



Linnæus University

Sweden

Bachelor Thesis

A new or the same old story?

A comparative analysis of the Cold war and Post-cold war era.



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Abstract

The main purpose of this Bachelor's thesis is to examine the cold war era (1948-1989) and the Post-cold war era (1991-2024) to determine if there is any correlation between the two time periods, particularly in the continuation of conflict and power dynamics. The study employs the use of the Realism and the Liberalism perspective from international politics to examine the two primary variables chosen, those being proxy war and the power dynamics. Both variables were examined from a Cold war era perspective and a post-cold war era perspective as well compared by looking at the liberalist and realist perspective.

The analysis demonstrates that while the cold war historically ended in 1991 with the dissolution of the USSR, its core structure and dynamics of conflict and power persist in a modified form. Proxy wars, a hallmark of the cold war's bipolar nature remain prevalent but have adapted to the multipolar world with new actors like a stronger China and a resurgent Russia joining the traditional actors of the United states of America. Similarly, power dynamics have shifted from the bipolar stability of the cold war to the complexities of unipolarity and multipolarity, revealing structural continents and ongoing rivalries. This thesis concludes that the elements that made up the cold war never truly disappeared but instead evolved with its method, actors and geopolitical landscape reshaped for the 21st century.



Key words

Cold war, Realism, Liberalism, Comparative analysis, Post-cold war, Proxy wars, Power dynamics

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1. Introduction

Those who study history and politics, we all know the story that on December 25, 1991, significant events marked the end of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the end of the cold war. At 7:32 PM, the flag of the USSR was lowered for the Kremlin for the final time, indicating the dissolution of the USSR. Moments before this, President Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as leader of the USSR and effectively transferred power to the Russian President Boris Yeltsin.¹ It's a story we all somewhat know about and one viewpoint of this is that capitalism triumphed over communism and that the United States (U.S.) was now the dominant power on this planet earth.

However, 36 years since the end of the cold war, it's important to ask the question "did anything really change?" Did the world actually come together, heal and become more peaceful? The past few years have been tough on the world, with wars raging in eastern Europe, tensions between the U.S., Russia and China at a boiling point. "The doomsdays clock now stands at 90 seconds to midnight - the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been" said Liechtenstein's United Nations representative on October 3, 2023 in regards to Russia's nuclear threats regarding its aggression in Ukraine.² In his book *The Global Cold War*, Odd Arne Westad argues that "*if there is any lesson that should be taken from the cold war is that unilateral military intervention does not work to anyone's advantage, while open borders, cultural interactions and fair economic exchange benefit all*".³ Since the world is at a boiling point due to military intervention, like the cold war, one

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, The Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Rise of Yeltsin and the Foundation of Post-Soviet Russia, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. <https://www.britannica.com/event/the-collapse-of-the-Soviet-Union/The-rise-of-Yeltsin-and-the-foundation-of-post-Soviet-Russia#ref340185> (Accessed: 1 december 2024)

² United Nations, Doomsday Clock Stands at 90 Seconds to Midnight, Closer Than Ever to Global Ruin, First Committee Told as General Debate Continues, Un Press (2023) <https://press.un.org/en/2023/gadis3710.doc.htm> (Accessed: 22 Januari, 2025)

³ O. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 406–407, available at: <https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.lnu.se/core/books/global-cold-war/75870878657DC67E0BC70FA7D2388494> (Accessed: 26 November 2024).



might say that nothing has changed. One could say that the cold war never actually ended.

1.1 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to examine if the cold war really did end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin wall. This does not mean the historical era of the cold war but instead if the key concept that made up the cold war is still prevalent in today's modern society.

The research question for this thesis is:

Did the cold war truly end, or have its structure and conflict persisted in new forms since the fall of the USSR in 1991.

This thesis will also be looking at the following underlying question to answer the main question that this thesis is trying to answer, that being:

What supports the argument that the cold war ended in 1989 or continued into modern day?

1.2 Disposition

This thesis begins with an introduction that provides the historical background of the cold war and the need to examine whether its structures and conflicts persist today. In the Second chapter a review of existing literature on the cold war, its aftermath, and contemporary international relations is made. It examines key works such as Francis Fukuyama's *End of history* and Aaron L. Friedbergs *The Weary Titan*, which explores ideological triumphs, hegemonic stability, and power transitions. The third chapter details the theoretical framework of this study, focusing on the two prominent schools of thought used in the thesis, liberalism and realism. Realism provides a lens for analyzing state centric power dynamics and



conflicts, while liberalism emphasises the role of international institutions, cooperation and interdependence. The fourth chapter outlines the methodology. It introduces the comparative historical analysis method used to examine two distinct periods of time: the cold war (1947-1989) and the post-cold war era (1991-2024). The fifth chapter presents the analysis and results of the study. The chapter explores proxy wars and power dynamics, examining examples from both the cold war and the post-cold war. The sixth chapter provides a concluding discussion as well as answers the research questions by arranging the results, reflecting on the persistence or transformation of cold war dynamics and thereafter the thesis concludes with a bibliography listing all sources.

2.0 Literature review

This study will look at different views in regards to the end of the cold war, as well as post-cold war global conflicts. The main focus that will be looked at is what reason people say that the cold war ended in 1989 and if the arguments brought up can give enough support for supporting the tale that is being told.

2.1 Traditional view: The cold war ended in 1991 (Fukuyama end of history)

The traditional view when it comes to looking at the end of the cold war and the aftermath can be found in “*The end of history*” written by Francis Fukuyama. The core argument that is being made in the book is that the cold war concluded with the collapse of the USSR, marking the triumph of liberal democracies and the capitalist system. This meant that humanity had reached the endpoint of ideological evolution and that liberal democracies represented the most advanced form of government instead of monarchy, authoritarianism or communism. The **Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)** and the **Collapse of the USSR (1991)** can therefore be seen as validation that



western values such as the free market, political pluralism and individual freedoms had triumphed over the system that communism was promoting.⁴

Now looking at this from the eyes of the twenty-first century at “*The end of history*” it can be questioned if Fukuyama captures how the modern world is looking now. Tho the argumentation that free market and capitalism triumphed over communist states and collective system holds truth to it. However liberal democracies did not win over all other ideologies and humanity did not reach its supposed ideological evolution. Looking at the world from a 2024 perspective we can see a resurgence of authoritarianism and a surge of populism which has led more nations to turn away from liberal democracies.⁵ It's important to note that Fukuyama only looks at the ideological aspects of the end to the cold war and not the conflict aspects that was and is continuing to this day.

2.2 Hegemonic stability theory and the Weary titan

A good comparison can be made between the British empire (1895-1905) and the cold war and modern U.S. In the book *The Weary Titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905* by Aaron L. Friedberg. The book explores the challenges that the British empire faced in regards to its decline as the single global superpower during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁶ During the 19th century, Britain functioned as the global and single hegemonic power, ensuring stability in the world through its naval dominance, controlling trade routes and colonial administration. However by the late 19th and early 20th century this global dominance was beginning to decline and it became harder to maintain the same level of order that they

⁴ F. Fukuyama, Francis Fukuyama and the end of history (University of Wales press, 2016), pp. 3-18, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lnu.se/stable/jj.14491600> (Accessed: 29 November 2024)

⁵ M. Fasting, After the end of History: Conversations with Francis Fukuyama (Washington, Dc: Georgetown University press), pp.22-25

⁶ A. Friedberg, The Weary Titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905 (Princeton university press, 2010), pp.292-304. <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lnu.se/stable/j.ctv1jk0jzw> (Accessed: 25 November 2024)



had done earlier. With this decline for Britain, it created uncertainty and instability in the world leading to a power vacuum.⁷ This same hegemonic power existed during the cold war with the U.S. and USSR sharing the hegemonic role and operating as a co-hegemony in a bi-polar system. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the U.S. emerged as the single hegemon of the world and took the role that Britain had done during the 1815 to 1914 as the sole hegemon. But just as explained in Aaron L. Friedberg's *The Weary Titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline*, the modern U.S. is losing its grip as the single world hegemonic power and the power vacuum is once again being filled by other states, this time being China and Russia.⁸

2.3 Key debates and gaps in the field.

When looking at the key debates in the field the question regarding if the Cold war really was about the victory of ideology or just a global conflict for power with Communism or Capitalism as a justification to the mean. This argumentation becomes more clear in modern day as the same power dynamics exists despite the shift in ideology away from communism vs Capitalism. The question of communism vs capitalist liberal democracy are no longer a major concern except in regards to justification of a nation's actions or existence. This can be seen when looking at China or North Korea where the Communist parties or a communist economy is used as a way to justify the action of the existence or the reasoning for its anti-capitalist or anti western world view.⁹

When looking at the field, we need to look at what defined the cold war and what its characteristics were like and if they are still prominent in modern

⁷ A. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton university press, 2010), pp.292-304.

