




A Comparative Analysis between the New Great Power Competition and the Cold War: Quo Imus?

Yeni Küresel Güç Mücadelesi ile Soğuk Savaş Arasında Karşılaştırmalı Bir Analiz: Nereye Gidiyoruz?

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Abstract

Although international system and polarity are always favorite subjects in international relations studies, following the emergence of a power competition between the US and China, they have been discussed more widely. This competition also has triggered an important debate, since some have predicted continuity of the multipolar system while others have predicted a new Cold War, which are quite different structures and imply very different reflections to the international community. This article proposes a comparative analysis between the Cold War and current power competition with their actors, structure, and content to assess the change in the international orders and the system. The article concludes that although the actors with their potentials and rivalry present some level of similarity with the Cold War, they don't have enough political power and motivation to manage international affairs, nor have they enough control over the system. More importantly, there are other significant differences in the conditions and content of competition. Therefore, it is hard to predict a bipolar world in the near future since there is no significant change in international orders. However, the article also acknowledges that a Cold War like polarization is still possible under some conditions. The more the US and China polarize the more its negative effects on global trade and collective security will be felt by the international community and these effects will be indicative of how the international orders change and transform the system.

Key Words: Great power competition; new Cold War; polarity; the US; China.

Öz

Uluslararası sistem ve kutupluluk konuları uluslararası ilişkiler çalışmalarında her zaman ayrıcalıklı bir konuma sahip olsa da ABD ve Çin arasında beliren yeni güç mücadelesinden sonra daha fazla tartışılır olmuşlardır. Bu mücadele aynı zamanda büyük bir görüş ayrılığına da işaret etmektedir, çünkü bazıları bu mücadelenin çok kutuplu sistemin devamını, bazıları ise yeni bir Soğuk Savaş'la sonuçlanacağını öngörmektedir ki bunlar birbirinden oldukça farklı yapılar ve uluslararası topluma yansımaları da bir o kadar farklı olacaktır. Bu makale, uluslararası düzenlerde ve sistemdeki değişimi değerlendirmek amacıyla Soğuk Savaş'la yeni güç mücadelesi arasında aktörler, yapı ve içerik açılarından karşılaştırmalı bir analiz sunmaktadır. Makale; aktörlerin, kapasiteleri ve rekabetleri bakımından Soğuk Savaş dönemindeki mücadeleye bir derece benzerlik gösterecekleri de uluslararası meseleleri yönetme ve sistemi etkileme konularında yeterli politik güç ve motivasyona sahip olmadıklarını iddia etmektedir. Daha da önemlisi, şartlar ve içerik bakımından da büyük farklılıklar bulunmaktadır. Dolayısıyla, yakın gelecekte çift kutuplu bir dünya öngörmek zordur. Bununla birlikte makale, bu güç mücadelesinin belli koşullar gerçekleştiği takdirde Soğuk Savaş benzeri bir kutuplaşmayla sonuçlanabileceğini de kabul etmektedir. ABD ve Çin ne kadar kutuplaşırsa küresel ticaret ve müşterek güvenliğe olumsuz etkileri uluslararası toplum tarafından o kadar fazla hissedilecektir ve bu etkiler uluslararası düzenlerin nasıl değişeceği ve sistemi neye dönüştüreceği konusunda belirleyici olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Küresel Güç Mücadelesi; yeni Soğuk Savaş; kutupluluk; ABD; Çin.

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Introduction

Despite their weakness on prediction of exactly when and in what circumstances it happens, change in the structure of the international system and polarity discussions are among the most attractive and debated subjects of international relations theories. For an interesting example, although everybody agrees that the international system was bipolar between 1947 and 1991, then it turned to unipolarity, the current status and transition date are highly controversial, even almost every year an academic study has asserted that ‘the international system has transformed’ since 1993 (i.e. Layne, 1993; Ikenberry, 2018). For instance, Huntington (1999) suggested that after the unipolar moment the world became ‘unimultipolar’, which implies a hybrid system consisted one superpower and several major powers both competing and cooperating simultaneously in different areas. One decade later, Haass (2008) asserted that the world became ‘non-polar’, which implies the involvement of several distinct poles or power centers in different patterns. Both works received considerable academic attention and support. One decade later, following the emergence of a power competition between the US and China, multipolarity has had more acceptance, however, this time with a prediction of a new Cold War, namely bipolarity.

