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**MAP-(C) 102**

**Politics of International Relations**



Unit-I

International Relations: Meaning, Significance and its Changing Nature, Cold War: Origin and Nature, End of Cold War: Implications, Nature of Contemporary International Order: Changing Alignments.

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**Unit I****International Relations: Meaning, Significance and its Changing Nature**

International Relations (IR) is an academic discipline that studies international relations. It is important to note on the outset that the academic field is denoted with upper cased first letters (International Relations), whereas the subject of its study is written in lower case (international relations). This unit starts by defining international relations and also tries to capture its significance and changing nature.

**International relations as interstate relations**

Scholars of IR vary greatly in defining international relations. For many, international relations refers to the relationships between states. This is the traditional definition of international relations held by many scholars of International Relations especially those of the Realist School of IR. International relations of this kind can be traced back a long way in history with records indicating relationships between ancient Sumerian states, going back to around 2500 BCE. States tend to have a multitude of relationships between them on different spheres, be it economic, political, or defence. These relationships exist between the official governments of states and are carried out through diplomacy. By this definition, states are the key units of international relations. States are different from nations for 'nation' is a cultural entity but state is a territorial, political-legal entity. Thus, according to the aforementioned traditional definition, it is only entities with legal statehood that are primary actors in international relations.

One of the chief features of states in the modern period is sovereignty. A sovereign state answers to no higher power and thus is autonomous in both its domestic and external behaviour. International system is thus a collection of sovereign states and their interactions constitute international relations. The sovereign nature of modern states is an important factor in the international system. Since states are sovereign, there is no central authority to regulate the relationships between them. Thus, many IR scholars argue that the relationship between states is characterised by anarchy. As there is no

central authority in the international system, states have to take care of their own interests, using their own resources without any illusion of a higher authority guaranteeing justice or order. This is the reason the international system is often referred to as a self-help system. Existing in a self-help system makes security the preponderant concern of states as survival becomes their overriding apprehension. States seek to ensure their survival through diplomacy and strategy with military force playing an important role, as a defensive shield and also as an offensive tool to advance their interests. While survival is the key interest, states also use diplomacy to advance their economic and other interests with other states in the pursuit of prosperity. These are the main arguments put forward by many IR scholars, especially of the Realist School, who hold onto a state-centric view of international relations.

#### Changing definition of international relations

The traditional definition of international relations as merely relations between states has been challenged in recent times by many scholars from different schools of IR. They argue that international relations should be defined in a broader way by including all cross border relations that happen between a plethora of actors, be it peoples, NGOs, International Organizations etc. It is argued that because of the acceleration of globalization, states are not the only actors in international relations even if they remain as the most important one. States do exercise a lot of control over cross border transactions as they are the ones with the power to issue visas and levy duties. However, scholars of this persuasion argue that two recent developments have undermined the role of states in the international system.

Firstly, it is argued that the growth of international institutions in recent times in the form of both intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations have weakened the role of states in the international system. International relations of today is also driven by non-state actors like International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and other such institutions. Even International NGOs like Amnesty International play important roles in setting the agenda and shaping the debate. Intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations, European Union and many others also exert their influence on the international system. Thus, it is argued that a study of international relations of today cannot ignore the role played these actors.

Scholars of the Liberal Institutional School and even the Constructivist School of IR argue that the growth of international institutions have increased cooperation between states by reducing the anarchic nature of the international system.

Secondly, it is also argued by some that the acceleration of globalization in the last few decades has transformed the international system by establishing a multiplicity of relations between states, many of which are difficult for states to control. For example, increased global trade has vested multinational corporations with enormous power and influence. Advancements in technology have facilitated increased contact between peoples through means like the internet and such interactions are difficult for states to regulate but they also play an increasing role in influencing relations between states. The globalization of the world economy has meant that even the economies of rival states are now intricately linked. Globalization has thus established economic, social, cultural and political linkages which go beyond the purview of states. Thus, some neo-liberal scholars of IR have argued that states are now in a state of 'complex interdependence'.

Thus, owing to these two broad developments, it is argued by many that international relations should be defined as all cross border relations and not just inter-state relations. As noted earlier, some scholars even argue that growth of international organizations and the development of multiple linkages between states due to globalization have reduced the anarchic nature of the international system and have made international relations more formal and regulated. States are also said to be less worried about security and give significant if not equal importance to economic relations with other states. It is anyway imperative today that any student of international relations studies inter-state relations as well as other cross border relations.

