

Post–Cold War era

by..... Aniruddha Saha

Post-Cold War era is the period after the end of the Cold War. Because the Cold War was not an active war but rather a period of geopolitical tensions punctuated by proxy wars, there is disagreement on the official ending of this conflict and subsequent existence of the post-Cold War era. Some scholars claim the Cold War ended when the world's first treaty on nuclear disarmament was signed in 1987, the end of the Soviet Union as a superpower amid the Revolutions of 1989 or when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Despite this ambiguity, the end of the Cold War symbolized a victory of democracy and capitalism, giving a boost to the rising world powers of the United States and China. Democracy became a manner of collective self-validation for countries hoping to gain international respect: when democracy was seen as an important value, political structures began adopting the value.

The end of the Cold War intensified hopes for increasing international cooperation and strengthened international organizations focused on approaching global issues. This has paved way for the establishment of international agreements such as the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and the Paris Climate Agreement. Environmentalism has also become a mainstream concern in the post-Cold War era following the circulation of widely accepted evidence for human activity's effects on Earth's climate. The same heightened consciousness is true of terrorism, owing largely to the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and their global fallout.

Background

During most of the latter half of the 20th century, the two most powerful states in the world were the Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States (US). These two federations were called the world's superpowers. Faced with the threat of growing German and Italian fascism, Japanese Shōwastatism, and a world war, the western Allies and the Soviet Union made an alliance of necessity during World War II.^[4] The pragmatic nature of this alliance and the underlying ideological differences between the powers led to mutual suspicions between the allies after the Axis powers were defeated. This struggle, known as the Cold War, lasted from about 1947 to 1991, beginning with the second Red Scare and ending with the Dissolution of the Soviet Union. Prominent Historian of the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis, wrote at the dawn of the post-Cold War era that the characteristics of the new era are not yet certain but it is certain that it will be very different from the Cold War era and it means that a turning point of world-historical significance took place. The new world of the post-Cold War era is likely to have few, if any, of these characteristics: that is an indication of how much things have already changed since the Cold War ended. We are at one of those rare points of 'punctuation' in history at which old patterns of stability have broken up and new ones have not yet emerged to take their place. Historians will certainly regard the years 1989–1991 as a turning point comparable in importance to the years 1789–1794, or 1917–1918, or 1945–1947; precisely what has 'turned,' however, is much less certain. We know that a series of geopolitical earthquakes have taken place, but it is not yet clear how these upheavals have rearranged the landscape that lies before us.

Linguistic debate

The term "post-Cold War" was criticized for its ambiguity: "Even though it has been ten years since the Berlin Wall came down," wrote Paul Wolfowitz in 2000, "we still have no better name for the period in which we live than the post-Cold War era." The name means that this new era "does not yet have a name." It was suggested that Pax Americana or "clash of civilizations" would more reflect the reality of the era but the former term would be "offending for many." The same dilemma expressed Condoleezza Rice: "That we do not know how to think about what follows the US-Soviet confrontation is clear from the continued references to the "post-Cold War period." "We knew better where we had been than where we were going."

Consequences of the fall of communism

The collapse of the Soviet Union caused profound changes in nearly every society in the world. Much of the policy and infrastructure of the West and the Eastern Bloc had revolved around the capitalist and communist ideologies respectively and the possibility of a nuclear warfare.

- **Government, economic and military institutions:**

The fall of Communism formed an existential threat for many institutions. The US military was forced to cut much of its expenditure, though the level rose again to comparable heights after the September 11 attacks and the initiation of the War on Terror in 2001. The end of the Cold War also coincided with the end of apartheid in South Africa. Declining Cold War tensions in the later years of the 1980s meant that the apartheid regime was no longer supported by the West as a bulwark against Communism and they were condemned with an embargo. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed from prison and the regime made steps to end apartheid, which were on an official basis completed by 1994 with the new election.

Socialist and Communist parties around the world saw drops in membership after the Berlin Wall fell and the public felt that free market ideology had won. Libertarian, neoliberal, nationalist and Islamist parties on the other hand benefited from the fall of the Soviet Union. As capitalism had "won", as people saw it, socialism and communism in general declined in popularity. Social-

Democratic Scandinavian countries privatized many of their commons in the 1990s and a political debate on modern institutions re-opened. Scandinavian nations are now more seen as social democrat (see Nordic model). The United States, having become the only global superpower, was also able to use this ideological victory to reinforce its leadership position in the new world order. It was claimed that, "the United States and its allies are on the right side of history". The US also became the most dominant influence over the newly connecting global economy. However, this unipolar international system was in tension with the emerging potential for a multipolar world as India, China, and Japan developed to a point where they might challenge US hegemony. This created new potential for worldwide conflict, ending the balance, from mutually assured destruction in the case of nuclear war, which had held the world in a state of "long peace" throughout the Cold War.

