

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

<https://www.e-ir.info/2010/02/04/a-cold-war-without-nuclear-weapons/>

BLEDDYN E. BOWEN, FEB 4 2010

The Cold War is given its name for a reason. The term 'cold' refers to indirect conflict, competition and sour relations between the USA and USSR from, in this author's opinion, the dropping of the second American atomic bomb on Nagasaki in August 1945 to the fall of the USSR in 1991. The development and deployment of nuclear weapons was a pivotal point in human history. These weapons increased the state's destructive power, particularly after the development of thermonuclear weapons, with effectively no limits. With greater destructive yields and shorter delivery times courtesy of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), it is common understanding that had the cold war turned hot, it would have been the end of civilisation as we know it. The most critical factor in the preservation of the *cold*, in a manner of speaking, in this author's opinion was one of the dynamics elaborated upon by Robert Jervis' theory of the nuclear revolution.[1] While imperfect, there are observations that have plausible logic. The most relevant to this essay is that nuclear weapons made wars suicidal and unwinnable, therefore major interstate war should be unlikely, if not likely to occur at all if leaders were sensible.[2] The aim of this essay is to speculate whether, in the absence of nuclear weapons, would the confrontation between the USA and the USSR remained cold, or erupted into a conventional Third World War. Jervis claims that a bipolar system is inherently stable. This author believes otherwise due to Jervis' own admission of other bipolar systems that have precipitated violent clashes.[3]

This author believes that if nuclear weapons were taken out of international relations at a point of divergence in the 1945, a total war between the capitalist West and communist East would have been far more likely to occur. Rather than a nuclear standoff and a long peace developing, I would speculate on a return to great-power politics. A brief counterfactual survey of actual history is required to speculate with any degree of realistic expectations of another world system. This author will predominantly look at the immediate post-war period and attempt to shape a bipolar international system without the shadow of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Nuclear weapons did not create the bipolar system, they merely strengthened it. Continental Europe was ruined, and Britain was financially wrecked. The USSR and the USA would still come out 'on top' from the ashes of World War II. However, the conventional capabilities of the allied/client states on both sides would factor more into war planning in the absence of nuclear weapons.

Whilst such a topic as this is not a stranger to science fiction and alternate history in popular culture,[4] this is a useful test of one of Jervis' logics on the effect of nuclear weapons on the relationship between force and statecraft. This author intends to answer the question by taking out nuclear weapons from the calculations of states over dilemmas and crises. Also, this essay will prove to be a vindication of the importance of nuclear weapons to major state relations stability. Our violent human nature has been forced to come to terms with advances in technology. This author believes that the speculation that nuclear weapons prevented another conventional total war will argue against humanity ever aiming for a non-nuclear international system. Such insights are valuable, especially when the US president is keen to express his desire for an end to nuclear weapons. He has insisted that such a goal would not be achieved within his lifetime. One here would speculate that the USA, with its clear superiority in conventional forces, power projection and logistics would benefit greatly in a world without nuclear weapon-states to trump its advantages. A return to 3rd Generation Warfare[5] in a multipolar international system would contain some of the hallmarks of European politics in the inter-war period in the 20th Century.

The point of divergence in this counterfactual alternate history could be in 1945, when American attempts to develop an atomic bomb failed. Truman would not have been able to notify Stalin of his new weapon of tremendous power at

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

the Potsdam conference. In turn, Stalin's spies would have been able to notify him of the failure, concordantly stopping Stalin from pursuing his own bomb. After scrapping all other research and development linked to the Manhattan project, I would first speculate that those resources would have been diverted to conventional weaponry, particularly to the American strategic bomber force. On the Soviet side a similar re-armament programme could have been initiated, perhaps to replace Stalin's nuclear 'national problem #1'. This is by no means asserting that this is what would certainly have happened had the Manhattan project been a failure, there could have been another brainwave for another super weapon, but for the sake of the argument here we shall apply these factors to known circumstances of the period.

