2025 Edition

Political Science & Int. Relations [PSIR] Notes

for

UPSC-CSE Mains & State PSCs

Paper 2 Section A

Comp. Politics and IR

Part 2

Topics: 7,8,9,10,11

Politics for India Publications https://politicsforindia.com

Table of Contents

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7] Changing International Political Order

1] The Cold War

A] Origins and Causes

The Cold War was a protracted geopolitical and ideological rivalry between the United States (and its allies) and the Soviet Union (and its satellites) following World War II. However, even before WWII ended, mutual suspicions ran deep.

The U.S., emerging as a global power, was determined to prevent any rival from dominating Eurasia, while the USSR's was bent upon security-driven expansion in Eastern Europe. Ideologically, the United States championed liberal capitalism, and the Soviet Union promoted communism – each viewing the other's system as a threat to its way of life. Winston Churchill famously warned in 1946 of an "iron curtain" descending across Europe, dividing the free West from the communist East.

Thus, we can say that several early events cemented the Cold War divide:

1] Soviet Actions in Eastern Europe

As Nazi Germany fell, Stalin's forces occupied Eastern Europe and installed pro-Soviet regimes. This suggested an expanding communist sphere.

In response, the U.S. adopted **containment** as its grand strategy. The 1946 ***Long Telegram*** by U.S. diplomat George Kennan (alias "Mr. X") advised that the USSR viewed itself in perpetual conflict with capitalism and could only be met with "patient, vigilant containment".

In 1947, with the **Truman Doctrine**, President Harry S. Truman established that the United States would provide political, military and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces.

Further, the **Marshall Plan (1948)** proposed that the United States provide economic assistance to restore the economic infrastructure of postwar Europe. Under the initiative, billions of dollars were injected to rebuild (West) European economies – both to create a bulwark against communism and to expand U.S. influence. This linked Europe to the U.S. through trade and also made the **dollar** a global currency.

Although offered participation, the Soviet Union refused Plan benefits and also blocked benefits to Eastern Bloc countries. It came up with its own economic bloc (COMECON).

In addition to above developments, **NATO was formed in April 1949** and the U.S. monopoly on atomic bombs ended **when the USSR tested its first atomic weapon in August 1949**, intensifying security fears. The U.S. proposal for international control of atomic energy (the Baruch Plan, 1946) failed as the Soviets countered that the U.S. must disarm first. **A nuclear arms race was underway (discussed later), which paradoxically would enforce caution: as theorist Kenneth Waltz observed, these superweapons "made Cold War cold" by deterring direct superpower war.**

2] Who Was Responsible?

The blame for the Cold War still remains debated. **Traditionalists** argue Soviet aggression and expansionism caused the breakdown of relations. **Revisionists** fault the U.S., noting that Washington's drive for global markets and its aggressive policies (Truman Doctrine, NATO formation, etc.) provoked Soviet insecurity. **Post-revisionists** conclude that both sides contributed – an inevitable clash of two security-conscious superpowers whose interests and ideologies were incompatible.

Realists even suggest the conflict was *structural*: a power vacuum after WWII left two dominant states whose geopolitical imperatives doomed cooperation. In contrast, **social constructivists** contend the Cold War was not preordained – it resulted from mutual misperceptions and distrust that, with better diplomacy, might have been overcome.

B] Phases of the Cold War

Although "Cold" (no large-scale direct combat between the superpowers), the rivalry had distinct phases of intensity:

1] Early Confrontation (late 1940s–1950s)

As the Iron Curtain solidified in Europe, the U.S. led the formation of NATO in 1949. The Soviets responded in 1955 by organizing the Warsaw Pact with their Eastern European satellites, formalizing a bipolar military standoff. In this, Germany became a focal point. The Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961 and stood as the Cold War's stark symbol until its fall in 1989.

During this period, the U.S. and USSR also competed for influence in the decolonizing **Third World**, For example, the Korean War (1950–53). In 1954, U.S. President Eisenhower articulated the **Domino Theory**, fearing if one country fell to communism, neighbours would follow. This rationale dragged the U.S. into Vietnam, where it waged a costly war (1955–1975) to prevent a communist takeover.

2] Height of Tensions (early 1960s)

The early '60s brought the world perilously close to nuclear war. After the failed U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba (1961) and amidst American attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, the Soviet Union in 1962 secretly deployed nuclear missiles to Cuba.

