

# "International Relations"

Evaluate the periods of détente and loose bipolarity during the cold war, identifying key factors that led to reduction in tensions. How do these periods compare with contemporary IRs, particularly in terms of US-Russia relations? Briefly explain the peaceful end of cold war using theoretical perspectives from IRs.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Fundamentally, cold war was bipolar but it was not static in nature. Intense confrontation had occurred in the early stages of cold war.

In this period, the international system entered the phases of détente and loose bipolarity, specifically from mid-1960's to late-1970's.

These phases referred to the relaxation of tensions between US and Soviet Union, along with persisting the decline in bloc politics.

Nuclear parity and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) of superpowers and their second strike capabilities led to the reduction in tensions.

Moreover, in contemporary world, global powers assume the same phases to prevent full scale escalation despite having second strike capabilities.

The rise of globalisation, economic interdependence and institutionalism led to the peaceful end of cold war.

Hence, the phases of détente and loose bipolarity played a significant role in preventing full scale war and also shaping the contemporary politics.



## B. Period of Détente and Loose Bipolarity

In cold war, the period of Détente refers to the deliberate easing of tensions between the US and USSR through diplomacy, arms control and confidence building measures. Whereas, loose bipolarity denotes the persistence of bipolar structure with declining alliance rigidity and increasing autonomy of secondary powers.

## C. Key Features of Détente

### 1. Arms Control and Strategic Stability

Détente phase institutionalized the arms control and strategic stability through agreements such as SALT I (1972) and the Helsinki Accords (1975). These agreements reduced the risk of accidental nuclear wars. Henry Kissinger viewed détente as means of managing nuclear competition not ending it. From the lens of liberal institutionalism, détente played a key role in countering full scale confrontation during cold war.

### 2. Diplomatic Engagement

Détente phase had regularized the US and USSR summits for counter dialogues. The expansion of trade and scientific cooperation



were the key aspects of negotiations table. Through the lens of linkage diplomacy both the super-powers managed diplomatic engagement.

## D. Key Features of Loose Bipolarity

### 1. Declining Bloc Discipline

The phase of loose bipolarity, referring to the decline in rigid alignment and bloc politics. For instance, the US-China rapprochement, middle powers gaining strategic space and after Sino-Soviet split, China acting independently of USSR clearly highlights the strategic achievement of loose bipolarity. The rise of China and non-aligned movements hindered the rigidity of bipolarity in the era of cold war.

### 2. Proxy Conflicts Continued.

Despite these phases of releasing tension among major superpowers, the conflicts shifted from centre to periphery. For instance, wars continued in Vietnam, Middle East and Africa on the behalf of super powers. As Kenneth Waltz argued that, "Nuclear weapons make wars among great powers unlikely", rather they shift their focus from super powers to smaller states.

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## E. Factors that Led to Reduction in Tensions.

### 1. Nuclear Parity and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD):

The attainment of second strike capability by both US and USSR made nuclear war suicidal. The concept of Balance of Power has brought super powers to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). As Kenneth Waltz said, "Nuclear weapons make wars among great powers unlikely." Hence, this realization compelled both super powers to seek stability through arms control and diplomatic engagements.

