuum in Europe led to competition between super powers to fill the vacuum.

This paper seeks to understand this transformation in World Politics from a bipolar system to a multipolar system. The methodology used is a historical, analytical approach. The study is normative in its orientation.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Changes produced by the Second World War continued to characterize the world. The post world war period saw a changed role for the nation state. Advances in military technology and deterrence gave rise to a war like atmosphere. One of the important changes witnessed by the end of the Second World War period was the emergence of the cold war. The aftermath of the Second World War saw the world divided into two power blocs.

USA and USSR were termed as the super powers. Both the power blocs wanted to strengthen their own blocs and there arose a competition for power between them. This competition and conflict was termed as cold war that was believed to be ideological in nature. The number of big powers weakened. The world and its nations were divided into two camps. It also witnessed the end of US isolation from world politics. From a policy of isolation the US now pursued a policy of containment of communism. It was also called the policy of Massive Retaliation.

The main feature of the cold war was the alliance politics that had emerged. The US had organized nations into the NATO alliance. The Soviet Union had organized nations under the WARSAW arrangement. The cold war was an ideological conflict between the two superpowers that sought to shape the economic, political and social dimension of human existence.

On all three counts USA and USSR differed. If the US was a democracy, USSR was a communist state. The USA therefore gave primacy to the value of individual liberty as against the emphasis laid by the Soviet Union on the principal of social equality. The US was an open free market economy and USSR a socialist economy believing in the significance of the public sector.

3. RISE OF POLARITY:

The cold war along with their blocs divided the world vertically into two groups known as the great east West divide. This configuration that emerged was termed as bipolarity. A fierce nuclear arms race began between the two. A highly militarized atmosphere prevailed under bipolarity.

4. BIPOLARITY:

The term bipolar or multi polar are very loosely used terms. For attaining clarity it is necessary to first understand the meaning of the terms bipolarity and multi polarity. For this it is essential to understand the meaning of

the term polar or polarity in international politics (1). A pole in International Relations is generally a power whose military strength is way above that of the other existing power holders.

The chief feature of a bipolar system is the existence of only two major powers (2). Their capabilities out power the capabilities of all those within the system. They are termed as the super powers. A super power is a global actor whose armed forces are so mobile that they could be placed in any part of the world. Their influence is not restricted to any geographical area. They have a very high degree of military preparedness, industrial development, technological advancement and nuclear capability. Both are adversaries of each other. Each actor is engaged in the process of isolating and limiting the other.

The international system is divided into 2 distinct blocs headed by a superpower. In a bipolar system, each group tries to usurp power of the other. Conflict is inevitable in a bipolar system. Bipolarity leads to confrontation between the two super powers. Politics of bipolarity is a politics of confrontation and crisis (3). The period between 1945-55 is regarded as the decade of tight bipolarity.

5. UNIPOLARITY:

With the end of the cold war, a transformation took place from Bipolarity to Unipolarity. The intermittent period in the 1970s is termed by some scholars as Multipolarity. International relations in the post cold war period became more and more complicated. The late fifties saw cracks appearing in the alliance. Nations wanted to break out of the shadow of America. In the late 1980s however, the bipolarity got transformed into unipolarity with the USA emerging as the sole survivor of the cold war.

NATO sought to expand itself and the Soviet Union disintegrated. WARSAW was liquidated. USSR broke up into 13 smaller states with Russia emerging as a primary player. USSR was later organized into the Commonwealth of Independent States. The successors of USSR were unable to pose serious threats to the supremacy of USA. European Union, Germany, France, Japan were unable to pose a serious challenge to the USA. NAM too had weakened because of internal differences between their member states.

US domination over International Relations was a reality. East Europe liberalized and efforts were made by several East European states to join NATO. The UN too became a puppet in the hands of USA. The US was the sole surviving power. This Super powerdom was most visible in the functioning of the UN. There was no power that could capably challenge the US and thus the US played a vital role in shaping International Relations till 1998. The premise that the structure of International politics changes only if great powers want it to change proves to be true (4).