In this context, as soon as the US strategic documents declared the beginning of new power competition, because of Chinese and Russian efforts to change the current international order (U.S. Department of Defense [DOD], 2018a; The White House, 2017), some American scholars and pundits have predicted that this competition will likely to end up with a new Cold War (Allison, 2017; Kaplan, 2018; Financial Times New Cold War Serial, 2020). These predictions also have repercussions from outside of the US. For example, a new Eurasian pole is asserted to have been built as an alternative geo-economic and political power center to the West (Diesen, 2018; Macaes, 2018). Similarly, the big power competition in Eurasia is predicted to bring a new bipolar international system in which “Greater Eurasia”, led by China and Russia, is deemed to represent a non-Western geostrategic and economic pole, while the “Greater America” represents the other pole (Karaganov, 2018).

Finally, the subject has been brought to official platforms. While UN Secretary General warned all members to avoid a new Cold War (Guterres, 2020), NATO Secretary General declared that there would not be a Cold War, but the Alliance needed to adapt to new security challenges posed by China (Stoltenberg, 2021).

It is obvious that whether this competition between the US and China may trigger a system change to bipolarity is an important debate, because multipolarity and bipolarity present quite different implications for the international community. Therefore, to contribute to this discussion, this article will examine and discuss the competition between the US, China, and partly Russia by comparing it with the Cold War to assess the possibility of a new bipolar international system. In other words, the article will try to provide an assessment by comparing the past and the present to estimate the future. Within this framework, firstly, basic features of international orders, bipolarity, as well as their theoretical relationship will be visited. Then, a short background of the current power competition will be presented. In the third part, new actors, the current structure, and the content of the current competition will be compared with the bipolar international system. In the final part, similarities and distinctions between the Cold War and new great power competition and the trend will be assessed, and the future implications will be presented.

INTERNATIONAL ORDERS, POLARITY DISCUSSIONS AND THEIR THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIP

Polarity is a longstanding analytical framework to describe the structure of the international system by counting the numbers of great powers and alliances in it. For example, as one of the earliest applications of system approach to international relations theory, Morton Kaplan (1957:21-53) describes the international system as “an analytical entity for explaining the behavior of international actors and the regulative, integrative and disintegrative consequences of their policies”; then he proposes six different types, based on actors: the balance of power system, the loose bipolar system, the tight bipolar system, the universal system, the hierarchical system, the unit veto system. Later, a triple classification, consisting of unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity, has gained acceptance and a large literature has established on it.

However, the vagueness of systemic change and transition has remained problematic, since polarity implies an unclear threshold value of the distribution of power and influence of the states within the system. Therefore, polarity theories have often suffered from similar analytical problems such as 'blunt measure of power', low predictability of systemic changes, and missing 'the interactions between the structure and agency' (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/2016:11-13).

On the other hand, the concept of international orders has come into use in the system and polarity discussions partially to encounter these problems with an analytical subunit between the system and agency. In this context, orders are generally seen as the main components of the global or international political system, while an 'order' is defined as "an organized group of international institutions" to help govern interactions among states (Mearsheimer, 2019:9). Norms and rules can be added to institutions in this definition (Johnston, 2019:13). Similar to international systems, orders also vary. Depending on the scope of membership, orders either can be 'international' or 'global', which means access to every state, or 'bounded' or 'regional', which infers limited membership. Secondly, depending on coverage, formality, and peremptoriness, orders can be either 'thin', which refers to rudimentary rules and institutions to achieve limited cooperation, or 'thick', which points to a dense set of agreements or commitments to achieve a higher level of cooperation or integration (Ikenberry, 2018:11-12). Thirdly, orders are also classified based on their aims and functions such as military, economic, environmental, or security.

However, neo-realists alter from neo-liberal approaches at some points on the classification and explanation of international orders. For example, Mearsheimer (2019:13-15) adds an ideological classification, which contains agnostic or ideological (i.e. liberal internationalist) orders, only peculiar to the unipolar international systems, and realist orders for bipolar or multipolar systems, which imply fierce competition with other orders within the system.

More importantly, in any realist classification, orders are generally accepted to be created and managed by great powers, thus they reflect the dominant power's interests and normative preferences (Johnston, 2019:13-15). Particularly bounded or regional orders are seen as a tool to compete with other great powers and orders (Mearsheimer, 2019:12-17). Likewise, since polarity is a reflection of the distribution of power across states in the international system, these orders are often directly associated with polarity (Johnston, 2019:27), within the dominant power's norms and institutions. Thus, a theoretical link can be established between polarity and orders in the international system. Simply, competing orders create poles and shape the system. When the balance of power and actors change orders change, and when orders change, the international system changes either suddenly or gradually. Accordingly, a more accurate estimation of systemic change might be possible by tracking the change in the orders.

