THE PLACE OF FORMER SOVIET UNION IN THE BIPOLAR POWER RELATIONS  
(1985 - 1993) 

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“The Cold War is over” 
President George Bush (Snr.) 
(1990) To blame Perestroika and Glasnost For 
the ailments of socialism is like blaming the 
Diagnosis and prescription for the illness. 
Indeed, the only way to ensure the future 
of Socialism is to grasp the nettle with 
political Courage of a Gorbachev. (New 
Horizon, 1990:2) 

Abstract 
Since the early 1990’s, the balance of power at bipolarity level has 
been altered significantly as a result of changes in Eastern Europe and 
eventual collapse of communism in former Soviet Union. The 
traditional balance of power has been shifted in favour of the USA, in 
the opinion of most analysts. Unlike the previous phases of detente, 
such as the early 1970’s, there has of late, been a fundamental shift in 
the structure of international relations. Particularly notable has been the 
dismantling of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, the collapse of 
communism in this area, and the demise of Soviet Union. In this paper, 
an attempt is made to explain the causes and effects of these 
developments, particularly; the perception since the early 1990’s, of 
the pattern of balance of power; that suggests as it were, that bipolarity 
has given way to unipolarity. Special attention will be paid to the 
economic and political reforms introduced by the former Soviet Leader 
Mikhail Gorbachev, which caused the former Soviet Union to refrain 
more than necessary, and signaling the end of the Cold War. 

Introduction Theoretical 
Framework 
One important theory that has captured enough attention of Scholars in the field of international 
relations particularly since the end of the Second World War is the “balance of power theory”. The 
concept of balance of power, which is the central theme of this essay, involves the utilization or 
arrangement of national power in a special way. According to Onwuka (1995: 3), the concept may mean 
almost anything, and it is used not only in a different sense by different people, or in a different sense by 
the same people at different times, but in different sense by the same persons at the same times. To 
Morgenthau (1973), balance of power “consists in the attempt on the part of one nation to counteract the 
power of another nation by increasing its strength to a point where it is at least, equal if not superior to the 
other nation’s strength. 

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, defines balance of power as “just equilibrium” in power 
among the members of the family of nations as will prevent any one of them from becoming sufficiently 
strong, to enforce its will upon the others (Balance of power, 1937). ‘Bipolarity’ is a situation of balance 
of power where two actors are involved. Bipolar power relations existed during the Cold War period and 
captured the attention of the world’s greatest powers: the United States of America and the former Soviet 
Union (USSR). The techniques used during this period by both powers in power balancing were 
“Armaments and Disarmaments”. Military armaments are major means of offsetting a nation’s military 
superiority Vis-a-vis its competitors. This explains the unprecedented ‘arms race’ between the United 
States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold war era (Abubakar, 1987). For example, in 1984, the 
Soviet Union was said to have deployed long range Cruise Missiles on its strategic bombers and sub-
marines in addition to land- based ones in reaction to a similar step by the United States. In making the 
announcement, the Soviet Union reiterated its determination not to allow the nuclear balance to be upset 
(Aja, 1993:15). 

The balance of power at bipolarity level was a feature of international politics during the cold
war era, and the alternating phases of the Cold war era can be talked about within an overall Soviet — American antagonism in which case, America and Soviet Union were in such an intense ideological loggerheads that each saw the other as potential enemy (Mbakwe, 1999). In view of equal nuclear deterrence, both powers were adjudged equal as each could destroy the other. The paper which employs descriptive - historical approach, will seek to examine the past systematically.

The Rise of Cold War (1945 -1984)

The origins and sources of Soviet - American confrontation have been analysed by scholars of both historical and political persuasions. Whether these scholars are liberals, conservatives, or Marxists do not matter. What is important most is their common understanding that the Cold War was essentially an ideological battle and an earlier pattern of anti-communism and interventionism in American foreign policy. Hogan (1992:248), echoes the Truman’s Doctrine in concluding that the Cold War in Europe was really a battle between freedom and autocracy. This, he saw as a fundamental debate between Liberalism and Communism. This debate gave the Cold War its moral intensity.

However, the fundamental cause of the Cold War was the reinforcing belief in both the former Soviet Union and the United States that confrontation was unavoidable; imposed by history. There was this belief among Soviet leaders that communism would ultimately triumph in the world and that the Soviet Union was the vanguard of this expectation. They also believed that the “Western imperialist” powers were historically bound to pursue a hostile course against them. For their part, America and other western leaders assumed that the Soviet Union was determined to enhance its own power and to pursue expansionist policies by all expedient means in order to achieve a Soviet - led communist world (Hogan, 251). Each side thought that it was compelled by the very existence of the other side to engage in a “zero - sum” competition, and each saw the unfolding history of the Cold War as confirming its views. Other influences such as national aims, institutional interests, and personal -psychological considerations enhanced the ideological struggles (Kinya, 1987:14). Moreover, the actions of each side were sufficiently consistent with the ideological expectations of the other side to sustain their respective world - view for many years.