### **Cold War: Origin and Nature**

Cold War lasted from 1945 to 1990. There is some debate among scholars about when it started. Some trace it far back to 1917, to the communist Russian Revolution which was the beginning of the ideological struggle between Communism and Capitalism. However, most historians attribute the origin of the Cold War to the end of the Second World War, the most destructive conflict in human history.

## End of the Second World War and the Origin of the Cold War

The Second World War saw the death of nearly 60 million people with two-thirds of them being civilians. It also resulted in wide scale, unprecedented devastation of Europe. When the war ended, Europe was in ruins, literally as well as morally. The Second World War brought to close the 19<sup>th</sup> century international order that had Britain and other European colonial powers at the forefront. In their place, United States and the Soviet Union rose as two superpowers who had enormous economic and military prowess.

United States and Soviet Union had fought on the same side as part of the Allied powers during the Second World War against the Axis powers led by Nazi Germany. However, it was an alliance of convenience as since the Russian Revolution of 1917, communist Russia and capitalist United States had not seen eye to eye. It was the overwhelming necessity to defeat Nazi Germany that brought them together under one camp. As shown by the map given below, the end of the Cold War saw parts of Europe left with Soviet control and others under the control of US and its Western allies.

Map of Europe after World after World War II



Source: Robert McMahon (2003), *Cold War: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 4

It is in this and the ideological dissonance between the US and the Soviet Union, one can place the origins of the Cold War. Europe and much of the world laid devastated by the Second World War and two great superpowers with conflicting ideologies had emerged. In the next few decades, they sought to impose their competing visions on the world and this led to tension and rivalry between them. It is this confrontation that came to be known as the Cold War. Thus, the roots of the Cold War lay in the way the old Eurocentric world order ended with concentration of power in two states, US and the Soviet Union, which had differing ideologies.

#### Nature of the Cold War

Cold War can be thus understood from one perspective as an ideological struggle between Capitalism and Communism with US and Soviet Union being the respective torch bearers for each doctrine. On the other hand, it can also be understood as a power struggle between two rival states for dominance and from that perspective, it was no different than the past power struggles between similar states in history, for example between Rome and Carthage. Thus, the cold war can be understood as the result of a bipolar power structure with US and Soviet Union being the two poles. It can be concluded that elements of both ideological conflict and great power rivalry interacted in complex ways, shaping the cold war. It is called as a 'Cold' War because of the fact that despite constant tensions and unprecedented build-up of arms on both sides, the United States and the Soviet Union officially were never at war during the entire period of the cold war. While they fought proxy wars in many regions of the world, there was no direct confrontation between the two. This was largely because of the nuclear status of both the countries. United States became a nuclear weapon power in 1945 and the Soviet Union followed suit in 1949. This meant that any direct full-fledged war between the superpowers would entail mutual destruction. The existence of this Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) status between the two countries was one major reason that both countries avoided any direct encounter and thus the conflict came to be known as the 'Cold' War.

A bipolar power structure meant that alliances were straightforward as countries had the simple choice of aligning either with the US or with the Soviet Union. While the Non-

Aligned movement led by India and like-minded powers tried to change this dynamic, their success was only limited.

### Course of the Cold War

By the end of the Second World War, United States and the Soviet Union held deep distrust of each other and this heightened for US and its allies once Soviet Union started installing communist regimes in Eastern Europe. They both accused each other of violating the terms agreed upon during the wartime conferences of Yalta and Potsdam. United States feared further Soviet expansion in Europe and thus adopted the Truman Doctrine in 1947 which provided military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey. This was followed up in 1948 with the Marshall Plan which provided economic assistance to Western European countries in order to enable them to make swift economic recovery such that they resist Soviet influence. These steps constituted the beginning of US policy of containment towards the Soviet Union which saw itself as in struggle against imperialist and capitalist forces led by the United States.

The first crisis of the Cold War took place in June 1948 over Berlin. West Berlin had been under the control of US and its allies while it was surrounded by Soviet held areas. Soviet Union sought to take control of West Berlin by blockading supplies to it through road and rail. United States and its allies responded by air lifting supplies to West Berlin and this came to be known as the Berlin Airlift. Soviet Union relented and lifted the blockade in May 1949. United States and its allies also signed the agreement on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949 with the defining principle of the alliance being, attack on one member treated as attack on all. This was to deter Soviet aggression and brought many countries under the military and nuclear umbrella of the United States. The Soviet Union responded to NATO, especially the inclusion of West Germany to it, by signing the Warsaw Pact in 1955 with its European allies. The Berlin airlift and the formation of NATO indicated firm American commitment to the defence of Western Europe and resulted in a stalemate in Europe that lasted for decades. However, the Cold War spread to other parts of the world. The establishment of a Communist regime in China in 1949 was watched with alarm by the United States and when communist North Korean regime attacked South Korea in 1950, the United

States interpreted it as a Soviet supported communist offensive. The resulting American intervention in the Korean War resulted in the restoration of pre-war borders in 1953.