In this context, after successfully anticipating that China would rise and become a challenge to the US since 2001, Mearsheimer (2019) applies to 'orders' in his recent work to explain why the current liberal order has failed and how the international system will change after it. Briefly, he examines the changes in the international orders and concludes that the new great power competition will create two thick and bounded orders, led by the US and China, which will wage military and economic competition each other while promoting cooperation among members (Mearsheimer, 2019:44). As a matter of fact, this prediction also infers 'a new Cold War' in terms of 'orders' since the 'former' Cold War similarly contained one thin international order and two thick and bounded orders, led by the US and the Soviet Union (Ikenberry, 2018:10; Mearsheimer, 2019:18). At this point, if the world is predicted to head towards a new Cold War era, a good level of similarity should be expected between the great power competition in the Cold War and the current one.

Similarly, since orders also reflect the great power competition and hint at change of the system, one can consider that comparing different variables such as actors, structure, and content might also provide useful data to assess the probability of a systemic change. Therefore, this article conduct a comparative analysis between the basic structural features of the bipolar system and the current power competition. As the first step of this comparison, we need to set forth the basic characteristics of a bipolar international system regarding actors, structure, and content.

Actors

A bipolar international system consists of two dominant superpowers, which are almost equal to each other but significantly superior to the rest of the states. (Mearsheimer, 2001) Moreover, these superpowers are supposed to have a good level of combination in national strength, which refers to a preponderance in political, economic, and military powers as well as other strength components such as territory, population, resources, and technology (Waltz, 1979:131). Shortly, two leading superpowers must score quite better at the whole national power elements than the rest of the world. Indeed, after the Second World War, both the US and the Soviet Union emerged as the only victorious superpowers among other wartorn countries, with enough power, resource, contesting ideology, and willingness to compose a pole.

The second important indicator for a superpower is its ability and willingness to manage international affairs and to solve crises. In other words, two superpowers in a bipolar system should be able to manage, influence, control, and direct the world or regional affairs at a considerable level (Waltz, 1979:205). This ability and willingness are also called “prestige” from a social context, as a term to answer who, to what extent, and how will govern (i.e. by means of coercive power or legitimacy) the international system (Gilpin, 1981:197-209). As seen in the Cold War, both the US and the Soviet Union had “sufficient motivation to keep global affairs under their scrutiny”, and, accordingly, they had “taken the fate of many others as being their concern” (Waltz,1979:205).

Thus, they had tried either to control all destabilizing changes or to absorb the negative effects by insulating their pole members to some extent (Waltz, 1979:209).

Structure

Bipolar international systems are classified differently such as loose and tight (i.e. Kaplan, 1957:39) or balanced and unbalanced (i.e. Mearsheimer, 2001). However, any bipolar international system contains only two thick and bounded alliance orders, whose leaders are capable of acting on a world scale without being challenged by a third party. Hence, there are no other peripheral or equal centers to affect world politics other than two competing poles (Waltz, 1979:168-171). After the Second World War, the US established an integrated alliance structure with the Bretton Woods system in economic terms and NATO in security terms, while the Soviet Union countered them with the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Thus two blocs or poles were established as the main basis of international relations. More importantly, most of the other states needed to be members of these poles, which provide more or less collective security and economic cooperation, albeit a limited and less effective non-alignment bloc also emerged later.

Content

An intensive and extensive rivalry between two poles is an important characteristic of the bipolar system. Unlike to multipolar international order, in which ‘who is a danger to whom’ is often unclear, the danger in a bipolar world is obvious, and two superpowers have to deal with every issue which might endanger the status quo or upset the power balance. That is why, not only all conflicts in different geographies but also a wide range of changes from military innovation to economic growth and technological developments can be subjects of this competition, which makes it both intensive and extensive (Waltz, 1979:171). In the Cold War, any conflict or change that may unbalance the existing equilibrium had easily become the concern for the main preservers of the balance. Thus, the US and the Soviet Union competed intensively in every shape of life, from nuclear weapons and outer space to Olympic Games, from science to ideology and normative values.