Within the framework of ideological conflict, the Americans and the Soviets waged the Cold War as a geopolitical struggle, more in terms of traditional balance of power politics than in terms of class struggle or global containment/deterrence strategy. What this point is stressing is that the Cold War had both ideological and geopolitical dimensions. Each side during the Cold War, looked to the realization of its ambitions (or its historical destiny) over the long term and thus, posited an indefinite period of conflict. Even though the Cold War policies were pragmatic and based on calculation of risk, cost and gain, there was always the hazard of a miscalculation that could be dangerous given the historical coincidence of the Cold War and the first half-century of the nuclear age. Nuclear weapons, by threatening the existence of World civilization, added significantly to the tension of the epoch. The era nevertheless, helped to keep the Cold War cold, thereby prevented a third World War in the twentieth century (Kinya, 1987:15).

The Cold War only ended when the ideological underpinnings were released. These occurred under Gorbachev’s leadership, which saw a fundamental re-evaluation in Moscow of the processes at work in the real world; a basic reassessment of threat, and a deep revision of political aims and objectives. The Cold War was not won by the west through geopolitical containment and military deterrence, as it is widely believed. Reagan’s military might and the Reagan’s Doctrine neither won the Cold War as some have suggested. Instead, “victory” for the West came when a new generation of Soviet leaders realised how badly their system at home and their policies abroad had been. What containment did was to successfully stalemate Moscow’s attempts to advance Soviet hegemony. Over four decades, it performed the historic function of holding Soviet power in check until the internal seeds of destruction within the Soviet Union could mature. At this point, however, it was Gorbachev who brought the cold war to an end (Anatole and John, 1990: 865).

How Did Gorbachev End the Cold War?

All Soviet leaders from Lenin to Gorbachev shared a belief in an inevitable conflict between Socialism and Capitalism. The only difference between Gorbachev and others before him, even
The Place of Former Soviet Union in the Bipolar Power Relations (1985 - 1993)

though he remained a socialist and even a Marxist - Leninist, was that Gorbachev renounced the idea of inevitable World conflict. He accepted the forces of interdependence of the world, of the priorities of all - human value over class value as well as the indivisibility of common security (Anatole and John, 868).

The change, which Gorbachev introduced and publicly declared in 1986, manifested itself in many ways; including policies reflecting a drastically reduced soviet perception of the American threat and vice versa.

The death of Konstantin Chernenko after a few months reign in 1985 brought the young generation of communists led by Michael Gorbachev to power. Inheriting a stagnant economy, a costly and bloody war in Afghanistan and tensions with the west (because of poor human rights record) and compounded by an explosion in 1986 at a nuclear plant in Chernobyl near kier in Ukraine, Gorbachev had no option than to introduce measures to revitalize the soviet economy and combat other problems. Before the introduction of his twin programmes of “Glasnost and Perestroika”, the World Bank, IMF, IBRD and OECD had already carried out a joint study of the soviet’s economy (International Monetary Fund, 1991). The study made specific case for economic reforms in the USSR. The reforms as recommended were the only condition given and a framework within which ‘Western Assistance’ could be rendered (Anatole and John, 867). Furthermore, the economic situation in the late 1980’s was worsened by strikes, inter-ethnic strife, the collapse of the Union-wide market due to the raising of local barriers to trade as well as a breakdown of system of the state orders.

One of the reform programmes, Glasnost (Openness), loosened the reins of censorship and eased the repression of the Brezhnev years. Under Glasnost, the media had more latitude to report sensitive issues. Social scientists began to write stories critical of past leaders particularly Stalin and Brezhnev. For example, in 1986, the Soviet press began to publish articles critical of the crimes of the Stalin era, a subject that had not being broached since the Khrushchev’s ouster in the early 1960’s. Press freedom expanded rapidly thereafter. By 1989, Gorbachev and the rest of Soviet leadership could be attacked openly in the press, and in 1990/91, large demonstrations occurred across the Soviet Union calling for his resignation. Even before 1990, the Communist government had begun to loosen out in its policy of religious intolerance by allowing the hosting in 1988 of the celebration marking the 1000 years of Christianity in Russia. (Geoffrey & Duncan, 1992)

The second policy ‘Perestroika’ was aimed at overhauling the entire political system by limiting the power of the Communist party, creating the new and powerful position of the State President as well as establishing a new state legislative body that had broad authority. (Anatole and John, 869). The policy called for an open and competitive election. Furthermore, the policy allowed the introduction of free enterprise practices in some areas of the economy. In addition, the project created new incentives for increased worker productivity and removed corrupt officials from all government agencies. These broad policy reforms must have arisen out of sheer experience of Gorbachev as Russian Ambassador in the European Union, and this enabled him to acquire some relevant experience on the dynamics and operation of Western economic system, which is production oriented and market forces driven (Kinya, 16).