The People's Republic of China, already having moved towards capitalism starting in the late 1970s and facing public anger after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 in Beijing, moved even more quickly towards free market economics in the 1990s. McDonald's and Pizza Hut both entered the country in the second half of 1990, the first American chains in China aside from Kentucky Fried Chicken which had entered 3 years earlier in 1987. Stock markets were established in Shenzhen and Shanghai late in 1990 as well. The restrictions on car ownership were loosened in the early 1990s, causing the bicycle to decline as a form of transport by 2000. The move to capitalism has increased the economic prosperity of China, but many people still live in poor conditions, working for companies for very small pay and in dangerous and poor conditions. After the end of the Cold War, Communism would also end in Mongolia, Congo, Albania, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Angola. Today there are only five remaining Communist countries in the world: China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam. Many other third world countries who had seen involvement from the United States and/or the Soviet Union were also able to resolve political conflicts with the removal of the ideological interests of these superpowers.^[18] As a result of the apparent victory of democracy and capitalism in the Cold War, many more countries adapted these systems, which also allowed them access to the benefits of global trade, as economic power became more prominent than military power in the international arena. However, as the United States maintained global power, its role in many Regime Changes during the Cold War went mostly officially unacknowledged, even when some, such as El Salvador and Argentina, resulted in extensive human rights violations.

- **Technology:**

The end of the Cold War allowed many technologies that were formerly off limits to the public to be declassified. The most important of these was the Internet, which was created as ARPANET by the Pentagon as a system to keep in touch following an impending nuclear war. The last restrictions on commercial enterprise online were lifted in 1995. In the approximately two decades since, the Internet's population and usefulness grew immensely. Only about 20 million people (less than 0.5 percent of the world's population at the time) were online in 1995, mostly in the US and several other Western countries. By the mid-2010s, more than one third of the world's population was online.

Digital Revolution

The Digital Revolution is the shift from mechanical and analogue electronic technology to digital electronics which began anywhere from the late 1950s to the late 1970s with the adoption and proliferation of digital computers and digital record keeping that continues to the present day. Implicitly, the term also refers to the sweeping changes brought about by digital computing and communication technology during (and after) the latter half of the 20th century. Analogous to the Agricultural Revolution and Industrial Revolution, the Digital Revolution marked the beginning of the Information Age. Central to this revolution is the mass production and widespread use of digital logic, MOSFETs (MOS transistors), and integrated circuit (IC) chips, and their derived technologies, including computers, microprocessors, digital cellular phones, and the Internet. These technological innovations have transformed traditional production and business techniques.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid- to late 20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism, marking a departure from modernism. The term has been more generally applied to describe what postmodernists believe to be the historical era following modernity and the tendencies of this era. While encompassing a wide variety of approaches and disciplines, postmodernism is generally defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection of the grand narratives and ideologies of modernism, often calling into question various assumptions of Enlightenment rationality. Consequently, common targets of postmodern critique include universalist notions of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social progress. Postmodern thinkers frequently call attention to the contingent or socially-conditioned nature of knowledge claims and value systems, situating them as products of particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and hierarchies. Accordingly, postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies to self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence. Postmodern critical approaches gained purchase in the 1980s and 1990s, and have been adopted in a variety of academic and theoretical disciplines, including cultural studies, philosophy of science, economics, linguistics, architecture, feminist theory, and literary criticism, as well as art movements in fields such as literature, contemporary art, and music. Postmodernism is often associated with schools of thought such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and institutional critique, as well as philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson. Criticisms of postmodernism are intellectually diverse, and include assertions that postmodernism promotes obscurantism, is meaningless, and that it adds nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge.

Cold peace

A cold peace is a state of relative peace between two countries which is marked by the enforcement of a peace treaty ending the state of war while the government or populace of at least one of the parties to the treaty continues to domestically treat the treaty with vocal disgust. It is contrasted against a cold war, in which at least two states which are not openly pursuing a state of war against each other, openly or covertly support conflicts between each other's client states or allies. Cold peace, while marked by similar levels of mistrust and antagonistic domestic policy between the two governments and populations, do not result in proxy wars, formal incursions, or similar conflicts.

Interwar period

In the context of the history of the 20th century, the interwar period was the period between the end of the First World War in November 1918 and the beginning of the Second World War in September 1939. This period is also colloquially referred to as Between the Wars. Despite the relatively short period of time, this period represented an era of significant changes worldwide. Petroleum-based energy production and associated mechanisation expanded dramatically leading to the Roaring Twenties, a period of economic prosperity and growth for the middle class in North America, Europe and many other parts of the world. Automobiles, electric lighting, radio broadcasts and more became commonplace among populations in the developed world. The indulgences of this era subsequently were followed by the Great Depression, an unprecedented worldwide economic downturn which severely damaged many of the world's largest economies. Politically, this era coincided with the rise of communism, starting in Russia with the October

Revolution and Russian Civil War, at the end of World War I, and ended with the rise of fascism, particularly in Germany and in Italy. China was in the midst of a half-century of instability and civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China. The empires of Britain, France and others faced challenges as imperialism was increasingly viewed negatively in Europe, and independence movements emerged in many colonies; the southern part of Ireland became independent after much fighting. The Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and German empires were dismantled, while the Ottoman and German colonies were redistributed among the Allies, chiefly Britain and France. The western parts of the Russian Empire, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland became independent nations in their own right, while Bessarabia (modern-day Moldova) chose to reunify with Romania. The Russian communists managed to regain control of the other East Slavic states, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, forming the Soviet Union. Ireland was partitioned between the independent Irish Free State and the British-controlled Northern Ireland. In the Middle East, Egypt and Iraq gained independence. During the Great Depression, Latin American countries nationalised many foreign companies (mostly American) in a bid to strengthen their own economies. The territorial ambitions of the Soviets, Japanese, Italians and Germans led to the expansion of their domains. The interwar period ended in September 1939, with the German and Soviet invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II.