Low interdependency and low instability are other characteristics of bipolar international system. Great powers in a bipolar world are less dependent on any other political and military support, especially in crises or wars. They are generally free to design strategies based on their interest in the power balance (Waltz, 1979:168-171). Therefore, crises, which might affect the balance, were either solved or frozen by two superpowers in the Cold War, and this policy made threat perception and predictability relatively easier.

BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT POWER COMPETITION

The United States is described as the only great power in world history that has had the luxury of not having aggressive or more powerful neighbors in its continent. The geographic location of the US provides a significant level of security, flexibility in international relations, unrestricted development, and wealthy resources (Miller, 2013). However, this location also implies at least one geopolitical disadvantage. Being too far from the other half of the earth never guarantees that the US does not have to care about the rest, especially about Eurasia as the most potent competitor to America. For this reason, preventing any anti-American power from controlling or dominating all Eurasia itself, characterizes one of the main goals of American grand strategy since the First World War. To achieve this aim, the US has preferred and tried to keep Eurasia divided among as many different powers as possible (Brzezinski, 1997:148-150).

In this context, after the Second World War, firstly, the US created an integrated alliance structure with the Bretton Woods system to cooperate with allied powers, and with NATO to contain the Soviet Union. Secondly, it has developed bilateral relationships in Asia-Pacific, which is also called 'the hub and spokes alliances', with different concepts such as the balance of power, countering, or containing hostile configurations (Richey, 2019:276). COMECON and the Warsaw Pact dissolved in 1991.

However, NATO succeeded in not only avoiding a new world war but also containing and preventing the Soviet Union from dominating all Eurasia in the Cold War. After the Cold War, NATO has expanded from Eastern Europe to Balkans until it reaches the Russian borders. Similarly, NATO's Partnership for Peace program has produced a lot of new partners, from the former Warsaw Pact in Europe to third-world countries in Asia.

Following the Cold War, the US replaced its containment strategy with engagement, which aimed at supporting Russia and China to cooperate with the US-led economic order for their transformation into liberal democracies. This support contributed much especially to China's economic rise in the 2000s, albeit did not achieve transformation and finally undermined the unipolar international system (Mearsheimer, 2019:24-26). In turn, the Chinese rise has caused the US to proceed with a reorientation strategy to preserve the existing power balance in Asia since the mid-2000s. This new strategy has aimed to check China by increasing the military capabilities and interoperability of regional allies and by isolating China to weaken it both diplomatically and economically (Silove, 2016:46-53). On the other hand, NATO expansion has caused Russia to annex Crimea and Donbas Regions of Ukraine, which brought a severe crisis in Europe. Concordantly, the successive political and economic sanctions have changed Russia's geopolitical posture fundamentally and caused Russia to prefer China as a security and trade partner, instead of the EU (Lukin, 2020; Trenin, 2019).

Meanwhile, some other events in world politics have also contributed to the shift in power balance against the US and the West. Firstly, non-Western countries have shown a remarkable strategic rise while the global dominance of the West has relatively declined in the last decade (Munich Security Conference Report, 2020). 'Hyperglobalization', which replaced the Bretton Woods system with unrestricted trade and investment, caused major economic problems in the West and undermined the legitimacy of liberal international order as the sole ideology (Mearsheimer, 2019:39-40).

Particularly, the economic and financial crisis of 2008 further reduced the relative power of the US in the international system (Ikenberry, 2018:20). On the other hand, China has shown a remarkable rise while Russia has resurged with its energy revenues and newly developed military technologies, in so much that the US supremacy over military technologies is asserted to be ended in some areas (i.e. BBC News, 2019). Even some US military systems have become dependent on China for software, electronic components, and rare elements (O'Rourke, 2020:10-13).

Lastly, it is asserted that the US and NATO have failed to manage the recent crisis such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Crimea, which have opened rooms for maneuver to Russia, Iran, and newly to China (Mearsheimer, 2019:28-29; Ashford, 2018:127-148; Quero, 2020:86-104). In the same vein, mixing policies are asserted to have been followed by the US Governments in the last decade. For example, the recent US Foreign Policy has been criticized for being discretionary and hypocritical since the US has supported simultaneously both democracies and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, and, intervened in Libya, but not Syria in very similar cases (Miller, 2013; Matissek, 2017:25). These foreign policy choices have also brought new security problems such as irregular migration to Europe, failed states, extremism, and foreign terrorist fighters, which divide NATO allies and passivize its coordinated efforts. Finally, China and Russia have been predicted to cooperate against the US and its allies to force them to evacuate from some parts of Eurasia and assessed as the main challenges to the current international order (U.S. DOD, 2018a:27; Office of the Director of US National Intelligence Council, 2017:35). Hence, these factors led the US to change its security focus from counter-terrorism to great power competition, to revise its strategical documents, and to take several steps accordingly.

