Emergence of a Bipolar World

Even before the smoke had settled from World War II, a new war of ideologies was gathering force. The United States and the Soviet Union had cooperated to defeat the fascist empires of Germany, Italy, and Japan. However, by the end of 1945, the wartime alliance crumbled. The capitalist world, anchored by the United States, and communist world, anchored by the Soviet Union, would collide in a colossal match of wills over the next fifty years – a conflict known as the Cold War.

Beginnings of the Cold War

As early as 1946, Winston Churchill described the rising Soviet control of Eastern Europe as an “Iron Curtain,” dividing the continent. In Greece, Joseph Stalin supported communist rebels fighting against a British-supported right-wing monarchy. Stalin was also threatening neighboring Turkey in the Dardanelles, a strategic straight connecting the Black Sea with the Mediterranean.

President Harry S. Truman emphasized in a speech the intentions of the United States to support free people who were resisting “attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” This Truman Doctrine established the capitalist world’s goal of containment – to prevent the spread of communism wherever it may threaten. A direct result of this philosophy was the Marshall Plan, which shelled out billions of dollars to sixteen European countries. This money helped stabilize the region after the most devastating event in world history.

Although aid was offered to the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, Stalin forbade the acceptance of money from the U.S., viewing it as a plan to spread capitalism. The Soviets, in turn, shelled out money to support its satellites and maintain communism in the region. To help pay for these expenses and the difficult task of rebuilding after the war, the Soviets dismantled German factories and drained other German resources from its occupied zone. France, Britain, and the U.S., by contrast, united their zones and encouraged the Germans to rebuild.

Germany became a divided nation, and the city of Berlin became one of the key focal points of the Cold War after the Soviets blockaded any goods from entering the city by road or by rail in 1948. The western powers counteracted this maneuver by a constant airlift of supplies to the Berliners for 11 months, until the Soviets lifted the blockade after intense international pressure. The Berlin Airlift showed the resolve of the west and although they had won this round, the crisis deepened hostilities between the two sides. A bipolar world emerged between the democratic, capitalist states, and the authoritarian, communist states – with the rest of the world hanging in the balance.

In 1949, the United States, Canada, and nine Western European states formed a military alliance called NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Members agreed to help each other if one of them was attacked. Later that year, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, and a highly competitive and tenuous arms race began.

In 1955, the Soviet Union and seven Eastern European states formed their own military alliance called the Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Pact was as much a tool for the Soviet Union to keep its satellites firmly under its control as it was a defensive agreement.

China and the Communist Takeover

During World War II the Nationalist and communist Chinese agreed to halt their civil war and form a united front against their common enemy, the Japanese. However, conflict between Nationalist and communist forces soon resumed after the war, each side hoping to gain an advantage over the other.

The Communists effectively used the war as an opportunity to expand their influence and had significantly increased the size of their army as well as the territory under their control. In time, the Communists won the upper hand in their brutal civil war, and by 1949 they had driven the Nationalists from power.

In 1949 Jiang Jeshi (Chiang Kai-shek), the Nationalist leader, fled with his supporters to the island of Taiwan and established a government there. On the Chinese mainland the Communists, led by Mao Zedong, established the People’s Republic of China. The United States government,
which had aided the Nationalists, refused to recognize this new communist government on the mainland.

While Mao Zedong’s government endeavored to reorganize the newly established People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Communists were also engaged in worldwide efforts toward an international socialist revolution. In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China were allies, united by political ideology and common economic interests. However, the two nations soon diverged.

Soviet leaders in the ‘50s believed that world communism could be achieved through scientific and economic successes rather than through military conquests. Therefore, they felt that they could have “peaceful coexistence” with the West. Chinese leaders, on the other hand, claimed that communist nations had an obligation to support “national wars of liberation.” They also argued that nations could never live in peaceful coexistence while capitalism existed. The Chinese insisted that by rejecting revolution as the means of social change, the Soviets had abandoned true Marxism. The Chinese also doubted that the Soviet model of economic development, which stressed heavy industry, would work in China, with its large farming population.

An overwhelming task faced this new communist government. Years of war had devastated China, Farms lay destroyed, and industry and transportation had almost ceased to function. The Chinese people had fared little better than their country. Miserably poor, they had been decimated by epidemics and famines. The Communists acted to restore order, bring inflation under control, and eliminate various forms of corruption. They also took violent action against their opponents. About 1 million people lost their lives in Communist Party purges.

In 1953 the Communists began the process of rebuilding China by issuing their first Five-Year Plan for economic growth. The Soviet Union provided part of the capital for this plan—which was modeled on similar Soviet plans—both most of the financing was Chinese. Although the plan stressed the rapid buildup of heavy industry, it also focused on land reform. The Communists seized farmland from landlords and redistributed it to the peasants. Thousands—perhaps millions—of landlords were killed in the course of this land redistribution program. The peasants organized their newly acquired land into collective farms, while the government operated state farms on much of the land that remained. Despite periodic droughts and floods, some peasant resistance to collective farming, and inefficient planning by government officials, the first Five-Year Plan was a success. Both agricultural and industrial output increased.