Japanese Conditional Surrender

Before studying an alternate bipolar system in further detail, the question of Japan must be addressed. There is considerable academic debate on whether the atomic bombs were needed to end the Pacific war, and whether they were used to end Japanese resistance as opposed to intimidating the Soviets. The argument that atomic weapons were not used on Japan to force a surrender[6] is a compelling one in this author's view. Alperovitz and Messer in the correspondence argue against Bernstein's view that the effect of atomic weapons use on the Soviets was merely a bonus to forcing surrender and saving American lives.[7] However, for the purpose of this essay, this author will accept Alperovitz's and Messer's argument that an atomic bombing of Japan made the Soviets 'more manageable in Europe'.[8] Speculating on a joint Soviet-American invasion of Japan or a fast Japanese surrender before Soviet involvement are both equally valid conjectures. However, to maintain simplicity in this essay's scope, this author will preserve our historical line and maintain American occupation in Japan as we knew it.

Taking away the atomic weapons in the Japanese case nullifies any effect of a growth in American power. The 'changed power balance'[9] that Stalin perceived would not have happened. The 'political offensive' from the West would not have been as strong (had it occurred at all) without the American atomic monopoly. With the Red Army's superiority in numbers in Europe, although Russia was an 'exhausted giant',[10] it was not to be trifled with. Stalin was a ruthless *realpolitiker*,[11] as much as in his domestic politics as he was on the international stage. Zubok states that Stalin was already planning for the next revolutionary war before the struggle over the survival of his own state was finished.[12] Unease in the Grand Alliance drove both sides to consolidate their spoils of war.

Existing Unease and Premier Molotov

Nuclear weapons were not the cause of the political divisions of the Cold War. Ever since the Bolsheviks took power in 1917 the West had attempted to overthrow or marginalise the USSR. Not until the USSR became essential in war planning had she been courted. In the late 1930s Stalin had a healthy choice of 'allies'. As already cited, Zubok states that Stalin wanted the capitalist powers in Europe to fight amongst each other. Stalin hoped to ferment worker's revolutions in other European states in a similar fashion to that of the 1917 October revolution, despite his inward tendency on the international stage in the 1920s and 1930s. The West had rightly contracted the Red Terror. The USSR and Stalin was the anti-Christ of Western liberalism, democracy and capitalism.

In the absence of nuclear weapons, and given the intense ideological differences between East and West, the inherent power-fear relationship[13] on both sides would have been very acute. In the absence of MAD, Molotov's views as opposed to Khrushchev's on "peaceful coexistence" would be more valid. Molotov had remained a staunch critic of Khrushchev's foreign policy.[14] There would have been no dilemma on trying to reconcile Molotov's desire to spread revolution through violence with the implications of MAD. This author believes that Molotov would have stood a greater chance of assuming power after Stalin for these reasons. Molotov had accumulated vast experience during his tenure as Foreign Minister and as one of Stalin's closest allies, and the post-war period in this alternate history would certainly allow Stalin (and those that behaved like him in the international system) to feel perfectly comfortable. Molotov would certainly have taken a similar line to Stalin, and there was a genuine fear of this in the West in our real history.[15]

Kennan's containment strategy would still have been applied. In the absence of the atomic monopoly, there would have been a greater impetus for the US to control geo-strategic vantage points to make up for the Soviet's vast

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

numerical advantage. Controlling (or at least allying with states in) areas such as Western Europe and Japan was a vital objective.[16] It is hard to imagine a tougher American policy in these times, nuclear weapons or not. More confrontational attitudes between the two sides would not have been as dangerous to the survival of the state if conventional war was its result.

Reversed 'Hostage' Logic

Jervis' 'hostage' logic is useful to explain how a war would be more likely in this non-nuclear bipolar system.[17] States can prepare for a conventional war. All technologies and military applications have their corresponding defensive measures. Although the USSR had no strategic air force compared to the USA, the USSR could certainly take measures against bombing. The western Europeans could certainly undertake fortifications to increase the difficulties for Soviet infantry and tanks to proceed westward in a war in Europe. There is no anti-nuclear weapon or strategy, apart from not participating in a nuclear war. Therefore, the game of chicken[18] between states would not fit this alternate bipolar system. Also, in a Soviet attack on Western Europe, the US would not have to immediately sacrifice its own cities to aid its European allies. Conventional deterrence, and US reassurance would be more credible.

Alternate Berlin Airlift and Korean War Outcomes?