In this context, following the Crimea Crisis, the US has increased its force deployment in Europe while NATO has started another transformation to counter the recent Russian threat.

In the same way, some Russian tactics have been defined as 'hybrid war', and the US and the EU have started cooperation on cyber defense, military mobility, and maritime security. (The North Atlantic Council, 2014). Later on, because of China's expansion policy in the East China Sea, its growing military footprint and intimidating policies to its neighbors, as well as its ambitious projects such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which covers 160 countries from Asia, Africa, and Europe with infrastructure for intercontinental transportation and trade, the US has decided to strengthen its military presence in the Indo-Pacific Region and to fortify regional alliance (O'Rourke, 2020:6-8). Similar to Russia, the US has also started to impose some restrictions and sanctions to enhance its competitiveness with China on trade and technology (U.S. DOD, 2018b). For example, the US investigated China's innovation and intellectual property policies, and then 44 global Chinese entities, including Huawei and ZTE, were placed on the restriction list in 2018 (Wu, 2020:105-109). Similarly, the US has started imposing tariffs on more than US\$ 360 billion of Chinese products, and immediately China has retaliated with tariffs on around US\$ 110 billion of US goods. (BBC News, 2020). When bilateral restrictions have been extended, and the US has started pressing on third parties, who continue technology cooperation and trade with China and Russia, the competition between the US and China has become a global concern and brought out the discussion of a new Cold War.

COMPARISON AND ASSESSMENT

In the first part, three basic and interrelated features of a bipolar system are presented regarding actors, structure, and content. These are preponderant power of pole leaders, and their capacity and motivation to manage international affairs and crises at the world level, two dominant power centers with no periphery, as well as intensive and extensive competition between these centers, with less dependency and unpredictability. In this part, a simple comparison will be presented in the same order.

Actors

Firstly, a simple comparison of the national power elements of the two nominees might help us to assess whether the US and China have enough capacity or potential to create a pole. In terms of economy, World Bank (2020) nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) data show that the US, with \$20.93 billion revenue, and China, with \$14.72 billion revenue, are close to each other but far larger than the third largest economy-Japan, which has \$5.064 billion. These countries are followed by Germany, the UK, India, France, Italy, Canada, and South Korea. As to military power, by looking at military spending of the top ten countries, the US and China are again seemed far ahead of the rest in terms of military budget and defense potential. According to an estimation of the Swedish Institute of International Peace (SIPRI, 2020), the U.S. spent \$778 billion and China \$252 billion on their military in 2020, followed by India at \$72.9 billion, Russia at \$61.7 billion, the UK at \$59.2 billion, Saudi Arabia at \$57.5 billion, Germany at \$52.8 billion, France at \$52.7 billion, Japan at \$49.1 billion and South Korea at \$45.7 billion. Except for Russia, a similar ranking goes for existing military strength as well. According to the Global Fire power ranking (2021), which analyze more than 50 individual factors, the top three are the US, Russia, and China, whose index score are very close to each other but considerably ahead of the followers, India, Japan, France, the UK, Germany, Brazil, and Pakistan respectively.

Concerning science and technology, they are also leading and competing countries. For example, the US and China are the biggest spenders for research and development and have the biggest share in global patent applications on innovative technologies, manufacturing, and trade in high-tech industries (Wu, 2020:106-107; Zhao, 2021:13-14). Lastly, in terms of geography and population, the US and China have enough potential to be nominated as superpowers as well.

China is the most populated country in the world with 1,402,112,000 people while the US has 329,484,000 people as the third biggest after India. Similarly, China is the third largest country after Russia and Canada, followed by the US with almost equal square kilometers. This quick comparison shows that while the US is still far ahead of almost all instruments as a superpower, China is an emerging potential superpower, although it still needs Russia and India to balance the US militarily.

