

The Last Time We Had a Multipolar World



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Things Didn't Work Out Very Well

Donald Brandon

After almost a generation of cold war and bipolarity the international situation is said to have been transformed. We have entered the postwar era at last, an age characterized by multipolarity and the sober pursuit of national interests. America, Russia and China are assumed to have at last abandoned their crusading approach to world affairs. In the Moscow, Shanghai and San Clemente communiqués issued after Summit conferences in 1972 and 1973 these great nations "took the pledge" to exercise restraint, moderation and similar virtues. A war- and world-weary United States eagerly embraces a lower profile abroad, gratefully bidding goodbye to thirty years of globalism.

Memories of the last "multipolar" period suggest caution is in order. The multipolar world of the 1930's was also characterized by the universal pursuit of national interests, and was climaxed by the

Second World War. To be sure, international relations in the 1930's were marked by ideological strains and the rivalry of differing political-economic systems. Moreover, no two historical epochs are identical in all critical aspects. But it is not necessary to suggest a simple causal relationship between multipolarity and war in order to question the present mood of optimism over international relations. It is enough to note the presence of certain essential characteristics of world affairs in the 1970's which existed also in the 1930's.

One of the most startling effects of the Second World War was the reduction in the number of Great Powers on the international stage. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two "Superpowers." In the 1930's there were seven Great Powers in the world: the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and Japan. Needless to say, some were stronger than others. But they were all in the top rank of the three dozen or so nations which made up the world community. With the exception of Latin

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America, what is now called the Third World consisted largely of European colonies and dependencies. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Stalinist Russia and militaristic Japan were revisionist and would-be imperialist powers. Britain and France were imperialist, and America was preeminent and quasi-imperialist in Latin America. The interaction among the seven Great Powers largely dictated the course of international affairs before and during the Second World War.

The era between the two world wars lasted twenty years—from the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to Hitler's attack on Poland in 1939. What is known as the interwar period fell into two phases: a time of settlement in the 1920's and a time of crisis in the 1930's. The main watershed between the two phases was the stock market crash in America in 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression throughout the world. The Depression was a political and international as well as economic disaster, dealing harsh blows to both democracy and peace. Great autocracies had gone down to defeat during and immediately after World War I: Czarist Russia, Ottoman Turkey, Imperial Austria, Prussian Germany. Manchu China had collapsed on the eve of the Great War. By 1919 it seemed the world had indeed been made safe for democracy. But in the following years—even prior to the onset of the Great Depression—new tyrannies were established in important European countries. Following the Russian Revolution and Lenin's totalitarianism, dictatorships in various forms appeared in Turkey, Italy, intermediate Europe and Spain. Thereafter, and clearly in part as a result of the Great Depression, the militarists came to power in Japan and the Nazis in Germany. Many historians cite the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 as the opening round in World War II. Hitler's road to war in Europe is well known.

While Japan, Germany and Italy were engaging in expansion, American public opinion was even more isolationist in the 1930's than it had been in the previous decade. The widespread disillusionment with the U.S. crusade in World War I was heightened by the Depression and increased still more with the sensational "revelations" of the Nye Committee. The Committee's "exposure" of "merchants of death" who allegedly were responsible for American entry into World War I added fuel to the passions of isolationism. The Neutrality Acts ("chastity belt legislation") of 1935, 1936 and 1937 were designed to keep this country out of existing and impending wars in Europe and Asia. President Roosevelt was unable, and for long even unwilling, to fly in the face of an isolationist Congress and country. Given the weakness and appeasement policies of Britain and France, the diplomatic isolation of Soviet Russia and the withdrawal of the United States, Hitler and the Japanese militarists not unreasonably concluded they could commit aggression with impunity.

Berlin, Rome and Tokyo were able to exploit the rampant pacifism and misunderstanding of the nature of international politics which pervaded the democracies. The dictatorships' willingness to risk, and if necessary to wage, war existed alongside the democracies' all too human but disastrous unwillingness to "arm to parley."