Assuming that the immediate post-War carving of Europe remained as we knew it, what could have gone differently in during the Berlin Airlift in the absence of nuclear weapons? Stalin could have given the orders to shoot down Allied aircraft, likely resulting in a war. A conventional war. Would Stalin have readily contemplated war with the West, knowing that the USSR have to take on the economic-industrial giant that was the USA? Perhaps the Red Army could overwhelm Western Europe, but the USSR would invite the consequences of long-range American bombers based in the UK, Japan and other bases. Jervis argues that states can inflict massive costs on each other without weapons of mass destruction.[19] The USSR lacked the same kind of strategic bombing capability, therefore no credible means of inflicting costs on the American heartland. An even darker suggestion would be that Stalin could have decided to simply move into West Berlin without notice and hope that the West would accept the loss. To a similar degree we can speculate on the Korean War. Would Douglas MacArthur have wanted to contemplate a further advance into China after eliminating North Korean forces without the use of nuclear weapons? Chinese forces could easily overwhelm UN forces through numbers. Ergo, would Mao have decided on kicking UN forces out of the entire Korean peninsula? Removing the nuclear factor in these two crises leaves many possible avenues unexplored, and includes the potential for an ever-widening conventional conflict that could have erupted into World War III.

Realist Victory and the Continued Superiority of 3rd Generation Warfare

A return to great-power politics would have made a mockery of the United Nations (UN). As the nuclear revolution may have forced states to compromise, it is doubtful cooperation would have been so frequent in this alternate bipolar system. Going to war would not seem insane. As the League of Nations failed to bring states into line when they preferred to use force,[20] the UN could not hope to stop the USSR or the USA from engaging in military operations against each other. Kennan could have been very accurate in attaching little significance to the UN.[21] Decolonisation would most certainly have occurred, but it would hardly have affected the grand strategy between East and West.

According to Mearsheimer, great powers fear each other because of the fear of aggression and the offensive military capabilities of other states.[22] However this author disagrees with Mearsheimer's claim that alliances are marriages of convenience. In the NATO camp, there was a shared view of capitalism, liberal democracy and personal freedoms. Also the NATO alliance secured America's marketplace. A common fear bound those states too. In the Warsaw Pact states, they were held down from Moscow. Not an alliance per se, perhaps more akin to imperialism. However, the US was dominant in the NATO alliance. Nevertheless, fear pervaded US society at the time, and gave rise to the McCarthy communist witch-hunts. This red terror, placed on top of Mearsheimer's state behaviour and the security paradox from a conventional arms race[23] (which in this alternate history could have replaced a nuclear arms race) would seriously increase the likelihood of World War III. This would make a mockery of Jervis' views on

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

bipolarity as an inherently stable system. Without nuclear weapons the weight of numbers, technology and battlefield tactics would come into play once more. The nuclear asset in the early Cold War served as an equaliser (and advantage) to the West against the Red Army's massive size. How would NATO compensate for this? This would increase the usefulness (and therefore the importance and influence) of NATO's European members. Britain's Royal Navy and RAF would be very useful in a conventional war against the Soviet Union. The French could once again provide mass troop numbers and West Germany would once more be an economic powerhouse. All these could complement US superiority on the sea and in the air. There was a genuine fear from Moscow that the west could whip the Soviets' 'asses'.^[24] The perpetuation of 3rd generation warfare would solidify the importance of numbers, technology and tactics to the state's security and war planning.

There would not be the luxury of existential deterrence. A conventional war could be winnable in the eyes of the opposing sides, and the states could be more willing to test their opponent's strategies and military technologies. It would not mean the end of civilisation. Conflict would be slower and immediately less destructive than a nuclear one. Any ICBM would be fitted with conventional warheads, and would have a limited destructive capability and would have to be extremely accurate to make them useful in war. With the destructive utility of ICBMs diminished, could Sergei Korolev's and Wernher von Braun's dreams of human spaceflight have ever been recognised? The lack of a space race would definitely have deprived the Soviet Union of one its most tremendous propaganda coups.^[25] The importance of satellite reconnaissance could have been ignored after losing interest in the ICBMs' destructive delivery capability without nuclear warheads.