As to the comparison of their political powers, their prestige as well as their ability and motivation to manage international affairs with the Cold War actors, today, this issue is more complicated and controversial. Firstly, although the US and China have well-organized and stable political systems, and both are key members of international institutions such as the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization (WTO), their impact and control on other members are more limited than the US and the Soviet Union had in the Cold War. Their ability to solve global crises can be questioned as well. For example, as seen in decades-long conflict areas such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, neither side took responsibility nor initiated collective efforts. Regarding non-traditional security issues such as global climate change, refugee flow, organized crime, and global pandemic the same situation has been seen. For example, despite the hope of global solidarity, the COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the competition and polarization, since the US and China recriminated each other and supported only their congeners.

The motivation or willingness of these two superpowers to manage international affairs presents a similar case. In the US, whether the US to continue dealing with the overall world with insufficient resources or to choose a strategic retrenchment is a major debate (Montgomery, 2020:169-170). On the other hand, China seems quite reluctant to be nominated as an alternative leader, instead, it wants to continue quietly to make partners for its economic rise (Zhao, 2021:4).

Conversely, multipolarity has been longed for years by China and mentioned in its strategic documents (Johnston, 2019: 31). In the same vein, Xi Jinping criticized the US several times for its 'Cold War mentality' and declared that China did not want bipolarity (i.e. Jinping, 2021). In this sense, it is hard to predict a new Cold War unless China bids for superpower status and openly challenges the US, even if it doubles the US in national power instruments.

Structure

As mentioned in the previous parts, there was one thin international order under the UN umbrella and two thick and bounded orders in the Cold War, but the Communist bloc disappeared while the Western orders globalized. Bretton Woods system was replaced with contemporary global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, and the WTO. China and Russia are active members and supporters of this economic order. Similarly, both also support the constructive order as permanent members of the UN Security Council and other UN organizations, simply because they have benefited from them (Johnston, 2019:19-20). Although China is suspected to offer alternative institutions such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRI, and less demanding normative values such as 'peaceful co-existence' (Richey, 2019:287; Quero, 2020), for the time being, they are still too new to create a competing order.

Western orders still exist but are not at the core of the current system anymore (Ikenberry, 2018:19). After the Cold War, the EU has appeared as a thick and bounded order and became an economic superpower together, but in political and security matters their members sometimes act individually and oppose each other, as was seen in NATO's Libya intervention (Biscop, 2019:16). Therefore, the EU does not present a competing order by itself either. Similarly, the Commonwealth of the Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and other institutions in Asia are relatively ineffective, because their members have different political priorities. On the other hand, NATO remained as the only collective security organization, albeit thinner than it was in the Cold War, and China and Russia are quite opposed to it, but they don't try to counter it with a new security organization. In short, it is hard to identify or predict only two competing blocs in world politics, since the polarity

between the US and China has not seemed to diffuse the international system yet.

Content

Regarding the content of the current system, unlike the description of the bipolar international system, today's world is usually depicted with a high level of 'interdependency', the vagueness of threats, and multiplicity in not only power centers but also in dependencies, which makes the world less predictable and less stable (Shea, 2019:20-21). For example, China trades with three fourth of the World, including the US. Even after bilateral restrictions, China is the third biggest trade partner of the US (Office of the US Trade Representative, 2021). On the other side of the coin, despite trade sanctions, Russia is still the biggest gas provider to the EU. Likewise, Russia sells advanced weapons to China, India, and Vietnam although 'four of them' have border disputes with each other (Zhao, 2021:6). These examples show that actors in the contemporary world are more independent and power centers are more dispersed than the Cold War period.

There is also no ideological rivalry like the Cold War. On the one hand, China and Russia do not have pre-conditions for trade or cooperation, nor is there an open ideological pressure or regime imposition (Shea, 2019:21; Zhao, 2021:3). On the other hand, the US is hovering between two competing ideologies: to continue spreading liberal democracy and defending normative values in its foreign policy, as was the case in unipolarity (Ikenberry, 2018), or giving them secondary importance in strategic alignments, as was the case in the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2019:32). Within the same scope, whether the Chinese stateled-capitalist model is as competitive as the liberal model or a dead-end is another debate. These controversies between the liberalists and realists actually reflect the slow transition in the structure of the international system, as well as the confusion within the US.