Perestroika followed reforms implemented in Czechoslovakia, which shifted many production decisions to on - site farm and factory managers. Gorbachev also undertook some military and strategic changes. For example, in 1986, he made clear his intentions and readiness to ban all nuclear weapons. In 1988 also, he proposed conventional arms reductions in Europe under a plan that would abandon the Soviet numerical superiority and also launched a substantial unilateral force reduction. In 1988 and 1989, he withdrew all Soviet forces (the Red army) from Afghanistan. At about the same time, he encouraged the ouster of the old Communist leadership in Eastern Europe and accepted the transition of the former Soviet - allied States into non-Communist neutral states.

By 1990, Gorbachev had not only accepted Germany’s reunification but also the membership of a unified Germany in NATO. A year later, he jettisoned the Warsaw Pact and the CMEA (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance), and had also agreed to substantial reduction in strategic nuclear forces. He also resolved to reduce defense spending by reducing conventional forces. (Aja, 1993: 19)


Analysts in the field of international relations are of the opinion that bipolarity in power politics has been altered significantly since the late 1980’s as a result of changes in Eastern Europe in general and Soviet Union in particular. It has been argued that the traditional role of balance of power
in world politics has seized to be the responsibility of the two super powers, the US and Soviet Union. In fact, some writers and commentators are of the opinion that bipolar balance of power has given way to unipolarity. From strategic analytical viewpoint, Glasnost and Perestroika did not directly undermine former Soviet Union as a super power. What came to be a challenge to Soviet super power status started with the abortive coup to overthrow Gorbachev in August, 1991. He was suspected as one selling out the Soviet to the west, thus becoming a Western surrogate. The hardliners felt that he had been bought over by the west (Mbakwe, 2001:15).

As the Soviet State started experiencing crisis, many nationalities within the Soviet Union began to demand for independence. To them, it was an opportunity to demand for an end to the collective umbrella. At this point, it became obvious that the Union was heading towards a possible disintegration. Combined with worsening economic conditions as well as strong and relentless opposition from Socialist hardliners, Gorbachev had to resign. On resignation, Soviet Union as a political entity was totally weakened. Mindful of the apparent political vacuum and strategic implications of this development, Boris Yeltsin of Russia called for the cooperation of willing nationalities and this gave birth to an “alternative” umbrella, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, some nationalities remained adamant to this call notably Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia (Mbakwe, 2001:18).

One of the greatest problems facing the former republic after its collapse was how to control the nuclear and conventional weapons scattered all over the Soviet States. The nuclear arsenals were not concentrated in Russia or Ukraine or in any of the nationalities. Without such effective control, the present political umbrella (CIS) would not be seen as a counter superpower to the United States of America. This is why some analysts have opined that bipolarity has given way to unipolarity. In other words, with the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the system has lost command and control of nuclear and conventional power capabilities for deterring the U. S. and its allies. Furthermore, the role of the Soviet Union in the Gulf crisis seemed to have given credence to the preponderance of power in the hands of the United States. It has been observed that she refrained more than necessary during the gulf crisis as a super power. For instance, there wouldn’t have been the UN action against Iraq if the former Soviet Union had vetoed such a proposal in the United Nations Security Council (Gad & Aharon, 1995:208).

On the other hand, when actually the UN force went beyond Soviet Union’s imagination, it did not overtly support Iraq with a view to checking US excesses. As a result, throughout the Gulf war, America was synonymous with the United Nations. Even the command and control of the UN forces against Iraq was determined not by the UN Security Council but by George Bush - the American President. (Aja, 16). Whatever is the case, Russia still claims it has nuclear power to check the USA. Hence, bipolarity or balance of power at two poles is still relevant in contemporary international politics.

Conclusions

It can be argued that even though communism is dead, it is rapidly being replaced by an intolerant and aggressive nationalism. It is therefore premature to celebrate the passing of the strong
The Place of Former Soviet Union in the Bipolar Power Relations (1985 - 1993)

Soviet communist State. The fact is that the failure of communist totalitarianism is now being replaced by nationalistic authoritarianism or even fascism of a Russian type. America and the rest of Western democracies still face the similar dangerous threat as the old Soviet Union posed. Russia is still strong in the strategic bipolar power relations because, after all, the need to consolidate the competition with the USA underlined the need for the reforms of the 1980’s (Fukuyama, 1989). The spirit to “keep America in check” is still there when one remembers the attempt made by nine of the fifteen republics in 1991 to renegotiate the Union treaty that gave rise to CIS and accelerated after the August failed coup. Quite fundamentally, however, the nature of international system and patterns of contemporary politics do not make room for unipolarity (Aja, 1993). The multiplicity of nations with nuclear weapons in different geopolitical corners of the globe would obviously, constrain the emergence of power at only one pole. The U.S. may be a leading power but not without checks. However, considering a position of weakness on which Russia has found itself in the bipolar power relations, America has found itself not only in a position of strength but also in a position of “dictator of power”. She could, therefore, be described as world’s policeman.

Works Cited