<https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lnu.se/stable/j.ctv1jk0jzw> (Accessed: 25 November 2024)

⁸ A. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton university press, 2010), pp.292-304.

<https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lnu.se/stable/j.ctv1jk0jzw> (Accessed: 25 November 2024)

⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Juche, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Juche> (accessed 20 December 2024).



day to see if the cold war is still continuing. Characteristics like proxy warfare, arms races and ideological competitions are some of the key points in what defined the cold war. Now some of them are more clear to see than others, like proxy wars that still continue into the modern day with nations from the different power blocks supporting the actor they want to win.

Arms races and ideological competitions are not as clear as they may have been back during the cold war with the nuclear arms race and the fight between capitalism and communism, but they are still common in modern day. Nations like China have been building up their military during the last couple of years to rival the might of the U.S. and since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war the western world's arms industry has gone into overdrive both to equip the Ukrainian army but also to rearm the western world and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹⁰

However as the world changes with technology and open conflicts become more bloody with more dangerous weapons, states turn to new ways to fight each other that does not mean spilling blood. This is through ways like Cyberattack, Economic sanctions and hybrid warfare meaning local arms actors, economic clout, disinformation and exploitation of social political polarization. This is something that can be seen in Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014¹¹

¹⁰ M. Bergman, M. Dorian, S. Martinez, O. Svedensson. The European Union Charts Its Own Path for European Rearmament. Center For Strategic & international studies. (2024) <https://www.csis.org/analysis/european-union-charts-its-own-path-european-rearmament> (Accessed: 2 December, 2024)

¹¹ A. Bilal. Hybrid warfare - New Threats, Complexity, and trust as the antidote. NATO Review (2021) <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html> (Accessed: 29 November 2024)



3.0 Theoretical framework

This thesis will employ a theoretical framework that combines realism and liberalism to analyze the persistence or transformation of cold war structures from a contemporary international relations perspective. These paradigms provide complementary perspectives that are essential for examining the research question: *Did the cold war truly end, or have its structure and conflicts persisted in new forms since 1991?* In addition, this study will adopt a comparative analysis alongside a qualitative research design to systematically examine the Cold war (1947-1989) and the post-Cold war era (1991-2024). The theoretical framework is tightly integrated with the methodology, allowing for a nuanced understanding and investigation of the key variables: *proxy wars* and *power dynamics*.¹² A comparative analysis enables the study to identify patterns, similarities and differences between the two distinct time eras that are being analysed. By applying realism and liberalism as interpretive lenses, this method helps to uncover whether the geopolitical conflicts and power struggles of the cold war have evolved or persisted into the post-cold war era.¹³ The employment of a qualitative research design, relying on historical records, policy documents, and academic literature to explore the selected time periods. Qualitative methods are suited to capture the complexity of international relations as they allow an in-depth examination of historical and geopolitical contexts, case studies and interpretation of power dynamics.¹⁴

¹² George, A. L., and Bennett, A., *Case studies and Theory development in social sciences* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2005). pp. 151-152

¹³ George, A. L., and Bennett, A., *Case studies and Theory development in social sciences* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2005). pp. 162-163

¹⁴ E. Esaiasson, M. Gilljam, H. Oscarsson, and L. Wängnerud, *Metodpraktikan: konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*, 5th edn (Stockholm: wolters Kluwer, 2017), pp. 212-214



3.1 Realism

Realism as a school of thought to international relations emphasizes the central argument of state sovereignty, power dynamics and the anarchic nature of the international system. During the cold war, realism reflected the balance-of-power politics that could be seen between the USSR and the U.S.¹⁵ Other principles like alliances and strategic manoeuvring of the superpowers of the USSR and U.S. on a geopolitical scale was also common in regards to the realism perspective.

Some of the key concepts of realism are the balance of power, which may suggest that states may secure their survival by preventing states from gaining military power to dominate other states. This means that if one state becomes stronger enough it will take advantage of this. At the same time realism perspective argues that a state will always act in their own interest and does not care for other states. This means that states can be allies like in NATO or the Warsaw pact (Warsaw Treaty Organization) but this is only in their own interest and in regards to the Balance of power and multiple nations together can shift or rebalance the power.¹⁶

3.2 Liberalism

The liberalist perspective provides a sharp contrast to realism. Instead of putting the state at the center of the perspective, liberalism emphasizes the importance of international institutions, cooperation and that shared norms are important to avoid conflict and to foster global stability. Where the realist perspective focuses on the power and competition between states, liberalism

¹⁵ S. Antunes, I. Camisao, *Introducing Realism In international Relations Theory. E-International Relations.* (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/>
(accessed: 2 December 2024)

¹⁶ S. Antunes, I. Camisao, *Introducing Realism In international Relations Theory. E-International Relations.* (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/>
(accessed: 2 December 2024)



highlights the potential for collective action and the importance of interdependence to address global challenges and problems.¹⁷

Looking at the key concepts of liberalism, international institutions, interdependence and the democratic peace theory are the main parts that make up the liberalist perspective. When it comes to international institutions, organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) play a large role in liberalism to provide a platform for dialogue, conflict resolution and stability for the collective. However, other institutions like NATO, the Warsaw pact and the World Trade Organization (WTO) also make up an important factor in regards to international institutions and cooperation that liberalism encourages.¹⁸ In regards to interdependence and the democratic peace theory, liberalism tells us that interdependence through economic or cooperation reduces the likelihood of conflicts being created and instead encourages a mutual incentive for peace. The work and establishment of the WTO reflect this principle in an economic sense.¹⁹ At the same time Democratic peace theory asserts that democratic countries are less likely to go to war with one another. This is supported by the relative peace among democratic nations during and after the cold war and how they have not fought against each other and have like stated earlier been working together for interdependence and cooperation through international institutions like the EU, WTO and the UN.²⁰

¹⁷ J. Mesier, *Introducing Liberalism in International Relations Theory*. E-International Relations. (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/18/introducing-liberalism-in-international-relations-theory/>
(Accessed: 5 December 2024)

¹⁸ J. Mesier, *Introducing Liberalism in International Relations Theory*. E-International Relations. (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/18/introducing-liberalism-in-international-relations-theory/>
(Accessed: 5 December 2024)

¹⁹ J. Mesier, *Introducing Liberalism in International Relations Theory*. E-International Relations. (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/18/introducing-liberalism-in-international-relations-theory/>
(Accessed: 5 December 2024)

²⁰K. Palcek, *The Democratic Peace Theory*. E-International Relations. (2022)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/18/the-democratic-peace-theory/> (Accessed: 3 January 2025)



4. Methodology

This thesis will use a comparative analysis to compare two different time eras, these being 1947 to 1989 (**the cold war**) and then 1991 (**after the fall of the USSR**) to 2024. When comparing the two time eras, the study will employ the use of liberalism and the realism theories from international politics. When using these two different areas of time, the thesis will look into two variables, those being power dynamics and proxy wars before looking if anything has changed between these two different eras of time. This will be done by looking at the proxy wars and see if these have occurred during both the Cold war and the post-cold war era. The Thesis will not include or mention every proxy war that has occurred during these two time eras but instead as a way to compare the reasoning for why they occur between the different time periods. The thesis will also look into the power dynamics, this means to look at international institutions and how their roles have shifted between the time eras.