Threat perceptions and state strategies are complicated as well. In the Cold War, both superpowers applied unconventional or political warfare tactics such as covert operations, supporting friendly underground resistance, and black psychological campaigns (Kennan, 1948). However, as new terms to define some Russian and Chinese activities, 'hybrid war' tactics and 'gray zone activities' are slightly different than them. In this context, cyber-attacks, geographical expansion, indirect military interventions,

meddling elections, technology theft, monopolization on key resources and sub-structures, and bribery are combined in these methods. They are also implemented by so-called 'non-governmental' actors such as individuals or private companies, thus they are non-attributable and outside the scope of international law. China and Russia are suspected to apply these hybrid tactics and gray zone activities as leverage in the power competition, since they are asymmetric, technology-intensive, gradualist, and clandestine, but always under the threshold of a military response (Akgul, 2021). These new methods also blur threat perception and deterrence. For example, traditional methods and the conventional US deterrence model which relies on threatening with overwhelming force or military superiority are asserted to get less valid against them. Since there might never be a reason good enough to use this massive force (Matissek, 2017:3).

In an overall assessment, although actors are partly alike, changing dynamics in the orders, structure, and content of the current system do not indicate any transition to bipolarity, thus it is highly unlikely a new Cold War in the near future. However, there is still a possibility of emerging two competing blocs within the multipolar system as described by Waltz (1979:98). In order for a wider polarization in new alliance configurations, we can set at least two requirements: for China to create a new bounded order with Russia, India, and like-minded Asian states, and for the US to convince the EU and other traditional allies in the Asia-Pacific for a competing bloc. Whereas China-India relations indicate an open rivalry, China-Russia relations have been developing since the Crimea crisis. Therefore, the last part will assess this trend and the potential of deeper Sino-Russian cooperation and then the relations within the West together to assess the probability of two competing blocs.

Trend

The first requirement for the emergence of a competing Eastern or Asian pole is deeper Sino-Russian alliance, which may pave the way for a competing order against the US. On the one hand, it is asserted that some US policymakers assume China-Russia differences are deep enough to block any influential anti-US bloc. Likewise, Russia is assumed to have a Western identity and projection over the EU and never wants to become a tributary or secondary power

in Asia (Trenin, 2019). Some academic works also present that the US will remain the only superpower in the next decades since China has a very long path to catch up with the US both technologically and militarily (i.e. Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/2016; Gilli & Gilli, 2018/2019). On the other hand, China and Russia confirm that their bilateral relationship is experiencing its 'golden age', in which the highest level of mutual trust and cooperation has been achieved (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019:45). This issue also implies a significant difference from the previous Cold War conditions, as let alone being antagonists, two rival powers are increasing their 'strategic partnership' in different fields.

In this context, except for 2014, bilateral trade between China and Russia have increased every year and reached from US\$ 39 billion in 2009 to 105 billion in 2020 (Statista, 2021). Following the energy and arm trade agreements in the last decade, China has become Russia's top trading partner. Likewise, China became the first foreign buyer of Russian Su-35 aircraft as well as the S-400 surface-to-air missile system. China sees Russia as the main source for its military technology modernization and cooperates on programs such as developing heavy-lift helicopters, diesel-electric submarines, and creating joint production facilities (U.S. DOD, 2018b:15).

Concordantly, their joint military training and diplomatic coordination have increased. For example, China participated in the Vostok military exercise with thousands of troops and vehicles for the first time in 2018, which was the largest of Russia since 1981. Likewise, they have expressed solidarity when Russia was imposed economic sanctions after Crimea Intervention, and when China received an opposite decision from the International Court of Justice regarding its expansion in the South China Sea (Lukin, 2020). Furthermore, they have been acting harmoniously in the UN Security Council regarding Syria and other security issues.

Briefly, China and Russia have the same aim and employ similar strategies and tools, while their powers are generally asymmetrical. For example, Russia has a declining population and economy but also has wealthy energy resources and a relatively strong army being modernized with high-tech equipment. China is on the opposite side of these strengths and weaknesses. It is a fact that even if the sum of their power indicators is below those of the US, they can pose a bigger threat together, and this asymmetry in power and tools

can be used complementarily against the US in the power competition. In terms of constructing a new pole or bloc, they are again complimentary since China offers economic alliance and an alternative model to the developing countries while Russia provides political alliance, nuclear deterrence, and military technology alternative to the West. Nevertheless, it is still early to predict a Eurasian bloc, since all of these examples imply that they are trying to make the world 'multipolar', not 'bipolar', while they don't have new institutions and formal mechanisms towards a competing order.