The resulting **Cuban Missile Crisis** (October 1962) was the Cold War's most dangerous showdown – a 13-day confrontation that brought humanity to the brink of nuclear catastrophe. Ultimately, a deal was struck: the USSR withdrew the missiles, and the U.S. pledged not to invade Cuba (and secretly agreed to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey).

3] Détente (late 1960s–1970s)

The mid-1960s through the 1970s saw a relative thaw. **Détente**, a French term for easing tensions, described the improved U.S.-Soviet relationship after two decades of high conflict. Several factors drove détente: the Cuban crisis shock, the exhausting quagmire of Vietnam (which eroded U.S. hegemony and gold reserves), and the Soviet desire to stabilize its sphere and economy.

In this phase, the key developments included: the **Partial Test Ban Treaty** (1963) banning nuclear tests in atmosphere, outer space and water. ; the Nuclear **Non-Proliferation Treaty** (NPT, opened 1968) to prevent new nuclear states; and the first **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty** (**SALT I**, 1972) freezing strategic missile launchers.

Notably, the U.S. also opened relations with communist China (Nixon's 1972 visit) – a strategic "triangular diplomacy" to exploit the Sino-Soviet split. However, despite rhetoric **the phase did not end the rivalry**: proxy conflicts continued, and both sides still modernized arsenals. Détente was more a pause than a permanent peace, as events would show.

4] Renewed Confrontation (1979–1985)

Détente collapsed at the end of the 1970s. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was dubbed the "Brezhnev Doctrine" in action (Moscow's insistence on controlling its perimeter). The U.S., under President Ronald Reagan, responded with hardline policies. The early 1980s thus saw a "Second Cold War" – high tensions and rhetoric. During this phase, the superpowers engaged in intense **proxy wars**. The he U.S. armed Islamic mujahideen fighters against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The toll of the Afghan war, combined with an arms race at a time of economic stagnation, strained the Soviet system severely.

5] Endgame (1985–1991)

A dramatic turnaround came with Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985. Gorbachev sought to reform the Soviet system (through **glasnost** openness and **perestroika** restructuring) and realized that easing Cold War tensions was necessary for internal revival.

Mikhail Gorbachev

He engaged in unprecedented summits with U.S. President Reagan, signing the **INF Treaty (1987)** to eliminate an entire class of medium-range nuclear missiles. Gorbachev also announced the **"Sinatra Doctrine,"** letting Warsaw Pact states "do it their way".

The result was swift: in 1989, communist regimes collapsed across Eastern Europe (the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, symbolizing the Cold War's demise). Gorbachev refused to send in Soviet tanks to stop these revolutions.

The **Cold War formally ended** with the Malta Summit in December 1989, where Gorbachev and U.S. President George H.W. Bush declared an end to hostilities. By December 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved into 15 independent states, marking **the end of the bipolar era.**

6] Global Developments During the Cold War

Despite the superpower standoff, the period saw transformative global changes during Cold War. The colonial empires in Asia and Africa collapsed – dozens of new **nation-states emerged** as the European powers withdrew. These newly independent countries often became pawns or players in the Cold War. Many joined the India led **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)** to avoid choosing sides. The Cold War's pressures also accelerated **European integration** in the West (culminating in the European Economic Community, the precursor to today's EU) as Western Europe sought unity and strength under U.S. protection. Technological competition surged – the superpowers' **space race** put Sputnik and then Apollo astronauts into space, dramatically advancing science and technology. Culturally, the rivalry shaped everything from Olympic sports to art and propaganda.

C] Consequences of the Cold War

The 45-year conflict left a profound imprint on international order:

Nuclear Arms Race and Arms Control: The superpowers amassed tens of thousands of nuclear warheads, leading to a precarious balance of terror (**MAD** – Mutually Assured Destruction). This arms race spurred the creation of global arms control regimes (NPT, SALT, etc.) to prevent catastrophe.

Military Blocs and Militarization: The world divided into rival blocs (NATO vs Warsaw Pact), and even formally neutral states often tilted toward one side or the other. Massive military expenditures were incurred; at one point the USSR devoted an estimated 15–20% of its GDP to defence. This prolonged militarization had negative economic effects – indeed, the Soviet Union's eventual collapse was partly due to the unsustainable burden of the arms race.