4.1 research design

This thesis will employ a comparative historical analysis to evaluate the geopolitical dynamics of two distinct time periods. These being :

- 1. The Cold War era (1947-1989), characterised by the ideological rivalry between the United States and the USSR and the clash between capitalism and communism.*
- 2. The Post-Cold War era (1991-2024), following the dissolution of the USSR up until modern day.*

This design is ideal for identifying the continuous change across these two different time periods and to look at how the geopolitical dynamic has changed between the two different time eras. When looking at these two time eras, the comparative approach will focus on two key aspects when



researching this question. The **first aspect** is proxy wars meaning wars where other non combative nations from the different power block are supporting one of the sides in the conflict (exemple, The Vietnam war, Russo-Ukraine war or the Syrian civil war.) The **second aspect** that will be looked into is the power dynamics and how it has shifted between the two different eras. This aspect focuses on the shift in global influence among the key actors in regards to geopolitics (e.g, the US, Russia and China) but also other institutions that have an influence on world politics, like Nato , Collective security treaty organization (CSTO), EU and major trade organizations. The purpose of this is to see how states and its power dynamic has changed between the two time periods.

4.2 Data collection

Data for this study will be drawn and collected from a multiple of sources. The main sources that this study will draw upon is historical records and archival data like documentation from the cold war regarding proxy wars, treaties and nations geopolitical strategies (e.g, Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam war and the U.S. policy of containment)

When it comes to the modern era (Post-cold war conflict) the study will look into contemporary reports and case studies. This means looking into UN reports, think-tank publications and policy papers.

When comparing these two periods, the thesis will use works from academic scholars to provide the study with theoretical insights.

4.3 Analytical approach

In this thesis two main variables will be investigated to answer the research question that is being asked, **Did the cold war truly end, or have its structure and conflict persisted in new forms since the fall of the USSR in 1991.** To answer this question, variables like the Proxy wars will be



examined between the different time eras, geographical distribution of where these different conflicts have taken place and what scale these proxy wars have had during these different time eras. Looking at the proxy wars at this point of view gives us an understanding of how, if any change has occurred in regards to where modern proxy wars are and where they are being fought. This also help to look into the change in the power dynamic which is the second main variable that is being looked into so see if there has been any evolution to the power blocks (e.g, the bipolar U.S. - USSR dynamic of the cold war) to a modern version with more actors instead of just one or two hegemony. This can be investigated by looking at what actors are funding the current proxy wars around the world but also give us an understanding of the current power blocks to see what nations are supporting each other in wars, trade and general defence.

4.4 Limitation

This study will limit itself to two main variables mentioned in **4.3 analytical approach** and will not attempt to answer other factors that can be important in the regard to answer the question if the cold war ended in 1989 or is continuing today. The study understands that there are multiple other factors that are important to talk about in regards to the research question but has chosen to focus on these two main ones to give insight into why the cold war did or did not end in 1989. The thesis will also not attempt to include every single proxy conflict into the study and instead only focus on the ones that are seen as important to answer the research question that this thesis is trying to answer.

4.5 Validity and reliability

To ensure validity and reliability the study will use data from a diverse range of sources like academic literature, quantitative datasets and policy reports to be cross-verified to ensure that the study keeps consistency. One important



aspect in regards to this study is transparency between the different variables and to make sure that the two variables remain the same and do not affect each other. When categorizing conflict as proxy wars it is important to be clear in defining if the conflict belongs to the variable or not. A modern example of this is the Russo-Ukrainian war that features both elements of proxy wars with non-combating nations supporting Ukraine and Russia through economic means, military aid and providing military intelligence or advisors into conflict. At the same time hybrid warfare elements are also common in Ukraine and in the world regards to the conflict with disinformation being spread by the Russian state to justify their invasion of Ukraine while also performing cyber attacks against nations in the west towards their military or businesses. This means that the war in Ukraine is both a proxy war in regards to the boots on the ground conflict with the different power blocs supporting different sides of the conflict while hybrid warfare is taking place at the same time both on the front lines but also way from the front in nations supporting the main combatants. Here it is important to make sure that the conflict that is brought up in the study is a proxy conflict and not a hybrid warfare one.

4.6 Reproducibility

It is of vital importance that this form study is able to be reproduced with the same outcome as this study will have to create a sense of validity and reliability for the future. A detailed description of the data sources and methods used in the study will enable replication of the study by other researchers.

5.0 Analysis

5.1 Proxy wars

The Cambridge dictionary explains that proxy war is *"a war fought between groups or smaller countries that each represent the interest of other larger*



powers, and may have help and support from these".²¹ This gives the thesis a target for what is sought after when analysing proxy wars and when it is compared between realism and liberalism. Proxy wars is something that isn't new to the world, however during the cold war the concept became more common than what it had been before and it would characterise the era.

5.2 Proxy wars during the cold war (1947-1989)

Graph 1.0 Regional distribution of Proxy wars during the Cold war.

Africa	Asia	Middle east	Europe	Americas
Congo Crisis (1960-1965)	Korean War (1950-1953)	Suez Crisis (1956)	Greek Civil war (1946-1949)	Cuban revolution (1953-1959)
Angolan Civil war (1975-2002)	First Indochina war (1946-1954)	Six-day war (1967)		Bay of Pigs invasion (1961)
Ethiopian Civil war (1974-1991)	Vietnam war (1955-1975)	Yom-Kippur War (1973)		Nicaraguan Contra war (1981-1990)
Mozambican Civil war (1977-1992)	Laotian Civil War (1959-1975)	Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)		El Salvador Civil war (1979-1992)
	Cambodian Civil war (1967-1975)			Guatemalan Civil war (1960-1996)
	Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989)			Colombian conflict (1964-ongoing)

The Cold War (1947-1989) saw numerous proxy wars where the U.S. and the USSR did everything they could to avoid direct military confrontation and ensure that none of them would reach mutually assured destruction, meaning that in theory the U.S. and the USSR had enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other if conflict broke out between them.²² This meant that the U.S. and the Soviets had to support different sides in regional conflict, which became

²¹ "Proxy wars," Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/proxy-war> (Accessed: 8 December 2024)

²²"Proxy wars," BBC Bitesize, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z9jpn39/revision/2> (accessed: 9 December 2024)



an integral part in the Cold War's ideological and political competition. The conflict/proxy wars were more common in the developing part of the world like Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East while Europe remained more calm when it came to proxy wars and conflicts. In graph 1.0 (just above) it can be seen how these proxy wars highlight the global nature that the cold war had and the ideological rivalry between capitalism and communism. Note that this is not all proxy wars that took place during the cold war but the more important ones to explain the concept of proxy wars and to understand the cold war.

5.3 Realism perspective

When looking at proxy wars from a realism perspective, it exemplifies the realist principle of balance of power. Here it can be used by both the U.S. and the USSR who sought to limit the expansion of the opposition party while at the same time maintaining or increasing the power of their own.²³ The realist perspective views the nation as the most important actor when it comes to the political chessboard and at the same time it is these nations goal to increase their own power in any way they can.²⁴ This can be directly connected to the cold war and the Fight between the U.S. and the USSR. With this knowledge we get an understanding of the reasoning for U.S. and Soviet involvement in different proxy wars. To keep their power growing or maintained. The two superpowers must perform these actions to stay at the top which means working against each other.

²³ C. Rauch, Theory: Different Branches of the Power Tree. E-International Relations. (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/03/realism-and-power-transition-theory-different-branches-of-the-power-tree/> (Acessed: 9 December 2024)

²⁴S. Antunes, I. Camisao, Introducing Realism In international Relations Theory. E-International Relations. (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/> (accessed: 2 December 2024)



Just as Hans Morgenthau (1948) says, *“that every political action is based on keeping, increasing and demonstrating power”*²⁵. This shows a general view of how the Cold War worked and not just in proxy wars, but also in other international incidents like the Cuban missile crisis (1963).