### 2. Economic Constraints and War Fatigue

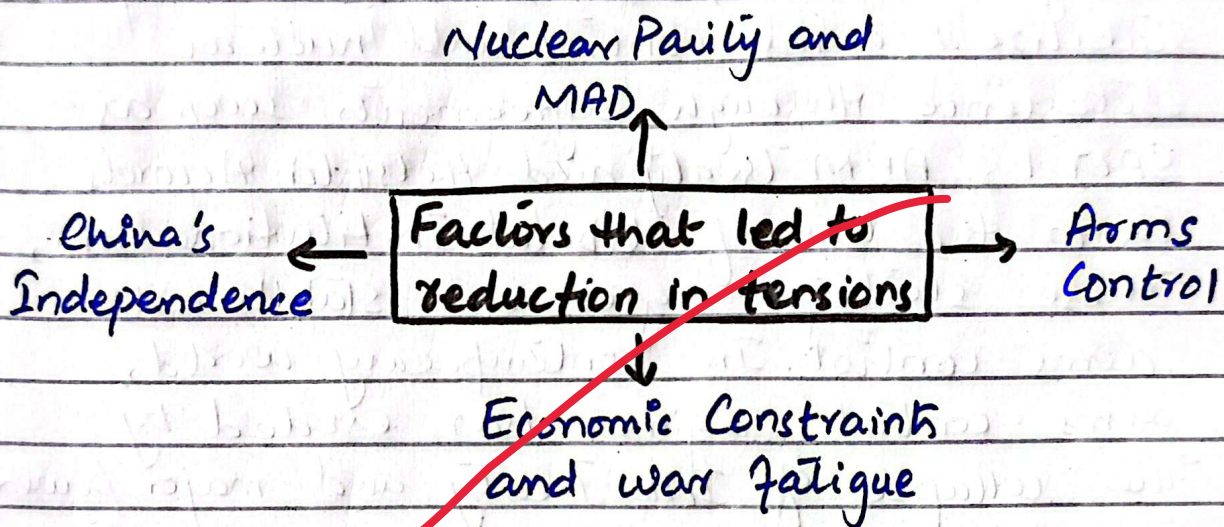
Economic constraints and strenuous war faced by USSR and US hindered their capabilities. The prolonged Vietnam War strained the US economy and economic stagnation faced by Soviet Union are the key factors that led to the reduction in tensions among great powers during cold war. From the lens of imperial overstretch, moderate confrontation between both powers can be emphasised.

### 3. Rise of China and Triangular Diplomacy

The Sino-Soviet split and China's emergence as an independent power transformed bipolarity



into a more complex structure. The US-China rapprochement allowed Washington to exploit triangular diplomacy. Henry Kissinger described this as, "creating balance within the balance." Hence, rise of China led to significant decline in bipolar tensions.



## F. Comparison of Détente and Loose Bipolarity with Contemporary International Relations

### 1. US - RUSSIA RELATIONS

#### 1.1. Ideology and Strategic Competition

Ideology of US i.e. Capitalism and Soviet Union i.e. Communism was the defining feature of Cold War rivalry. In contemporary world, ideology is secondary between US and Russia, whereas, security, balance of power and sphere of influence are the primary forces. As John Mearsheimer argues that "Russia's behavior is



primarily driven by security concerns rather than ideological expansionism. Therefore, the primary concerns have diverged as compared to past.

### 1.2. Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control

During cold war, détente and loose bipolarity stabilized arms control and nuclear deterrence through agreements such as SALT I, ABM Treaty and Helsinki Accords. From the lens of Liberal Institutionalism, these strategic agreement stabilized arms control. In contemporary world, arms control regimes has eroded by the collapse of INF Treaty and major powers including US and Russia being reluctant from signing NPT.

### 1.3. Alliance Politics

Cold war détente existed with relatively stable alliance system, as loose bipolarity allowed some autonomy without dismantling bloc cohesion. Today, NATO's Eastward expansion and Russia's limited alliance network have intensified Moscow's perception of encirclement. Stephen Walt's "Balance of Threat" theory explains Russia's assertive response as a reaction to perceived hostile intentions.



US - RUSSIA Relations  
in Contemporary  
world as compared to  
Détente and loose  
Bipolarity phases of  
Cold War

- Ideology and Strategic Competition
- Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control
- Economic Interdependence
- Alliance politics
- Geography and Nature of Conflict
- Diplomatic Engagement