Mao built a one-party totalitarian state, with the Communist party holding all the power. To increase literacy, the government simplified thousands of Chinese characters, making it much easier to learn to read and write. Women won equality under the law and were expected to work alongside men in the fields and in the factories. State-run nurseries were constructed to care for the children. Nonetheless, women remained second-class citizens. They were often paid less for the same work, and were still usually responsible for cleaning, cooking, and child care.

**The Red Scare**

With the rising threat of the Soviet Union and China, the fear of communism rose to immense proportions in the United States. The Second Red Scare (the first occurred after World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution) lasted from around 1950 through 1956. One of the key figures during the Red Scare was a senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy. He and his staff gained notoriety for accusing hundreds of people of being communists or communist sympathizers. These accusations were largely directed towards people in the U.S. government, but included many others as well. A few were, in fact, Soviet spies; but the vast majority were innocent of the charges brought against them. As a result, many people were blacklisted from employment or were shunned from society. The term McCarthyism has come to specifically describe the intense anti-Communist movement that existed in America during that period. People from all walks of life were suspected of being Soviet spies or Communist sympathizers and were brought before Congressional inquiries. These “witch hunts” eventually backfired and a nationwide popular opinion backlash erupted against McCarthy. He was eventually censured (publicly reprimanded) by Congress and the Red Scare began to die down.
Korea - The First War of Containment

Agreements made at the end of WWII divided Korea at the 38th parallel. The Soviet Union occupied the north, while the United States moved troops into the south. Elections held in the south resulted in the creation of South Korea, recognized by the United Nations. At the same time the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea, recognized only North Korea.

In June 1950 the North Korean army invaded South Korea, quickly taking Seoul. The United Nations Security Council, meeting in emergency session, declared the invasion an unwarranted aggression. In September 1950, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, supported by the United Nations, launched an attack at Inchon on the coast near Seoul. The North Koreans fell back behind their border with the UN forces in hot pursuit. As the UN troops approached the border between Korea and China, several hundred thousand Chinese soldiers joined those of North Korea. This combined force drove MacArthur and his army south of the 38th parallel.

Eventually the UN forces pushed the Chinese and North Koreans back across the 38th parallel. In July 1951, with the situation at a stalemate talks to end the hostilities began. After two years of negotiations, the two sides signed an armistice in July 1953 at Panmunjom. It fixed the boundary line between the two Koreas near the 38th parallel. It also established a demilitarized zone of 1.25 miles on either side of the boundary. The armistice also called for a political conference to be held within three months. This conference never took place, however, and no peace treaty was ever signed.

CIA Political Overthrows

The world was changing throughout the 1950s, and it wasn’t becoming a safer place, the Korean War notwithstanding. In 1952, the United States developed the world’s first hydrogen bomb near the Marshall Islands, a stronger nuclear weapon that utilizes a fusion chain reaction, rather than a fission chain reaction (as was used by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki). Joseph Stalin died in 1953, leaving a power vacuum in the Soviet Union. Stalin’s passing led to an increase in the feeling of uncertainty on the part of the west, since they were unaware which direction his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, would take the Soviet Union.

Both sides - the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. - sought to form alliances and destroy their enemies throughout the world. Iran, the most ethnically diverse country in the Middle East, was a key territory during the Cold War due to its oil reserves. In 1953, following the nationalization of their oil industry, the Prime Minister was removed from power in a plot, dubbed "Operation Ajax", orchestrated by British and US intelligence agencies to protect their oil interests in the region. The monarchy was reinstated and power handed to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose rule became increasingly dictatorial in the following years.

In 1951, the Guatemalans elected a socialist regime into power in their first ever free democratic election. After several socialist reforms were made, the U.S. became wary that the Soviet Union might have been pulling the strings. This fear coupled with the success of the Iranian coup led to another drastic move by the United States. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with a small group of around 400 Guatemalans overthrew the Guatemalan government in 1954. Although the coup led to the establishment of a rather inept and corrupt government, the goal of containment reigned supreme.

The Suez Crisis and the Aswan Dam

Egypt has both roots in Africa and in the Arab world. In the 1950s, Gamal Nasser emerged as an important Arab leader. Nasser set out to modernize Egypt and end western domination. In 1956, he nationalized the Suez Canal, ending British and French control. His defiance of the West increased his prestige in the Arab world. Israel, backed by the British and French, invaded the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula. However, the support that Israel, Britain, and France expected from the United States never came. The U.S. feared a greater war against the Soviet Union, which would have supported Egypt. The crisis came to an end, all invading forces returned home, and a UN border patrol was put in place between Egypt and Israel.

In the 1960s, with Soviet help, Nasser built the Aswan Dam on the Upper Nile. This dam controlled the Nile floodwaters and made year-round irrigation possible. This move also came with the price of worsened relations with the United States. Furthermore, the dam increased the salinity of the Nile, caused erosion in the Nile delta, destroyed fish hatcheries, and forced the relocation of many ancient temples as the waters rose. Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, would be the first Arab leader to make peace with Israel in 1979. After his assassination in 1981, future leaders would push for modernization and peace in the region; making Egypt one of the more moderate Arab states.