The key point in regards to the realist perspective in the view of the Cold War is that both sides used proxies to both contain each other while at the same time expanding their spheres of influence over other countries. The U.S. used the policy of containment, being an attempt to contain the USSR and prevent the spread of communism which led to the U.S. engagement in conflicts like Korea, Vietnam and The Bay of Pigs invasion.²⁶ While at the same time the USSR supported Marxist regimes around the world to establish spheres of influence and to counter the Western world, like in Afghanistan and Angola.^{27,28} Looking at these two points used by the U.S. and Soviets, it can be seen from a realist perspective that both nations are actively trying to gain or limit the other's power.

5.4 Liberalism perspective

When analysing proxy wars during the Cold War from a liberal perspective, a democratic superpower is meeting a non-democratic superpower on the world stage, this being U.S. vs the USSR. From the liberalist perspective it also reveals the limitation of international institutions like the UN when it comes to mediating and preventing conflicts. The UN as an international

²⁵ S. Antunes, I. Camisao, *Introducing Realism In international Relations Theory*. E-International Relations. (2018)

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/> (accessed: 2 December 2024)

²⁶ “George Kennan and Containment, 1947.” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan> (Accessed: 9 December 2024)

²⁷ “The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978-1980.” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan> (Accessed: 14 December 2024)

²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Military Support to Angola: Intentions and Prospects* <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP87T00573R000801010002-2.pdf> (Accessed: 14 December 2024)



institution is an integral part when it comes to the liberalist perspective and the importance that international organizations have on world politics.²⁹ However during the Cold War, international organizations failed multiple times to prevent the spread of wars and proxy wars. The UN struggled to prevent mediation during the cold war, especially during the Korean war as both superpowers used its veto power to prevent the other side to further their own interest.³⁰ However this limited the power of the other side, the international organization as the UN was instead used to further the goal of the U.S. and the west to combat North Korea and Soviet influence on the Korean peninsula. As the North Korean invaded the south, the U.S. pressed the UN to act and was able to press all member nations to agree to a cease fire and as well as to provide assistance for South Korea. This was only possible as the USSR (A member of the UN's Security Council) had boycotted the Security Council and therefore chose to not participate.³¹ This shows the lack of power that the UN had during the Cold War and the failure of international organizations from a liberalist perspective as it makes us question if this action consisted with the UN's vision and purpose of which it was created as well if they could have acted without picking one side over the other.

However despite the UN's involvement in the Korean War, peace efforts and cooperation was something that did occur during the Cold War between the world powers in a way to de-escalate the Cold War. The U.S.-USSR **Limited Test Ban Treaty** in 1963 and the **Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT 1)** in 1972 did lead to warmer relations between the two parties.³² The era

²⁹ J. Mesier, *Introducing Liberalism in International Relations Theory*. E-International Relations. (2018)
<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/18/introducing-liberalism-in-international-relations-theory/>
(Accessed: 5 December 2024)

³⁰ "The United Nations In Korea." Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum.
<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/united-nations-korea>
(accessed: 10 December 2024)

³¹ "The United Nations In Korea." Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum.
<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/united-nations-korea>
(accessed: 10 December 2024)

³² "Detente and Arms control, 1969-1979." Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/detente> (Accessed: 16 December 2024)



known as **detente** (1969-1979) and arms control during the cold war did see warmer relations between the U.S. and USSR however despite better relations, proxy wars was still something that was happening during this 10 year period.³³ Conflict like the Mozambique, Angolan and Ethiopian civil wars were all conflicts during this era showing the still underlying importance for the U.S. and USSR to expand their influence and for communism or Capitalism to win.

5.5 Proxy wars during the Post-cold war Era (1991-2024)

Graph 2.0 Proxy wars (1991-2024): The Post-cold War Era

Africa	Asia	Middle east	Europe	Americas
	War in Afghanistan (2001-2021) Tajikistani Civil war (1991-1997)	Iraq War (2003-2011) Syrian civil war (2011-ongoing) Yemeni Civil war (2014-ongoing) Libyan Civil war (2011-ongoing) Israel-Palestinian Conflict (1948-ongoing)	The Transnistria war (1990-1992) Georgian civil war (1991-1993) Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) First chechen War (1994-1996) Second Chechen War (1999-2009) Kosovo War (1998-1999) Russo-Georgian war (2008) Russo-Ukrainian war (2014/2022 -ongoing) Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020 and 2023 escalation) The East prigorodny Conflict (1992)	

Following the end of the Cold War in 1989, the dynamic of global conflicts shifted. Although the ideological struggle between capitalism and communism largely dissipated or atleast took a major backseat, proxy wars

³³“Detente and Arms control, 1969-1979.” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/detente> (Accessed: 16 December 2024)



continued to be driven by regional power struggles because of the collapse of the USSR, ethnic tensions and emergence of non-state actors. Looking at **graph 2.0** the regional makeup of where proxy wars were fought or are taking place until this day have shifted from what could be seen during the cold war (1947-1989). During the Cold war the biggest amount of proxy wars occurred in Asia, Africa and the Americas but during the post-cold war period Europe and the middle east became a more common area when it came to these proxy conflicts. A multitude of these proxy wars in Europe can be attributed to the Collapse of the USSR and its immediate aftermath as well as the dissolution of Yugoslavia.³⁴

5.6 Realism perspective of the Post-Cold War

The Post-cold war era proxy wars reflect a multipolar world instead of the bipolar one of the Cold war between the U.S. and the USSR. Instead the global powers of U.S., Russia and China work both against and to some extent with each other for regional control.

An important part when looking at the Post-cold war era proxy wars from a realist perspective is the importance of the fall of the USSR and what effect it had on where proxy wars were being fought. As the USSR transitioned into the Russian federation and all other member states of the USSR became independent, the bi-polar world that had been common since 1947, was now no more.³⁵ Russia was still a superpower on the world stage but their power had diminished and they were now forced to regain its power and restore their own power in regions where the USSR had been dominant. **The Transnistria war (1990-1992), Georgian civil war (1991-1993), Tajikistani Civil war (1991-1997), The East prigorodny Conflict (1992) and the Chenchen wars (1994-2000)** are examples of proxy conflicts that

³⁴ R. Hamilton, The Post-Soviet Wars: Part 1. Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2017) <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/12/post-soviet-wars-part-i/> (Accessed: 27 December 2024)

³⁵ "Consequences of the Collapse of the Soviet Union." Norwich University Online. <https://online.norwich.edu/online/about/resource-library/consequences-collapse-soviet-union> (Accessed: 27 December 2024)



have a direct connection to the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the new Russian state working to regain the power that they had lost, either by conquering these regions or making sure that friendly regimes remind in power.^{36 37} By doing this Russia could continue to be a world power even after their power was diminished in 1991. The Post-Cold war era is a time were Russia has had one goal, and that is to keep its place as a world power. Despite being weaker then what they were some 30 years ago they are still trying to keep themselves active as an international actor. The **Civil war in Syria (2011-ongoing)** and in **Yemen (2014-ongoing)** are examples of where Russia has had a role as an actor in proxy wars to keep their influence over the middle eastern region and keep their allies still in control.³⁸ However as the War in Ukraine is raging, Russia is losing its control over its ally Syria. Former Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba Comments in a CNN article that *“Putin has thrown Assad under the bus to prolong his war in the Ukraine”* and this is true as Russia puts all efforts into fighting the Ukraine and Nato in a major conflict and proxy war that has not been seen since world war 2, Russia's other allies and puppet regimes that they have supported are now falling as Putin is no longer giving them support to continue to hold their regime together.³⁹ Assad himself has been forced to flee to Russia as Syrian rebel forces are roaming through his presidential palace in damascus.⁴⁰

³⁶ N. popescu, EU-foreign policy and Post-soviet conflicts: Stealth intervention (Taylor & Francis group, 2011), pp. 1-4.
<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lnu.se/lib/linne-ebooks/reader.action?docID=614919&ppg=61> (Accessed: 26 November 2024)

³⁷ R. Hamilton, The Post-Soviet Wars: Part 1. Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2017)
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/12/post-soviet-wars-part-i/> (Accessed: 27 December 2024)

³⁸ D. Cosic, Russia Seeking to Retain Influence and Relations with New Syrian regime. Euronews.com (2024)
<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/13/russia-seeking-to-retain-influence-and-relations-with-new-syrian-regime> (Accessed: 19 December 2024)

³⁹ N. Hodge, Assad's fall is huge blow for Putin, highlighting fragility of his own rule. CNN World. (2024)
<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/09/europe/syria-russia-bashar-al-assad-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html> (Accessed: 16 December 2024)

⁴⁰ N. Hodge, Assad's fall is a huge blow for Putin, highlighting fragility of his own rule. CNN World. (2024)
<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/09/europe/syria-russia-bashar-al-assad-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html> (Accessed: 16 December 2024)



At the same time as Russia has become less of a world power, the U.S. has remained and for a while was the only real world power in the world. The Syrian civil war, Yemeni civil war and the Israel-Palestine conflict shows that the U.S. is still continuing to support the actors that they find will have a positive outcome on displaying and increasing their own power.