The period from 1953 to 1969 was filled with conflict and confrontation between the two superpowers which included the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 which almost led to nuclear confrontation between the two. In October 1962, the United States discovered that the Soviet Union had begun installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. The United States under President John F. Kennedy responded by implementing a military quarantine of Cuba and after tense negotiations, Soviet Union agreed to remove its nuclear installations from Cuba. Historians believe that the world was on the brink of a nuclear war during this crisis. United States also got increasingly involved in the Vietnam War during this period, starting from 1961 and Vietnam became another theatre of proxy war between the two superpowers.

From 1969 to 1979 however, there was a general period of calm and easing of tensions between US - Soviet relations and this phase has come to be called as 'détente'. This became possible because both superpowers realised the importance of avoid nuclear escalation and also wanted to lessen the costs of the arms race. Also, by 1969, Soviet - China relations had become strained and even hostile while China - US ties were beginning to take hold which ultimately led to a rapprochement between the two. This marked a realignment of huge proportions and weakened the Soviet Union by splitting the communist camp. The détente period saw the superpowers signing arms control agreements but it has to be noted that while the détente was an attempt to have more friendly relations, both superpowers continued to support their allies across the world firmly as shown during the Arab-Israeli War of 1973.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the election of a belligerent US President in Ronald Reagan in 1980 resulted in return of heightened tensions between the superpowers and historians refer to 1979 to 1986 as the period of 'the second cold war'. American military interventions in Grenada in 1983 and against Libya in 1986, combined with a more hostile rhetoric from President Reagan increased US-Soviet tensions. Soviet Union responded in kind and in 1983 shot down a South Korean civilian airlines over Soviet airspace. This period marked another phase during which the world came close to the brink of nuclear war.

## **End of Cold War: Implications**

The cold war ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the final dissolution the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a momentous event in world history that would reshape international relations. The end of the cold war came so abruptly that most scholars of IR failed to predict it. Before discussing the implications of the end of the cold war, it is important to briefly note the causes for the end of the cold war.

### Reasons for the End of Cold War

It is very difficult to give precise reasons for an event as complex and as significant as the end of the cold war, especially because it did not conclude with an outright military defeat of one side. Instead, it was the peaceful dissolution of the mighty Soviet Union that ended the cold war. It is challenging to discuss in brief why and how the Soviet Union disintegrated because there were a lot of factors. Yet, it is possible to list the most important internal and external reasons for the demise of the Soviet Union.

Internally, the Soviet Union had been facing economic stagnation from the 1970s which continued into the 1980s. This was made more difficult by the necessity to keep up military spending in order to compete with the United States. The inflexibility of Soviet central planning system began to show and Soviet industries lagged behind the West in terms of modernization. Late 1970s and early 1980s was also a period of poor harvests in the Soviet Union which further hurt the Soviet economy. Politically, after the death of Brezhnev, the early 1980s saw a succession of ageing political leaders coming to power in the Soviet Union who could not respond effectively to many challenges the country faced. Finally, Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in 1985 with an ambitious programme to reform Soviet economy and society. His two prominent domestic initiatives were 'glasnost' (openness) and 'perestroika' (restructuring). The former increased freedom of expression within the Soviet Union while the latter aimed at political and economic restructuring. Glasnost allowed criticism of the government and loosened controls over the press. Perestroika introduced democratic reforms and also certain economic reforms aimed at liberalizing the economy. These initiatives ultimately undermined the communist party and public opinion questioned the communist system itself. With respect to Eastern Europe, Gorbachev abandoned the Brezhnev doctrine which granted only limited sovereignty to them. Instead, his 'Sinatra

doctrine' allowed some element of freedom for East European countries and when they took advantage of it and began overthrowing the communist regimes, Gorbachev refrained from using military force to assert Soviet dominance. Thus, the Soviet empire in East Europe collapsed with the unification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 being the most dramatic example.