American Preponderance

This author believes the above speculations and removing the nuclear factor from state thinking in the early Cold War has painted a credible picture of how international politics could have progressed (or not at all) after the Second World War. The maintenance of a (initially biased to the Americans) bipolar system between the two most powerful states on Earth would have been likely. The US would have had a lead over the USSR in the balance of power for longer than the 'atomic monopoly' years in this alternate history. The USA's homeland was not materially ravaged by war. This economic preponderance would serve the West well in a conventional confrontation with the communists. In our timeline the existential deterrence from nuclear weapons diminished the US notion of 'free security'.^[26] This decline in American security would still have happened, especially once the Soviets would have developed their own strategic bomber force as the most effective way of levelling the playing field. However, I believe the economic importance of Europe and Japan to the US would have guaranteed the Americans against a reversion to the interwar isolationist policies.

Conclusion

With American preponderance and relative security of its homeland, a pre-emptive war against the Soviet Union would have been a very credible option, in this author's opinion. If the Soviet ideology was to be believed, a future war would have been unavoidable. Stalinist or Molotovian politics would have stirred up the system to promote the cause of communism. Without MAD, force would have been a viable means to end communism. There would have been no dilemma of conciliating the use of nuclear weapons with the irrationality of a suicidal war.^[27] On the other side of this non-nuclear Cold War the USSR would not be pressured to seek coexistence, and could have benefited from the constant fear of invasion and crisis. For these reasons this author believes that nuclear weapons saved humanity from a darker Cold War that could have been more likely to have turned hot.

Bibliography

Alperovitz, G., Messer, R.L. and Bernstein, B.J. (1992) 'Correspondence', *International Security*, 16:3

Booth, K. and Wheeler, N.J. *The Security Dilemma* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Craig, C. and Logevall, F. *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009)

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

Fursenko, A. and Naftali, T. *Khrushchev's Cold War* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006)

Gaddis, J.L. *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Hammes, T.X. *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2006)

Jervis, R. *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989)

Mearsheimer, J.J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001)

Morgenthau, H.J. (1964) 'Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy', *The American Political Science Review*, 58:1

Sheehan, M. *The International Politics of Space* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007)

Zubok, V.M. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

[1] Jervis, R. *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989)

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24

[3] *Ibid.*, pp.24-25

[4] One example is the plotline in Westwood Studios' (now Electronic Arts) *Command and Conquer: Red Alert* videogame. It portrays an East-West conflict over Europe with the Soviet and Allied armies waging a conventional war in a very different 1950s (in the absence of nuclear weapons).

[5] Hammes, T.X. *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2006) pp. 23-31. Hammes refers to 3rd generation warfare as the mechanised manoeuvre warfare epitomised in the Second World War.

[6] Alperovitz, G., Messer, R.L. and Bernstein, B.J. (1992) 'Correspondence', *International Security*, 16:3

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 219

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213

[9] Zubok, V.M. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) pp. 30-31

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 17

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-26

[13] Mearsheimer, J.J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) pp. 42-44

[14] Zubok, V. *A Failed Empire...* pp.99-100

[15] Fursenko, A. and Naftali, T. *Khrushchev's Cold War* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) pp. 25

[16] Gaddis, J.L. *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp.28-29

A Cold War without Nuclear Weapons

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

[17] Jervis, R. *The Meaning of the Nuclear...* pp. 13-14

[18] *Ibid.*, pp.38-42

[19] Jervis, R. *The Meaning of the Nuclear...* pp. 25

[20] For example: The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935.

[21] Gaddis, J.L. *Strategies of Containment* pp. 28

[22] Mearsheimer, J.J. *The Tragedy of Great...* pp. 32-33

[23] Booth, K. and Wheeler, N.J. *The Security Dilemma* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp.5-7

[24] Zubok, V. *A Failed Empire...* pp. 29. Quoting Soviet generals in 1946.

[25] Sheehan, M. *The International Politics of Space* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) pp. 26-30

[26] Craig, C. and Logevall, F. *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009) pp. 56-58

[27] Morgenthau, H.J. (1964) 'Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy', *The American Political Science Review*, 58:1, pp. 25

—
Written by: Bleddyn E. Bowen
Written at: Aberystwyth University
Written for: Campbell Craig
Date: November 2009

About the author:

Dr Bleddyn E. Bowen is a Lecturer at the Defence Studies Department, King's College London, which is located at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, UK Defence Academy. Bleddyn's research specialises in spacepower theory, classical strategic theory, and modern warfare. Bleddyn has published on spacepower theory and naval analogies, the politics of space debris removal, and EU space strategy.