However, it's not only the U.S. and Russia that are dealing and supporting actors in proxy wars. The People's Republic of China, formally an ally to the USSR and part of the communist sphere has taken the role of a great power and has made the world go from a bi-polar to a tri-polar world with three world powers fighting for dominance. Today China's role in the world and in proxy wars can be seen in the Russo-Ukrainian war as they are actively supporting Russia⁴¹

5.7 Liberalism perspective of the Post-Cold War

From a liberalist perspective, the post-Cold war proxy wars have revealed both progress and limitations in international governance, international organizations and institutions. While multilateral institutions like the UN and other organisations have attempted peacekeeping through peace negotiations or sending a multinational peacekeeping force to prevent outbreak of war, their effectiveness often depends on the cooperation of great powers.⁴² Examples of this can be found in Libya where UN peace efforts have been undermined by the competing interests from external actors.⁴³ The same can be said with Ukraine during the War in the Donbass. This can be seen

⁴¹ P. Andersson, H. Von Essen, V. Bohman, Chinas and Russia's narratives on the war against ukraine. Swedish national China center. (2023), pp. 7, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeu/chinas-and-russias-narratives-on-the-war-against-ukraine.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2025)

⁴² United Nations, United nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en> (Accessed: 29 December 2024)

⁴³T. Hill." The U.N.'s Libya Mission Needs a Reset. United States Institute of peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/uns-libya-mission-needs-reset> (Accessed: 2 January 2025)



following the Minsk agreement as Russia violated the agreement and conflict continued after an armistice was put into effect.⁴⁴ The UN's peacekeeping forces is a special case in regards to peace work as it is a multitude of nations cooperating together creating a sense of legitimacy, a worldwide range and a sense of burden sharing that other international institutions can have a problem creating.

At the same time as the UN is having a hard time enforcing peacekeeping. Here other organizations and multilateral coalitions like NATO have had an easier time to perform peacekeeping efforts or enforce a peace settlement in the regions were they had been involved in. NATO's involvement in Kosovo reflects the liberalist focus on collective security and humanitarian intervention, even though these missions faced criticism for their outcomes on the homefront. At the same time NATO was criticised in regards to their involvement in Afghanistan that lasted from 2001 to 2021. Here the multinational coalition was criticised for not being able to establish a stable and democratic Afghanistan which led to the Taliban regaining control in the country in 2021.⁴⁵ At the same time the UN peacekeeping forces failed in regards to the Rwandan genocide in 1994 where the UN's inactions showed the weakness that international governance had.⁴⁶

5.8 Power dynamics

⁴⁴ K. Volker. Don't let Russia fool you about the Minsk agreements. Center for European Policy analysis. (2021)
<https://cepa.org/article/dont-let-russia-fool-you-about-the-minsk-agreements/> (Accessed: 19 december 2024)

⁴⁵ NATO, NATO and Afghanistan. (2022)
https://www.nato.int/cps/ro/natohq/topics_8189.htm (Accessed: 2 Januari 2025)

⁴⁶ United states Holocaust Memorial Museum, Pleading for help: Rwanda,
<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/rwanda/pleading-for-help>
(Accessed: 3 Januari 2025)



The Cold war was defined by its bi-polar power dynamics structure with the USSR and U.S. dominating world politics and events. Proxy wars, international events and other important decision making that affected the world was usually caused by these two nations.

The post-cold war period saw a shift from the bi-polar world to a Unipolar world with the U.S. taking on the role as the sole world power after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.⁴⁷ However as years have gone by, the world has seen the rise of new up and coming superpowers like China, Russia and at the same time regional actors that play a big role in the area that they are located in. China in east Asia is a great example of regional power and what role they play in regional and local politics in the regions.

5.9 Realism perspective of the Cold war power dynamics

The realist perspective views the cold war as a classic example of a balance-of-power struggle with two superpowers engaged in arms races, forming alliances and waging proxy wars to limit the other's power and influence from spreading instead of direct confrontation with each other.⁴⁸ One of the key mechanisms of the cold war was the nuclear arms race and the nuclear deterrence that came with it. As both the U.S. and USSR had enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other and the world along with it if full scale war would occur, it meant to shift away from the war against each other and instead find other ways to win over the other. An example that shows the underscored balance of power principle of the Cold war was the **Cuban Missile crisis (1962)** when the USSR decided to place nuclear missiles on Cuban soil to deter the U.S. from trying to invade Cuba just like

⁴⁷ "Consequences of the Collapse of the Soviet Union." Norwich University Online. <https://online.norwich.edu/online/about/resource-library/consequences-collapse-soviet-union> (Accessed: 27 December 2024)

⁴⁸ S. Antunes, I. Camisao, *Introducing Realism In International Relations Theory*. E-International Relations. (2018) <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/> (accessed: 2 December 2024)



they had done during the **Bay of Pigs invasion (1961)** as well as an answer for the U.S. placement of Jupiter missiles in Turkey.^{49 50} This crisis was the closest both sides ever came to all out war and nuclear conflict, something both sides wanted to avoid. Once again the knowledge of both sides being able to annihilate each other did work as a deterrent for the sides to avoid nuclear war and instead pursue their strategic gains in other ways. This can be seen in the **Limited test ban treaty in 1963** and then the Increased tensions during the **Vietnam war (1965-1975)**.⁵¹ Instead of pursuing such direct action as had happened during the Cuban missile crisis, Proxy conflicts became the norm of the cold war.

At the same time both powers established spheres of influence in critical regions around the world so that the superpowers could keep their influence around the world. Both sides used their influence to create defensive alliances to protect their own interests and statehood. The most clear example of this is the **Warsaw treaty organization** or more commonly known as the **Warsaw pact**, a collective defense treaty established by the USSR and the Seven Soviet puppet states in Europe in 1955 and worked as a counterweight to **NATO (North Atlantic treaty organization)** that had been formed in 1949.^{52 53} The Warsaw pact acted both as an alliance for the defence of the USSR and therefore created a buffer zone between the western bloc and the heartland of the USSR, while also creating a balance of power between the two power blocks in regards to NATO. This is the reason why Stalin kept control over eastern europe and did not make them independent states.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962,” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of state. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis> (Accessed: 18 December 2024)

⁵⁰The Bay of Pigs, John F. Kennedy Presidential library and museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-bay-of-pigs> (Accessed: 7 January 2025)

⁵¹ History, Vietnam War, <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history> (Accessed: 28 December 2024)

⁵² NATO, NATO Declassified: What was the Warsaw pact, https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/declassified_138294.htm (Accessed: 17 December 2024)

⁵³ NATO, What is NATO? <https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index.html> (Accessed: 17 December 2024)

⁵⁴“Proxy wars,” BBC Bitesize, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3h9mnb/revision/6> (Accessed: 17 December 2024)



5.10 Liberalist perspective of the Cold war power dynamics

The Liberalist perspective sees the importance but also the challenges faced by global governance during the cold war where institutions like the UN were restricted by the Veto powers of the U.S. and USSR in the UN security council which worsened the institutions ability to mediate in conflicts.⁵⁵ At the same time the UN was used by both sides during the Cold war to further the superpowers own agenda. An example of this can be found in the UNs handling of the Korean war (1950-1953) which saw UN intervention as an international military spearheaded by the U.S. under a UN mandate, which the USSR opposed.⁵⁶ However the power dynamic of the cold war can also be seen in the superpower and their allies using means as boycotting to enforce their own agenda. An example of this is the **boycott of the Olympic games in 1980** that took place in the USSR. This was because of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the coup that installed soviet loyalist Babrak Karmal as president in the country.⁵⁷ Some 60 countries joined the boycott of the olympic games and shows the use that even non political international organisations have a role when it comes to world politics and the role it can play in the liberalist perspective.