With respect to external factors, historians are divided how much of the Soviet collapse can be attributed to the aggressive posturing of Ronald Reagan. Some argue that the hardline rhetoric and policies of Reagan, increased the costs of cold war for an already economically ailing Soviet Union which resulted in its collapse. Some others argue that Reagan's policies only prolonged the cold war as Soviet collapse could have happened earlier if the US had been more conciliatory. However, more than American policies, it is argued that the isolation of the Soviet communist system from the global capitalist system resulted in relative disadvantage for the Soviet economy which precipitated the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Thus, a combination of internal and external factors led to the unexpected fall of the Soviet Union. This monumental historical event had systemic implications.

### Implications

Firstly, the end of the cold war ended the ideological competition between capitalism and communism with the triumph of capitalism. Thus, many scholars like Francis Fukuyama argued that the liberal democratic capitalist order had emerged as the predominant ideological inclination of the world. Some others like Samuel Huntington predicted that future conflicts would be on non-ideological grounds like ethnic or nationalist or religious or civilizational fault lines. The experience of the past two decades shows that at least some of these predictions have come true.

Secondly, the end of the cold war altered the structure of the international system. The cold war bipolar structure gave way to a unipolar system with US becoming the sole superpower of the world. This resulted in a period of US hegemony which to a large extent continues till today. The lack of structural conflict resulted in a brief period of falling defence expenditures across the world, especially by the US, which however changed after the 9/11 attacks.

Thirdly, with the integration of the communist countries into the global capitalist system, globalization accelerated, pushed forward by the US. Liberalization of trade became a norm and objective of many countries and economic linkages between countries increased. Cultural and societal links have also increased.

### **Nature of Contemporary International Order: Changing Alignments**

It has been more than three decades since the end of the cold war. Scholars of IR have tried to capture the contemporary international order. On the one hand, Liberal optimists like Francis Fukuyama predicted a period of peace and prosperity based on the foundations of a liberal democratic international order. However, realists like Mearshamer warned that any such optimism is naïve and argued that power politics and conflict will be present between states. Some others argued that historic fault lines of nationalism/ethnicity/religion that had been held in check by the cold war order would come to the fore.

The events of past three decades do not fit neatly into any single prediction.

#### Continuing US hegemony

US remains the predominant economic and military power of the world. It maintains the international liberal order through its economic might and keeps the trade lanes open through the reach of its military, with multiple bases across the world. It also continues to push its economic and political agenda through international institutions like the UN and WTO.

#### Rise of China

While US remains the sole superpower, China is fast emerging as a challenger. China's rise has been on the basis of an economic system which is a blend of capitalism and communism, combined with a non-liberal, non-democratic unique political system. Hence, the rise of China is seen as a threat to the liberal democratic international order by many Western analysts. Some have predicted a new cold war in future between the US and the China.

#### Rise of non-state threats

The post-cold war period has also seen a rise in non-state threats fuelled predominantly on religious fundamentalism. This has become the case especially after the 9/11 attacks. Non-state actors have exercised unprecedented influence on the international order in recent times, causing even major wars like the US led invasion of Afghanistan (2001).

#### Increasing Russian belligerence

While the end of the cold war saw a collapse of Russia as an economic superpower, Russia still retained a seat in the UN Security council as well as inherited the tremendous military might of the Soviet Union. Russian economic restructuring also did not succeed fully but propelled by oil revenues and an assertive leader in Vladimir Putin, Russia has become increasingly belligerent in the last decade as shown by its recent military interventions in Ukraine, Georgia and Syria. Hence, while Russia is no superpower, its status as a great power continues to influence the international order.

#### Changing Alignments

The impact of the above mentioned factors have resulted in changing alignments in the post-cold war era. These alignments have not been as straightforward as they were during the cold war but are complex and multi-layered. Many countries like India who were formerly close with the Soviet Union have liberalized their economy and have tried to align closely with the US. However, there is also emergence of solidarity between developing countries in order to get better deals in international institutions and this is shown by the emergence of alliances like the BRICS. US led invasion of Iraq which was widely condemned by the world has also led to concerns about US unilateralism. Increasing Russian assertion is argued by some as a response to US unilateralism. More recently, US has been attempting to put together a broad alliance to balance a rising China by forging closer relationships with countries like India and other Asia-Pacific countries.

In many ways, the international system is in transition. US is still dominant but other powers like China and India are rising. It remains to be seen whether this will result in a multipolar system with several great powers or a bipolar system with China and US as two poles.

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