Proxy Wars and Instability in the Developing World: The Third World became a chessboard for proxy conflicts – from Korea and Vietnam to Angola, Afghanistan, and Central America. Many of these wars were devastating for the local populations and left legacies of instability.

Paralysis of the United Nations: The UN Security Council, with both the U.S. and USSR holding vetoes, was often deadlocked and ineffective in major crises. Superpower rivalry stymied collective security except when interests aligned.

Economic and Technological Competition: The Cold War split the world economy. The West experienced unprecedented growth under U.S.-led institutions (IMF, World Bank, GATT), while the Eastern bloc had a closed, centrally planned economy. Technologically, competition (especially the space race and defence research) led to breakthroughs (satellites, computing, etc.), but also huge expenditures on unproductive capacities like warheads.

Stability (the "Long Peace"): Paradoxically, some scholars argue the Cold War imposed a grim *stability* on great-power relations. With two superpowers checking each other, large-scale wars (like the World Wars) did not recur. Nuclear deterrence forced caution – direct U.S.-Soviet clashes were avoided for fear of Armageddon. As John Lewis Gaddis dubbed it, the post-1945 era was a *"Long Peace"* among major powers, albeit shadowed by the constant risk of annihilation.

Other consequences: When the Cold War ended, the global landscape changed swiftly. The immediate aftermath was a unipolar world with the United States as the lone superpower. There was optimism about a liberal "New World Order" under U.S. leadership and a reinvigorated UN.

However, some observers note that the end of the East-West ideological clash gave way to Samuel Huntington's predicted "**clash of civilizations**" – with cultural and religious conflicts coming to the fore. The 1990s also saw the rise of **non-state actors** – from terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to multinational corporations – gaining influence in a more interconnected, unipolar world. Meanwhile, the **Non-Aligned Movement** struggled to redefine itself in a world no longer split between two blocs.

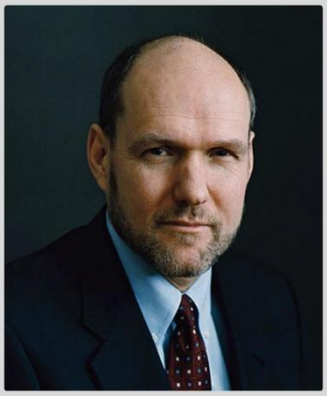
The Cold War shaped the second half of the 20th century profoundly. It set the stage for many of today's institutions and alliances, left a mixed legacy of technological progress and traumatic conflicts. Understanding its trajectory – and how it ended – is crucial to grasping current debates about whether we are entering a *"new Cold War."*

2] Cold War 2.0?

With rising tensions in recent years – marked by a confrontational Russia, an assertive China, and a more protective U.S. stance – it is often argued if a **"Cold War 2.0"** is emerging. There is no consensus on this term's applicability. Some argue that today's rivalries, while serious, differ fundamentally from the original Cold War; others see strong parallels in the hostility between major powers.

A] Views of Stephan Walt

Prominent scholars like Stephen Walt caution that calling current U.S.–Russia tensions a "new Cold War" is **misleading**. Walt notes that the original Cold War featured two roughly equal superpowers locked in a global ideological and military competition. Today's context is quite different:



Stephan Walt

The international system is no longer bipolar but **"lopsided multipolar."** The U.S. remains the preeminent power, while Russia is a distant second-tier player and China is an emerging peer competitor. Russia's economy (about $2 trillion GDP) is dwarfed by America's (around $27 trillion). If the Cold War was Godzilla vs. King Kong, remarks Walt, the current U.S.-Russia matchup is more Godzilla vs. Bambi.

There is **no global ideological binary** driving the divide. In the Cold War, liberal democracy and communism were rival ideologies. Today's Russia does not offer a compelling transnational ideology akin to Soviet communism. The competition is more about geopolitical interests than winning minds.

The confrontation is **geographically narrower.** U.S.-Russia friction today centers on specific regions – Eastern Europe (e.g. Ukraine), the Middle East (Syria), and cyberspace – not a worldwide contest in every theatre. During the Cold War, conflicts and proxy wars spanned from Asia to Africa to Latin America.