One of the most fateful results of the Great War of 1914-18 was the destruction of the European consensus regarding the international system. Prior to that war European powers accepted their responsibility to try to resolve disputes which could result in general war. They also understood and practiced balance-of-power politics in order to prevent hegemony by any one or combination of powers in Europe. Underlying this practical consensus was something of a moral-intellectual consensus. Despite the fragmentation of European culture since the Renaissance and Reformation, there remained a residue of common conviction and outlook which served to underwrite and support the international system. Neither the moral-intellectual nor the political consensus survived the First World War. Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism took hold in three of the great nations of Europe, destroying the old consensus. Japan, of course, did not subscribe to Occidental mores.

Given the destruction of the old moral-intellectual and political consensus, it is not surprising that both international law and the League of Nations were weak in the interwar period. Although the League achieved many things in the humanitarian field, the organization was not effective in the area of peace and security. Then, as now, no country was willing to submit disputes which affect its vital interests to the International Court of Justice. Similarly, no country could be coerced by majority votes in international organizations. Accordingly, Japanese, Italian and German aggression in the 1930's was no more deterred by international law and organization than by the democracies' (and Russia's) uncoordinated diplomacy.

The selfishness and anarchy inherent in a world of sovereign nations was fully demonstrated in the years just prior to World War II. The 1930's was a time of universal pursuit of national interests without regard to the international common good. World War I, of course, was primarily a nationalistic war. The nation-state is usually said to have been codified as the basis of the modern international system by the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 following the Thirty Years War. Therefore, nationalism had been triumphant for at least three centuries prior to the Second World War. But until World War I, with the single major exception of the Napoleonic Wars, Europe's common culture (plus the balance of power) restrained somewhat the pursuit of national interests. Europe was still seen to be, at least ideally,

above the nation-states. But in the 1930's a world of democratic and totalitarian nationalisms lacked even the limited consensus which had persisted from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. All of which is relevant, I believe, to our present situation.

Looking back after almost thirty years of cold war in the nuclear age, the fifty million casualties, immense destruction and moral-political-social damage wrought by World War II still stagger the memory and imagination. Nevertheless, there is no comparison between the fears of war in the 1930's and the much greater fears existing since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

America and Russia emerged from the holocaust of World War II as superpowers and have dominated international relations for almost a generation. Now bipolarity is in the process of being succeeded by a multipolar world. Western Europe, China and Japan are potential superpowers, and even now are playing greater roles. The importance of the Washington-Moscow-Peking triangle is apparent even though China is not yet in the same power league as the U.S. and USSR. Western Europe and Japan, if they are willing and able, might become political and military as well as economic heavyweights, although not superpowers, by the end of the 1970's. Washington and Moscow are already limited by each other's nuclear capabilities and by their inability to control some of their allies and clients. American and Russian power and influence will remain preeminent in world affairs during the '70's. But their ability to lead will be increasingly restricted by Western Europe, China and Japan as the decade moves along. In short, for the first time in almost thirty years multipolarity is returning to the world stage.

As the Great Depression was the obvious, overwhelming economic factor in the 1930's, so some observers think that international relations will pri-

marily hinge on several major economic problems in the 1970's. Some put monetary and trade relations among the United States, Canada, Western Europe and Japan at the top of the list of urgent economic issues. Cassandras have gone so far as to compare the political dangers in economic relations among the industrialized Western nations and Japan to the Great Depression. A second major economic issue of the present decade is the continuing and growing gap between the Haves and Have Nots. This North-South division of the globe is, in the view of some, replacing the East-West cold war as the number one issue of world affairs. The third paramount economic question of the decade is the relation between the West and Japan on the one hand and Russian and Chinese economic development on the other. Western and Japanese trade with, and loans to, Moscow and Peking in the pursuit of détente could increase the overall strength, including military strength, of the two giants of communism, which remain at least opponents of the non-Communist world as well as enemies of each other. Successful handling of any one of these three major economic questions of the decade would be a formidable task. But together, and along with the many noneconomic issues of international relations, these problems could overload the capacity of interested powers to act in a relatively successful fashion.