On the other side of the coin, inter-state relations within the West are worth examining as a potential second bloc. Notably, unlike the previous Cold War, the Western world seems less willing to support the US in its competition. For example, the EU countries, the UK, Japan, and Australia are asserted to have serious concern over the US-China confrontation and do not want to be forced into a 'binary choice' between their main security partner and their top trade partner (Richey, 2019:284-285; Wu, 2020:110-111). Similarly, it is asserted that although Chinese economic expansion has increased concern on Pacific and ASEAN countries they also have deep anxieties about US credibility and capability to counter China (Zhao, 2021:7). Likewise, when the US tried to isolate the Chinese Huawei Company or started pressing its allies to reject BRI-related projects some Western allies such as the UK, France, Germany, and Italy pushed back these efforts with economic considerations (Wu, 2020:110-111; Zhao, 2021:3-8).

What is more, the US, the EU, and other regional powers have different perceptions and priorities regarding China and Russia. While Russia is acknowledged as a near threat, China is believed both as a risk for its military and technological expansion and an opportunity for trade and cooperation in the EU countries (Biscop, 2019:16-17; Munich Security Conference Report, 2020). In the same vein, the aforementioned conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, which caused refugee flow, failed states, extremism, and terrorism strike more badly the countries of the region and the EU, and diverge them from the US' threat perception of China. These crises also have helped Russia to become stronger in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and China to offer new insights to conflict regions 'every day' (Quero, 2020). In other words, ongoing conflicts are serving more to the interests of China and Russia, while dividing the Western world, weakening NATO, and

harming US popularity in the region.

As a specific example, Turkey was an integral part of the containment strategy against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Also, it has a long historical rivalry with China and Russia. However, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has drifted apart from the US, and the course of events has been forcing Turkey to cooperate more with Russia. US relations with Iran and the Arab States and China's 'pocking of these holes' present similar cases. In short, the West is less unified and the US has fewer allies than it had during the Cold War. Nevertheless, China has already become a subject in NATO discussions as a challenge to global security, and newer reports seem clearer about the Chinese threat and its hybrid tools in gray zones. (i.e. NATO 2030 Report, 2020) Therefore, if these regional conflicts can be lessened with political solutions and NATO decides to contain China in its new strategic concept this overall posture still can change.

CONCLUSION

Consequentially, this simple comparison indicates that although the potential of actors and their rivalry present some level of similarity, there are significant differences in the conditions and content of competition. Firstly, albeit the US and China have sufficient material capacity, they don't have enough political power and motivation to manage international affairs, nor have they enough control over the system. More importantly, the international community does not want bipolarity, the West is not unified, and there are a lot of new variables such as interdependency, the vagueness of threats, a high level of trade, and globalization. The current international system presents one remaining thin and international order and two bounded but thin orders on the Western side, while there is not an effective order on the Eastern side. There is also no shift in China's and Russia's overall posture in key international organizations, and there is no evidence of military bipolarity attempts to foresee a structural change. Therefore it is hard to predict a bipolar world soon by looking at the international orders. More broadly, there might never be a Cold War again, since states are too interconnected and independent while the changing dynamics are too complex and complicated to describe the system only with orders and competing poles. Unlike what Mearsheimer predicts, it is not easy to compete

militarily in hostile configurations while enormously trading and cooperating in other fields.

However, this article also acknowledged that this great power competition might end up with a new Cold War-like polarization within the multipolar system and might have implications for third parties. The emergence of two competing blocs is still possible under three conditions or developments, which might be indicative to shape this trend: if NATO fully covers China as a new threat in its future strategic concept, if Sino-Russian strategic cooperation or entente becomes a formal military alliance with treaties and creates a competing order, and if current polarization between the US and China diffuses more to the economic order and affects global trade significantly.

Therefore, the more the US and China polarize the more negative effects of this competition on global trade and collective efforts to solve global problems will be felt by the international community and this trend will be indicative of the direction of any system change.

Another conclusion can be drawn from the state strategies. The article shows that China and Russia do not intent to replace the whole international orders but to replace the current leader or dominant powers. Similarly, they don't involve in an arms race with the US as was the case in the Cold War, instead, they prefer varied hybrid and gray zone methods, which are confusing and deceiving, to hide their balancing strategies. Even if the current power indicators show the US' superiority, they also imply that gaps are closing, and time is working against the US, partly thanks to rivals' gradualist hybrid and gray zone activities. Therefore, a Cold War-like polarization might even be a desirable scenario for the US unless being caught unprepared. If the international system turns into bipolarity, it is obvious that the US will need new methods, more allies, and a wider containment.

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