Unipolarity was how this world order was described. Several factors like the end of the cold war, disintegration of USSR, liberation movements in East Europe, economic inter dependability, emergence of US as sole surviving power, universal acceptance of the principles of democracy, decentralized markets, US role in peacekeeping operations, etc gave rise to a unipolar world.

6. MULTIPOLARITY :

There were many nations however, who till the 1970s sought to break out of US shadow. France during the period of Charles De Gaulle, in fact, sought to assert its independence globally. During the same period China rose as a powerful state in Asia. This period also saw the entry of some new centers of power like the European Union, Japan, Germany, and China. They initiated a movement to break out of the unipolarity that had emerged.

In the period of globalization, there emerged several factors that pointed towards a multipolar world. Multipolarity involves the existence of a number of centers of power in International Relations. It is characterized by restrained behavior of the actors. The power structure is complex. Each pole views the other as adversaries and allies. Alliances in this system are short term or temporary. States cooperate only during temporary alliances since they are involved in seeking to lower the power and prestige of the competitor (5).

Multipolarity emerged due to several factors like the weakening of the Soviet bloc, the breakdown of Yugoslavia into 6 independent republics and the subsequent ethnic genocide in Bosnia, where NATO forces had to be used. The growing tension between Serbia and Croatia as well as the problem in Albania showed the world that ethnic nationalism was not just a phenomenon restricted to the third world but encompassed the developed world as well. Yugoslavia decided to remain nonaligned. Conflict also broke out between USSR and China and the waves of liberation broke out in Eastern Europe. These factors weakened the power of USSR.

USA too suffered during this period. The Suez crisis suggested a problem in the western alliance. Latin America too moved out of USA shadow. Expansion of the nuclear club, rise of new states, rise of economic integration of Western Europe alongwith countries like Japan challenged the unipolarity of USA. The emergence of new centers of power like China, India, France, European Union, Germany, Japan, South Africa signify what is termed as polycentrism.

Politics in Europe changed. The demolition of the Berlin wall, leading to the unification of Germany, end of WARSAW alliance, rise of democratic regimes transformed the politics in Europe. All nations sought to think in their own national interests with a national security perspective in mind (6).

There were also changes in Asian politics. Rise of fundamentalism in Central Asia. Increasing ethnic conflict, ethnic violence and wars and the growing menace of international terrorism have led to a rearrangement of the international system. The role of non state actors like multinational corporations and ethnic groups has increased. International interdependence has increased however there is very slow cooperation in South South economic progress. A global polity is emerging that is transcending boundaries and leading to multipolarity (7).

A trend towards democratization has also increased. Democracy has become not just a political form of government but also a cultural value. Establishment of not just democratic governments but democratic cultures has increased.

7. CONCLUSION:

In the 20th century multipolarity or polycentrism has increased. Demands for democratizing the international order have gained strength. The establishment of not just regional organizations but organizations based on common objective or issues are being formed. Cooperation between regions has now gone beyond regions. The formation of the Rim land nations group or even the BRICS show a trend towards transregional economic cooperation.

After the 2001 September attacks on the world trade center, the US has realized that it can also be vulnerable. Their territory can also be targeted. It was not just a terrorist attack but an attack on the supremacy of the US and the policies it pursued during this period. The US too could now be territorially threatened and weakened.

The US has also felt a need to involve other states in its international war against terrorism. This is seen as a trend towards multipolarism or multipolarity. All the states felt the need to dilute unipolarity. They came to realize that a multipolar world was a just world. Numerous centers of power emerged. In 2001 China and Russia signed an agreement with an objective to subdue the US. European Union transformed itself into a political union with common citizenship, common currency.

However the emerging system has to acquire a definitive shape. The new world is heading towards multipolarity with also some characteristics of a bipolar system.

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