It is sometimes suggested that America oscillates between isolationism and internationalism each generation. If true, it means the U.S. will retreat to an isolationist posture in the 1970's and stay there until the dawn of the twenty-first century. Although one must reject this mechanistic view, it is doubtful that America will continue to play a leading role on the world stage in the aftermath of Vietnam. A desire to attend to long-neglected domestic ills and a belief that the cold war is over (or nearly over) reinforce a natural tendency to withdraw.

The Nixon Administration is attempting to find the happy medium between isolationism and globalism, and most students of foreign affairs think the American people are aware of the impossibility of total withdrawal from the world. American isolationism during the 1930's was a principal factor leading to World War II. It must be hoped that public opinion is, as experts suggest, sufficiently sophisticated to resist the temptation to repeat that folly in the 1970's. A relatively peaceful decade, not to speak of a "generation of peace," requires an activist though prudential American role in world affairs.

If there was neither a consensus on the international system nor on moral-intellectual matters in the 1930's, the consensual aspects of world politics have not improved in the intervening years. They are, in fact, even more complicated in the 1970's. While the gap between totalitarian and democratic attitudes and practices persists, the entrance of the Third World adds another major dimension. The



analyst must define and evaluate Western, Communist and Third World operational ideas and ideals, as well as allow for the great diversity within each.

The interaction among these disparate cultures and political-economic systems is both a fascinating and complicating aspect of the current age of international relations. Unhappily, however, the great differences which exist prevent the creation of a new consensus on both the international system and on a moral-intellectual framework for our time. The Nixon Administration claims that it has dealt with these issues via "Basic Principles" duly signed by America, Russia and China and proposed for American-Western European-Japanese relations. But such documents are of little real importance, and would not even be necessary in an age of genuine consensus. Moreover, the U.S. has taken little notice of Western-Third World relations, either through "Declarations" or practical policies.

The diverse worldviews and systems of the Western, Communist and Third Worlds are reflected in the United Nations and international law. It is obvious that both the U.N. and international law are as weak now as the League and world law were in the 1930's. In fact, given the Communist and Third World assault on modern international law as a Western product, global law is even weaker than it was then. As for the U.N., it is true that the admission of the People's Republic of China and the two Germanies makes the organization more universal in membership. But in the 1970's, at least, the U.N. is unlikely to strengthen significantly its capability to affect the course of events in the area of peace and security. Both the U.N. and international law are deserving of support for the limited roles they will continue to play on the world stage, but in any assessment of the major influences in international affairs during the present decade the U.N. and global law must be rated low, as were the League and law in the 1930's.

Despite the immediate postwar hopes for the United Nations and expectations that regionalism was the wave of the future, nationalism has persisted since 1945 on a global scale. There are now almost 150 countries in the world community. Nationalism is the strongest single ideological factor in contemporary international relations, far stronger than democracy, communism or various Third World authoritarian ideologies. Both the Western and Communist camps have obviously been rent by nationalism. Many have hailed the advent of an "era of negotiations rather than confrontation," and a good deal of East-West diplomacy has taken place in the last few years under this rubric. Many assume that America, Russia and China are now at last basing their foreign policies on national interest rather than on messianic notions or Grand Designs. But even if there is a large measure of truth in this analysis, it does not bode



all that well for the 1970's and beyond. The 1930's were also a time of universal pursuit of national interests, and the climax was the greatest war in human history.

Russian and Chinese foreign policy have been characterized in the main by caution and prudence. Fortunately for the West and for all mankind, the nuclear age has not been accompanied by the sort of recklessness exhibited by Hitler and the Japanese militarists in the 1930's and early '40's. This is not to say that Moscow and Peking have abandoned their long-range aim or myth of a Communist globe, but whatever the relationship between ideology and national interest in Russian and Chinese foreign policy, it is reassuring that both countries generally take a patient, long-range view of world affairs. Reassuring, that is, if America, Western Europe and Japan have the staying power required for the long range.

Unhappily, there is one glaring exception to the general rule of restraint in Moscow's and Peking's approach to foreign policy. It is their posture toward each other. There is perhaps a fifty/fifty chance that the many differences between Russia and China will at some point in the 1970's spill over into war. Their relatively rational approach to the non-Communist world is in contrast to their near paranoia regarding each other.