## G. Peaceful End of Cold War → Theoretical Perspective

### 1. Realist Perspective

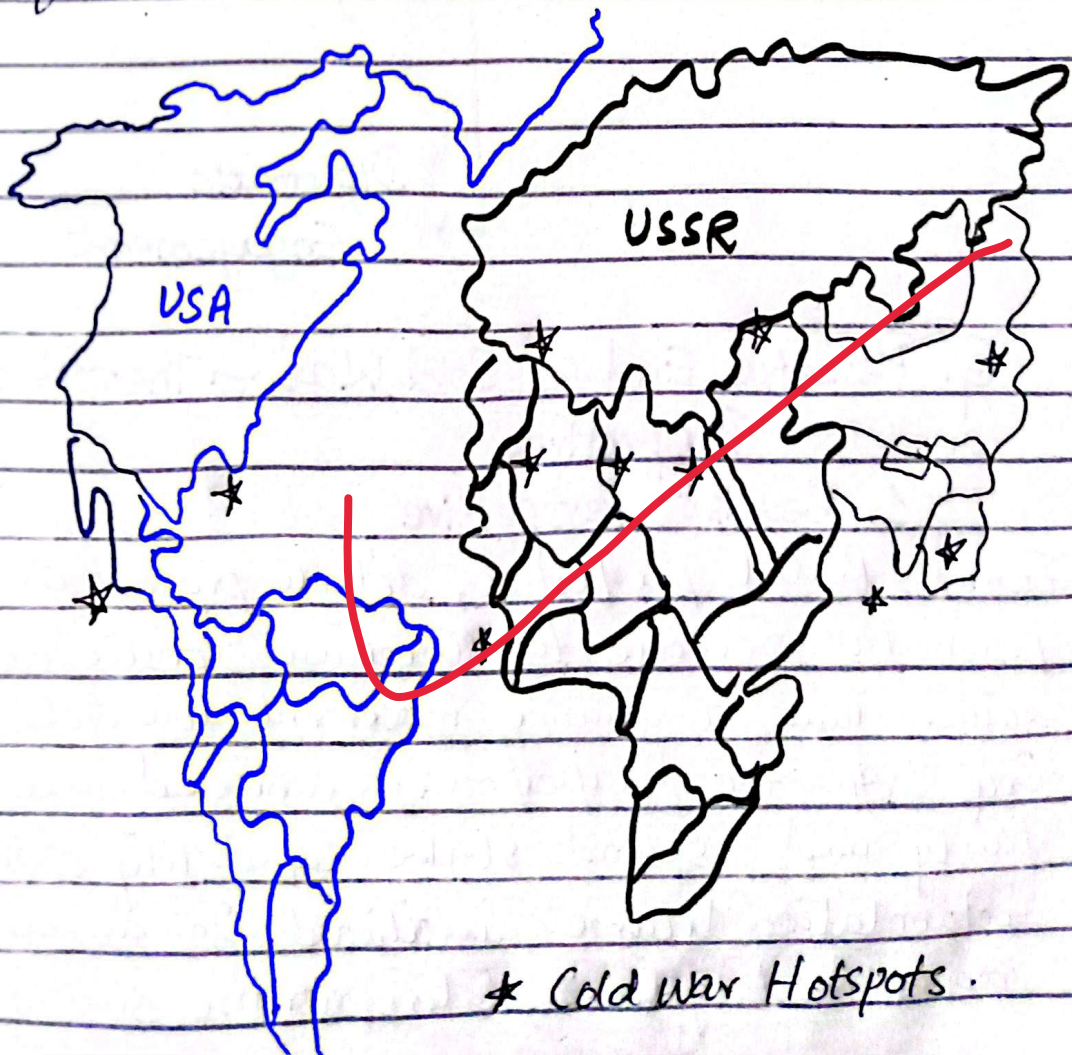
From a Realist perspective, détente proved as a pragmatic response to structural constraints rather than a genuine movement towards peace. Once both the superpowers achieved nuclear parity and second strike capability, direct confrontation became irrational. In an anarchic international system, states prioritize survival,



leading them to manage rivalry rather than eliminate it.

## 2. Liberals Perspective

From a liberals perspective, institutionalisation of arms control and strategic stability led to the peaceful end of cold war without full scale escalation. Robert Keohane notes that, "cooperation can emerge even under anarchy when institutions reduce uncertainty." Hence, liberal institutionalism declined the intensification and direct confrontation in the war.





## H. Conclusion

To sum up, détente and loose bipolarity were pragmatic responses to structural realities. Collaboratively, they lowered the probability of catastrophic war and allowed greater maneuverability for states. Moreover, it led to intra-bloc fragmentation and the rise of several other powers as China and Japan. These phases of détente and loose bipolarity still shape the international system of contemporary world, which ultimately led towards the peaceful end of Cold War.

Very good presentation

Just improve bit of improvement

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