Despite the deep conflict between the two superpowers and the power dynamics that existed between the two of them, attempts to de-escalate the cold war and find ways to cooperate with each other. The period of detente in the 1970s with the SALT I (**Strategic arms limited talks**) and the helsinki accords hosted in 1975 in regards to political and military issues, territorial

⁵⁵ Security Council report, The Veto, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php> (Accessed: 3 January 2025)

⁵⁶ "The United Nations In Korea." Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/united-nations-korea> (accessed: 10 December 2024)

⁵⁷ M. Ellison, The 1980 Olympics Boycott, Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-1980-moscow-olympics-boycott> (Accessed: 19 December 2024)



integrity, the definition of borders, peaceful settlement of disputes and the implementation of confidence building measures between opposing militaries for Europe.^{58 59}

Another example of cooperation between the superpowers and liberal democracies working together can be seen in the **Suez crisis (1956)** where British-French forces took control of the Suez canal after that Egyptian president Abdel Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez canal company. Both the U.S. and USSR were against the action of the British and French which led to an interesting sense of cooperation between the two to solve the conflict in the region fearing that war could break out in the middle east and between the two power blocs if not handled correctly.⁶⁰

5.11 Realism perspective of post-cold war power dynamics

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, as new nations emerged on to the world map and the Warsaw pact collapsed, the U.S. emerged as the sole superpower of the world meaning that they could pursue whatever goal they wanted to increase their power without any real resistance from the world.⁶¹ The U.S. leveraged this free power that they now had through military interventions in the middle east, for example during the Gulf war in 1991 where the U.S. were able to organize an international coalition against Saddam Hussein's Iraq following their invasion of Kuwait.⁶² Despite the international community being unanimous with the condemnation against Iraq, it was the U.S. as the world lone superpower that lobbied for an

⁵⁸“Detente and Arms control, 1969-1979.” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/detente> (Accessed: 16 December 2024)

⁵⁹Helsinki Final act, 1975, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki> (Accessed 27 december 2024)

⁶⁰ The Suez Crisis, 1956, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of state. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/suez> (Accessed: 18 December 2024)

⁶¹ “Consequences of the Collapse of the Soviet Union.” Norwich University Online. <https://online.norwich.edu/online/about/resource-library/consequences-collapse-soviet-union> (Accessed: 27 December 2024)

⁶² The First Gulf War, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/firstgulf> (Accessed: 21 December 2024)



international coalition and to intervene against Iraq. This same intervention by the U.S. could be seen during the Yugoslav wars, both in Bosnia and in Kosovo. In December 1992, U.S. president George Bush informed Serbian president Milosevic that if Serbia were to invade Kosovo the U.S. would respond with military force.⁶³ In April 1994, Nato would carry out airstrikes against bosnian-serbs that were supported by the Serbian government. This marks an important mark in world history as this was the first time that NATO would involve themselves in a military conflict and perform these airstrikes. This shows that the U.S. could finally stretch their influence without the fire of all out war or the involvement with another superpower.

As the U.S. could stretch their muscles and intervene more actively around the world, the newly formed Russian federation was forced to pick up the pieces of its former superpower self. Russia intervened in conflicts or actively fought in wars in regions like Chechnya, Transnistria, Georgia and Tajikistan, not in wars of conquest but as a way to keep their sphere of influence over regions that had formerly been a part of the USSR.⁶⁴ The fall of the Warsaw pact in 1991 saw the power dynamic in the world shift against russia so russia had to work with the few nations that they still could ally with, this being the some of the newly formed states that would come out of the USSR, like the new central asian republics, the caucasus states and Belarus. These nations together would work to form the **CSTO (Collective security treaty organization)** According the **CTSO** own articles found on their website ‘‘The CSTO worked the same as **NATO**, as in if any of the nations part of the CTSO wert to be invaded or subjected by a foreign power then the rest of the members would declare war on the foreign power.’’⁶⁵

⁶³ PBS. Kosovo Chronology.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/etc/cron.html> (Accessed: 22 December 2024)

⁶⁴ N. popescu, EU-foreign policy and Post-soviet conflicts: Stealth intervention (Taylor & Francis group, 2011), pp. 1-4.

<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lnu.se/lib/linne-ebooks/reader.action?docID=614919&ppg=61> (Accessed: 26 November 2024)

⁶⁵ Collective Security treaty Organization, 25 years of CTSO, <https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/> (Accessed: 23 December 2024)



As the years have gone by since the fall of the USSR in 1991, Russia has begun to stretch their own muscles more and more and also taken advantage of a weakened U.S. that no longer sees an interest in being a world police and instead wants to focus on their own interior problems.⁶⁶ This has been hinted at by president-elect Donald J. Trump has hinted that if NATO allies do not bolster their own military spending they will withdraw from the alliance.⁶⁷ This both shows that U.S. interests do not correspond with the rest of the alliance and that the U.S. does not win anything from being part of the NATO alliance. At the same time the U.S. has reaffirmed their commitment to East Asia, especially with the defense of Taiwan against a stronger People's Republic of China. In 2024 president elect Donald trump told a reporter from the washington post that “China would not invade Taiwan, but that the PRC eventually will.”⁶⁸

At the same time as the U.S. has turned away from its international commitments, Russia and also China has taken the moment to expand their own influence around the world. Russia with their war in the Ukraine and China with their **Belt and Road initiative**, that works to strengthen infrastructure around the world to promote China, especially with themself.⁶⁹

5.12 Liberalism perspective of post-cold war power dynamics

Following the collapse of the USSR, 1991 saw an expansion of multilateral institutions like the current version of the EU which was formed in 1992 with the Maastricht treaty that would work for more economic integration, a

⁶⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/20/opinion/biden-afghanistan-intervention.html> ...

⁶⁷ M. Hirsh, Trumps Plan for NATO is Emerging, Politico, (2024)
<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/07/02/nato-second-trump-term-00164517>
(Accessed: 4 January 2025)

⁶⁸ Congressional Research Service, Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations, (2024)
<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10275> (Accessed: 4 Januari 2025)

⁶⁹ J. McBride, N. Berman, A. Chatzky”, Chinas massive belt and road initiative, Council of foreign relations, (2023)
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative> (Accessed: 26 December 2024)



single currency, common citizen rights and a united foreign and defence policy.⁷⁰ European cooperation and the EU had existed before 1992, with its first iteration being the European Coal and Steel community (ECSC) formed in 1952 to integrate coal and steel industries into a single common market.⁷¹ Other organizations like the World trade organization in 1995 to promote international trade and also international cooperation with climate change that could be seen with the Paris agreement in 2016 just to collectively solve the climate crisis and that every nations have a say in the matter.⁷²

Another example of the multilateral institutions and cooperation between states could be seen with the international criminal court (ICC) located in Haag, Netherlands that was founded in 2002.⁷³ This demonstrates an effort from the world to strengthen the global justice system and to solve criminal matters on a world scale.