In fact there never was a monolithic Communist camp throughout the generation of the cold war. The United States extended aid to Tito's Yugoslavia following the latter's break with Stalin in 1948. Secretary of State Dean Acheson predicted at the time of Mao's coming to power in 1949 that China and Russia would fall out over territorial, racial and other issues. These two facts alone refute the widely repeated myth that the American government thought and acted upon the notion that there was a monolithic Communist bloc and "conspiracy."

Polycentrism has been apparent to informed West-

1930's

Seven Great Powers
Global Great Depression
Democracies deeply fearful of war and fail to maintain balance of power
No consensus on international system
No moral-intellectual consensus
International law and League weak
Universal pursuit of national interests
Germany, Italy and Japan reckless
No monolithic Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis, but great threat to democracies, USSR and China
Military developments not major barrier to war

1970's

Two Superpowers, three Great Powers
Western, Communist, Third World economic ills
Democracies refuse to "think about the unthinkable," may not maintain balance of power
No consensus on international system
No moral-intellectual consensus
International law and U.N. weak
Universal pursuit of national interests
Russia and China both cautious
No monolithic Communist bloc, indeed deep and bitter Moscow-Peking rift
Nuclear weapons major deterrent to total war, but limited conflicts continue

ern élites throughout the years since World War II. Nationalism is as powerful in the Communist as in the Western and Third Worlds. Had it not been for the Vietnam war, the U.S. Government would almost certainly have moved much earlier than it did to exploit the Moscow-Peking rift.

All this is not to say that Washington could have easily (or even with difficulty) avoided the length and perils of the cold war. But it is apparent that the bitter Moscow-Peking split and the chance of conflict between the two Communist giants are key factors in the partly transformed world scene of the 1970's. While it is possible that Russia and China could patch up their differences after Mao leaves the scene, the odds are against such a reversal, given the depth and breadth of the Moscow-Peking rift.

Some would argue that the single most important factor distinguishing the years since 1945 from earlier epochs is the development of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Many think that the existence of this "ultimate weapon" prevented the outbreak of World War III on several occasions during the cold war. It is in any event beyond dispute that these horrible instruments of death and destruction have so far acted as a restraint on American-Russian rivalry. One hopes they will also deter a Russian-Chinese all-out clash during the 1970's and beyond.

But if nuclear weapons have contributed to deterrence of Armageddon, they have also permitted nations to resort "safely" to conventional and guerilla war. More than fifty such wars have in fact occurred in the years since World War II. This Age of Conflict which began in 1914 continues to be bloody and dangerous. It is not pleasant to recall the predictions before World War I that such a holocaust could not happen because it would be so awful. Memory of the two world wars and aware-

ness of the precarious nature of contemporary international relations force one to acknowledge that fear of nuclear war and pledges to avoid it might not be enough to avert another catastrophe.

In reviewing the basic characteristics of the international milieu of the 1930's and 1970's, both similarities and differences are obvious. In somewhat simplified form, we can see the comparison at a glance, as above.

Assuming that America remains activist on the world stage, huge problems remain. It is far from certain that Western Europe and Japan will remain content to play their designated secondary roles as American partners. It is, in fact, likely that Western Europe and Japan will both go nuclear, given their increasing anxiety over the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The major achievement of the Nixon Administration, in playing Russia against China and vice versa, is based on their mutual hatred. Even a limited knowledge of human nature and history suggests that such hostility is a poor foundation for Nixon's vaunted "durable structure of peace." As for the Third World, the Nixon Administration has been pursuing a course of almost benign neglect.

Given the lamentable absence of a genuine world community and the consensual problems on the international scene, America has little choice but to pursue balance-of-power politics. But the quest for a multipolar balance in the nuclear age promises to be at least as perilous as the bipolar cold war confrontation we have endured for a generation. It is, of course, not inevitable that the 1970's will, like the 1930's, lead to a holocaust. But neither is there warrant for the excessive optimism exhibited in many quarters in the U.S. today.