Further, Walt warns that equating today's situation with the Cold War might risk focusing on the "wrong enemy" – diverting attention from China's rise. Arguably, larger long-term challenge for Washington is **China,** not Russia. In effect, the U.S. faces a potential two-front strategic rivalry (with Beijing and Moscow), which is very different from the singular focus it had on Moscow during the Cold War.

He emphasizes that, unlike the ideological and military standoff of the original Cold War, today's U.S.-China rivalry is characterized by deep economic interdependence, technological competition, and differing visions of global order. Walt contends that both nations have conflicting interests—while the U.S. seeks to uphold a liberal, rules-based international system, China advocates for a Westphalian model emphasizing state sovereignty . He warns that mischaracterizing this competition could lead to policy missteps and unnecessary escalation.

B] Current Global Order

We can characterize the present world as **post-post-Cold War**: unipolarity has waned, and a more contested multipolarity is emerging. U.S. power is still predominant militarily and in alliances, but it is being challenged regionally by Russia and globally by China. International institutions are still largely Western-designed (UN, Bretton Woods system), yet their efficacy and authority is undermined by rise of parallel institutions.

Still, unlike the rigid blocs of the Cold War, many countries today are **non-aligned or multi-aligned**. For example, India (discussed later) is courting both the U.S. (for security against China) and Russia (for defence equipment and energy). Turkey is a NATO member yet buys Russian missiles. This underscores that while the great-power competition is real, it is more complex and less all-encompassing than the U.S.-Soviet duel.

Thus, the term "Cold War 2.0" is contested. **Stephen Walt** and others urge caution, arguing the metaphor may oversimplify and misdirect policy. **Alexei Arbatov** and similar voices respond that the hostility and distrust in U.S.–Russia relations today *do* mirror a Cold War climate, albeit in a changed environment.

The risk, of course, is that learning the wrong lessons (either underestimating the dangers or overreacting and creating self-fulfilling prophecies) could make the world more dangerous. As one analyst put it, history may not repeat, but it often rhymes – so careful statecraft is needed to avoid a slide into a more severe confrontation.

3] U.S. Hegemony and Changing Global Order

A] The Rise of U.S. Hegemony

The United States emerged from World War II as the strongest nation on earth – militarily victorious, economically thriving, and possessing a nuclear monopoly. Several long-term factors explain how the U.S. built a position of **unprecedented hegemony**:

1] Geopolitical Advantages

The U.S. benefited immensely from its geography. Flanked by two oceans and peaceful neighbours, the American homeland was shielded from the devastation that ravaged Europe and Asia in two world wars. This security allowed the U.S. to develop a stable democracy and prosperous economy.

It also meant that when others were exhausted by conflict, the U.S. could intervene decisively. Indeed, the U.S. entered both the world wars late – once other powers were drained – ensuring victory at a lower cost. By 1945, the U.S. stood astride the world as the only major industrial economy not wrecked by bombing or occupation. It produced roughly half of global economic output and had the dominant navy controlling key sea-lanes.

2] Economic and Financial Power

As WWII ended, the U.S. leveraged its economic might to establish a new international financial order (the **Bretton Woods system**). American loans and aid helped rebuild war-torn regions. The U.S. dollar – backed by vast gold reserves – became the world's principal reserve currency. The dollar's central role gave Washington enormous leverage – a point still holds.

3] Military Supremacy and Alliances

The U.S. used its wartime military strength to create a permanent global military presence. After 1945, it established bases across Europe and Asia. USA also built **treaty alliances**: NATO in 1949 (securing Western Europe), and with Japan, Australia and New-Zealand in Asia.

Through these pacts, the U.S. effectively became the **guarantor of security** for many regions, stationing troops and committing to defence. This entrenched U.S. leadership over allies (who, as noted, "outsourced" much of their defence to Washington).

4] Ideological Appeal and Leadership

American ideals of freedom, democracy, and open enterprise had wide appeal, especially in contrast to totalitarian fascism or Stalinism. The U.S. presented itself as the champion of a "free world" – a self-image rooted in its concept of **"Manifest Destiny"** and reinforced by WWII's outcome.

Culturally, American products, Hollywood films, and later pop music became globally influential, bolstering U.S. soft power. Overall, many societies found aspects of the U.S. model attractive or at least aspirational.