However much the world has worked for more international cooperation and to solve problems on the world stage, there are large forces in the world that are working against these powers. The rise of Authoritarianism and Nationalism has challenged the liberal world order which has seen an undermining of the cooperation and establishment that was created during the early years after the USSR's collapse. An example of this can be found in the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement in 2016 under the Trump presidency which saw a rejection in international liberalist principle of cooperation.

⁷⁰ European union, History of the EU: 1990-1999, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1990-99_en (Accessed: 5 January 2025)

⁷¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, European Coal and Steel Community, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/European-Coal-and-Steel-Community> (Accessed 23 january 2025)

⁷² World Trade Organization, What is the World Trade Organization?, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact1_e.htm (Accessed: 5 January 2025)

⁷³ International Criminal Court, The International criminal court at a glance, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/ICCAtAGlanceEng.pdf>, pp. 1-2 (Accessed 5 January 2025)



The Post-cold war era also saw an emergency or rise of non-state actors like the **Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**, also new threats to security like cyber threats which complicates the state-centric liberalist framework even more in a world that is becoming more nationalist and authoritarian.

However even if the liberalist world view has taken a hit internationally it is still not defeated as many nations hold on to international cooperation. The EU still remains a large actor when it comes to international cooperation on the European continent with many nations that want to join and are seeking entry into the union.⁷⁴

6.0 Comparison

6.1 Comparison Cold war proxy wars

When making a comparison of the cold war era proxy wars, let's start by looking at the key assumptions of realism and liberalism. Realism sees the international system as anarchic, meaning that every state acts in their own self interest. Nations can ofcourse enter into alliances with other countries but this is only to further their own power. The cold war was a balance of power conflict between two superpowers, these being the U.S. and the USSR and proxy conflict was just a tool to prevent the other side from gaining influence while avoiding direct confrontation with the other side as it could lead to Nuclear assured destruction which underscored the realist principle of avoiding mutual destruction through calculated restraint.

All these actions can be seen during the cold war era and can be connected back to realism. For example the U.S. containment policy aimed at restricting soviet expansion (e.g, in Vietnam and Afghanistan) and also the USSR's support for marxist regimes to create spheres of influence in example afghanistan or angola shows the balance of power and also the use of proxy

⁷⁴ European Parliament. Enlargement: How do countries join the EU?, (2024) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20180126STO94113/enlargement-how-do-countries-join-the-eu> (Accessed: 6 Januari 2025)



wars to prevent a direct confrontation. At the same time The U.S. and the USSR created alliances like NATO and the Warsaw Pact to consolidate the power blocs and deter its enemies. Once again this is in the Superpowers own self interest to keep the balance of power.

When looking at the Liberalist perspectives the key assumptions that are being important in regards to proxy wars during the cold war is that cooperation is possible through international institutions and shared norms as well that cooperative treaties like SALT 1, Limited Test ban treaty demonstrated the potential for collective actions. Liberals also speak of the importance of liberal institutions, like the UN and its role in mediation or legitimizing conflict even if it was constrained by the superpowers veto and agenda.

When looking at how these conclusions have been used during the cold war in a liberalist perspective, shared norms and cooperation can be seen with the detente periods of the cold war where the U.S. and USSR cooperated in regards to arms control and the Signing of the SALT 1 but also other treaties like the Helsinki accords highlights the possibility of dialogue between the superpowers. Also when looking at the UN, while limited, it did serve as a platform for negotiation during key conflicts, for example the Korean war.

6.2 Comparison Post-cold war Proxy wars

In the comparison of the post-cold war proxy wars the world saw a shift from the bipolar world dominance of the cold war to a unipolar world dominated by the U.S. in the 1990s before shifting once more to a multipolar world in the later post-cold war era with the US, Russia and China taking the role of world superpowers. This rising power of china and the once more resurgent Russia challenges the status quo to shift the balance of power once more in the world after the fall of the USSR when the U.S. was left as the sole



superpower of the globe. This challenge as the world lone superpower can be seen with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as its war in Georgia, Transnistria and interventions in central Asia as a way to re-establish dominance in the old Soviet sphere. This can also fit with the realistic perspective of the use of proxy wars like how it was used during the Cold War as a continued tool for the superpowers to expand their dominance without the risk of confrontation or full-scale war. At the same time, China's Belt and Road initiative seeks to expand economic and political power around the world, especially in Asia and Africa, which can be seen as countering U.S. dominance in these regions.

At the same time, the liberalist perspective looks at how following the Cold War, liberal institutions looked to strengthen global cooperation and governance through a multitude of international institutions like the WTO, EU, and ICC, while at the same time also working as a peacekeeping force through the UN in Africa or NATO in Kosovo, which demonstrated a collective action for peace in the world. The actions of expansion of the EU reflected the liberal ideals of integration and collective security that the EU wishes to accomplish. As well as economic globalization and the spread of democratic principles that can be seen as a stabilizing force for many of the European nations, both for those that have joined or wish to join the Union. The same ideals of integration and collective security can be seen in NATO and the Russian-led CSTO. The rise of global governance and international cooperation can also be seen in the climate arguments that have occurred in recent years, like the Paris Agreement. But international cooperation can also be seen in trade organizations like the WTO, which can be connected to the liberalist view of international cooperation.

6.3 Comparison cold war era power dynamics

When looking at the Cold War era power dynamics, realism draws attention to power politics and state sovereignty as a central organizing principle of



international relations. During the Cold war, The U.S. and the USSR acted as the primary actors in a bipolar system of global superpowers. These two would engage in proxy wars and compete for dominance within their own respective spheres of influence. In a realist world view, this emphasises the power struggle that nations have where they wish to maximize their own power in the so-called anarchic international system. This point of view can be seen in the Creation of NATO and the Warsaw pact as a counterbalance to safeguard the superpowers' powers through collective power. Despite the cold war's hostile nature the U.S. and Soviet had, liberalism point to periods of detente and agreements such as SALT 1 and the Helsinki accords as examples of cooperative efforts to maintain global stability. At the same time, the UN, though constrained by superpower rivalry, provided a platform for negation and mediation even if it did not work as effectively as intended.

The cold war institutions like the UN were often paralyzed by the superpower rivalry of the USSR and U.S., with the security council's veto power limiting its effectiveness. Alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw pact were seen as tools of power consolidation instead of the multilateral and cooperative alliance as they were intended to be. Liberalism sees international institutions as central to managing Cold war dynamics. Despite their limitations, institutions like the UN played a critical role in conflict resolution and peacekeeping (despite its limitation by the world superpowers).

When looking at global order and stability from the realist perspective, the era of the cold war could be seen as the most safest time to be alive due to the balance of power. This meant that nations worked against each other to prevent them from becoming too strong which would jeopardise the other nations survival. The bipolar superpower dynamic that existed during the cold war alongside alliance blocks and spheres of influence meant that both sides of the conflict (U.S. vs USSR) were deterred from attacking each other by the prospect of mutually assured destruction. At the same time realists



also argue that this peace that the balance of power created was fragile as the rising tension and the interest of becoming stronger instead manifested in proxy wars and other risk of escalations that could be seen with the Cuban Missile crisis. When liberalism looks at global order and stability, the perspective of the cold war was seen as the potential for global stability, peace and norms. This could be seen in regards to the period of detente and the treaties like SALT 1 which shows the effort made by nations to build trust and prevent conflicts and instead solve it through mediation.

6.4 Comparison Post- cold war era power dynamics

The Post-cold War era introduced a unipolar world with the U.S. taking the role of the world's sole Superpower following the fall of the USSR. But as the years have gone by since the end of the cold war the world has changed. Both the liberalist and realist perspective provide contrasting lenses to analysing this time period.

Realism emphasizes the persistence of power politics with can be seen with the U.S. as the sole superpower following the USSR's collapse which meant that the U.S. could act and intervene militarily without the fear of repercussions from other superpowers. This could be seen in the Gulf war and Yugoslavia wars where the U.S. could flex its powers and establish its power since the fall of the eastern bloc. At the same time the newly formed Russian federation, one of the Successor states of the USSR was forced to reassert influence and retake control of the former sphere of the USSR. Both the Russian federation and the U.S. worked to maximize its powers following the USSR's collapse as the world order had shifted. This is something realism interpret as states maximizing its powers in an anarchic international system which the end of the cold war lead to with the collapse of one of the two world powers and spheres. The liberalist perspective highlights the potential cooperation and collective action that transcend individual state power politics. Institutions like WTO, ICC and the EU are



collaborations that expanded their roles during the post-cold war period to mediate conflict instead of solving it on the battlefield. Even the U.S. military interventions during the Gulf war and the Yugoslav war were often conducted under the guise of multilateralism, either through the U.S. led coalition in the Gulf war and through NATO during the Yugoslav war. When comparing these two, realism sees the post-cold war US. dominance as a natural extension of it gaining political power while liberalism views it instead as a multilateral framework of evidence of a shift towards cooperative global governance.

When looking deeper at international institutions, realism looks at institutions like NATO and Russian lead CTSO as secondary factors to state interests and just acting tools for countries to consolidate their own influence. At the same time the liberalist perspective points out that the international institutions were at the center when it comes to the post-cold war power dynamic as it facilitated stronger cooperation between states that had not been seen before. In areas like trade with the WTO, in justice with the ICC and climate questions with for example the Paris agreement. Other important institutions like the EU were also founded during this time which create the picture seen as creating interdependence between different countries to reduce the likelihood of conflict and strengthen collaboration. Both perspectives in this matter dismiss each other in what they see as important in regards to world politics as realism dismisses institutions as subordinates to states powers meanwhile liberalism emphasises their ability to shape the global order through these institutions and cooperation.

The post-cold war era realism sees the unipolar world as inherently unstable, this means rising powers like China and resurgent powers like Russia will surface to combat the current global order which in this case is the U.S. This challenge of the current order has a negative effect on the world and the



stability drops. Examples of this can be found in Russia's action in Ukraine and China's Belt and road initiative as well as their interest in Taiwan which can be interpreted as attempts to rebalance power in the world. Meanwhile Liberalism sees it as the spread of democracy which can be interpreted as a creation of stability and norms for the world order. Despite authoritarianism and nationalism spreading, and nations seeking their own interests like Russia in Ukraine, there are successful models of stability through integration and stability which liberalism promotes, like the EU.

Graph 3.0 Key comparative points between the different time eras, Political views and variables.

Aspect	Cold war (realism)	post-cold war (realism)	Cold war (liberalism)	Post-cold war (Liberalism)
System structure	Bipolar (U.S. vs. USSR)	Multipolar (U.S, China, Russia)	Bipolar but with some cooperation	Multipolar with strong emphasis on multilateralism
Conflict type	Proxy wars (Korea, vietnam)	Proxy wars (Syria, Ukraine)	Peacebuilding attempts via Treaties (Salt I)	Peacekeeping (Nato in Kosovo or UN in Africa)
Institutions role	Secondary to state power NATO or Warsaw pact	Secondary but rising Regional like brics	UN as a constrained mediator	Institutions (WTO, ICC, EU) fosters cooperation
Actors motivation	Self-interest, Balance of power	Power Maximization, Regaining influence	Ideological rivalry Capitalism VS. Communism	Collective security , Economic Globalization
Global stability	Nuclear deterrence Ensured Stability but fragile	Rise of hybrid warfare undermines stability	Norm-building through Diplomacy	Liberal norms Challenged by Authoritarian Nationalism

7.0 Conclusion



This thesis had a goal to examine the two time eras of the Cold war (1947-1989) and the post-cold war era (1991-2024). To compare the two time eras, the thesis looked into the concept of proxy wars during these two eras and how the power dynamic has changed. Looking at these variables, the thesis used realism and liberalist perspective to answer the question if the cold war truly ended or if its structure and conflict persisted in new forms since the fall of the USSR in 1991.

The analysis demonstrates that while the cold war as an era and conflict formally concluded with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, its underlying structure and dynamics have persisted in modified forms into the post-cold war period. These continuities can be seen through the continuity of proxy warfare from the cold war era into the post-cold war era. Proxy wars were central to the bipolar power struggle between the U.S. and the USSR, primarily driven by ideological competition, however as the post-cold war era began, proxy wars remained a key feature for global conflict but now shaped by the multipolar world powers of the U.S., Russia and China and no longer the conflict of ideology between capitalism and communism.

When it comes to power dynamics, the bipolar system of the cold war that was dominated by the U.S. and the USSR ensured stability through the system of balance of power strategies but fostered instability via competition. The post-cold war eras was a unipolar moment of the U.S. dominance that transitioned to a multipolar world where the rising power of China and resurgent Russia actively challenged the current world order of the U.S. regional actors and non-state actors also play a more important role in world politics. The competition for power and influence continues in the world, reflecting a structural continuity that has been seen since the cold war era and is continuing till this day.

To recap the and to give a final answer to the research question. The cold war, as a historical period ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin wall but



the same characteristics that made it up, proxy wars, power struggles, and competition in areas like trade or international institutions are all characteristics that still persist in the modern geopolitical landscape. This indicated that the cold war and the dynamics that existed with it never truly ended. Instead the cold war has since the historical end in 1989 evolved with new actors, regions and political goals shaping its continuation into the 21st century.

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9.0 Appendix

Graph 1.0 Regional distribution of Proxy wars during the Cold war.

Africa	Asia	Middle east	Europe	Americas
Congo Crisis (1960-1965)	Korean War (1950-1953)	Suez Crisis (1956)	Greek Civil war (1946-1949)	Cuban revolution (1953-1959)
Angolan Civil war (1975-2002)	First Indochina war (1946-1954)	Six-day war (1967)		Bay of Pigs invasion (1961)
Ethiopian Civil war (1974-1991)	Vietnam war (1955-1975)	Yom-Kippur War (1973)		Nicaraguan Contra war (1981-1990)
Mozambican Civil war (1977-1992)	Laotian Civil War (1959-1975)	Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)		El Salvador Civil war (1979-1992)
	Cambodian Civil war (1967-1975)			Guatemalan Civil war (1960-1996)
	Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989)			



Graph 2.0 Proxy wars (1991-2024): The Post-cold War Era

Africa	Asia	Middle east	Europe	Americas
Rwandan Civil war (1990-1994)	War in Afghanistan (2001-2021) Tajikistani Civil war (1991-1997)	Iraq War (2003-2011) Syrian civil war (2011-ongoing) Yemeni Civil war (2014-ongoing) Libyan Civil war (2011-ongoing) Israel-Palestinian Conflict (1948-ongoing)	The Transnistria war (1990-1992) Georgian civil war (1991-1993) Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) Bosnian Civil war (1992-1995) First chechen War (1994-1996) Kosovo War (1998-1999) Russo-Georgian war (2008) Russo-Ukrainian war (2014/2022-ongoing) Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020 and 2023 escalation) The East prigorodny Conflict (1992)	



**Graph 3.0 Key comparative points between the different time eras,
Political views and variables.**

Aspect	Cold war (realism)	post-cold war (realism)	Cold war (liberalism)	Post-cold war (Liberalism)
System structure	Bipolar (United States VS. Soviet union)	Multipolar (United States, China, Russia)	Bipolar but with some cooperation	Multipolar with strong emphasis on multilateralism
Conflict type	Proxy wars (Korea, vietnam)	Proxy wars (Syria, Ukraine)	Peacebuilding attempts via Treaties (Salt I)	Peacekeeping (Nato in Kosovo or UN in Africa)
Institutions role	Secondary to state power NATO or Warsaw pact	Secondary but rising Regional like brics	UN as a constrained mediator	Institutions (WTO, ICC, EU) fosters cooperation
Actors motivation	Self-interest, Balance of power	Power Maximization, Regaining influence	Ideological rivalry Capitalism VS. Communism	Collective security , Economic Globalization
Global stability	Nuclear deterrence Ensured Stability but fragile	Rise of hybrid warfare undermines stability	Norm-building through Diplomacy	Liberal norms Challenged by Authoritarian Nationalism