

**COMMENTARY**

**STABILITY AND ORDER IN EUROPE REVISITED:  
LESSONS SINCE 1945<sup>©</sup>  $\Sigma$**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper revisits the question of the international structure and political stability in Europe before and after 1945. It is argued that there were relations between the international political system and political stability in Europe during the two periods: the period from 1900 to 1945 and from 1945 to 1989. Instructive lessons from global political history and Mearsheimer's Neorealism have shown the instability of multipolarity in the present decline of the US order. This is because the international political structure strongly influenced the degree of stability in Europe. The different global political structure affected the different levels of stability before and after 1945. The bipolar structure strongly influenced and determined Europe's power configuration and stability after 1945. The instability of Europe before 1945 was strongly related to the multipolarity structure; there were many great powers, and the existence of multiple polarities with seven great powers posed difficulty in managing them. Thus, striking a balance between them was nearly impossible and was a lesson for today's reading of international politics.

**Keywords:** bipolarity, multipolarity, great powers, the balance of power, long peace.

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$\Sigma$  **Article info:** Submission date: 6 April 2021; Acceptance date: 13 November 2022; Publication date: 31 Mac 2023.

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## **KOMENTAR**

### **MENYEMAK SEMULA KESTABILAN DAN ORDER DI EROPAH: PENGAJARAN SEJAK 1945**

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#### **ABSTRAK**

*Kertas kerja ini meninjau semula persoalan struktur antarabangsa dan kestabilan politik di Eropah dalam tempoh sebelum dan selepas 1945. Dihujahkan bahawa terdapat hubungan antara struktur politik antarabangsa dan kestabilan politik di Eropah dalam dua tempoh tersebut; tempoh dari 1900 hingga 1945 dan dari 1945 hingga 1989. Pengajaran terpenting dari sejarah politik global dan Neorealisme menurut John Mearsheimer telah menunjukkan sifat multipolariti yang tidak stabil dikala kemerosotan orde kuasa Amerika Syarikat sekarang. Ini kerana struktur politik antarabangsa sangat mempengaruhi tahap kestabilan di Eropah. Struktur politik antarabangsa yang berbeza mempengaruhi tahap kestabilan yang berbeza sebelum dan selepas tahun 1945. Struktur bipolar sangat mempengaruhi dan menentukan konfigurasi kuasa dan kestabilan di Eropah selepas tahun 1945. Ketidakstabilan Eropah sebelum tahun 1945 berkait rapat dengan struktur multipolariti yang wujud, kepelbagaian kuasa besar, dan kewujudan pelbagai polar kuasa dengan tujuh kuasa besar sehingga menimbulkan kesukaran untuk menguruskannya. Oleh itu, mencapai keseimbangan sesama mereka adalah hampir mustahil dan memberi pengajaran untuk pengamatan politik antarabangsa hari ini.*

*Kata kunci: bipolariti, multipolariti, kuasa besar, perimbangan kuasa, keamanan yang berpanjangan.*

## Introduction

The degree of stability in Europe was different during the period before and after 1945. The period before 1945 (from 1900 until 1945) was coloured by conflict and hostilities with two great wars, First World War (1914- 1918) and Second World War (1939-1945) (Mearsheimer 1982, 1990, 1994/1995, 2014). During this period, the seven great powers' multipolar structure dominated the global political formation (Kennedy 1987, 14; Morgenthau *et al.* 2005, 7). The seven great powers were Great Britain, France, the United States, the Soviet Union (USSR), Italy, Japan, and Germany. Power management was complicated during the period of multipolar political structure. It differed from the period after 1945 (from 1945 until 1989), which was coloured relatively with harmony and peace (Rendall 2006, 526). From 1945 until 1989, only two great powers dominated the international political structure, the US and USSR. Power management during bipolarity was much easier with only two great powers (Waltz 1979, 1988, 1993). There was no great war that occurred during the period after 1945 until 1989.

How did the power configuration and great powers relations differ during the two international political structures? This study revisits the international political structure (bipolarity structure and multipolar structure) and its impact on the degree of stability in Europe. The discussion in this paper is divided into two major parts. First, retrospect readings from a political reading of the European order and stability. The final part is about how the multipolar structure before 1945 contributed to the instability in Europe; how the bipolarity structure that emerged after Second World War influenced the stability and peace conditions in Europe; and was the bipolarity international political structure responsible for the stability and peaceful condition during the period after 1945 until 1989.

### Retrospective Reading of the European Order and Stability

The achievement of Europe and the European Union's (EU) legacy since the end of the second world war is known to many, especially to comparative regionalism students (Sorenson *et al.* 2022). By the end of the Cold War, the EU model often inspired the rise of regional arrangements in developing regions (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 28; Acharya 2021, 5). This brings many instructive lessons and controversies, including the decaying story of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) amidst tensions in South China and with the (Australian, the United Kingdom, and the US (AUKUS) arrangement since the inceptions of the US President Joe Biden administration (Haas 2003, 36; Liff 2019, 457).

However, the world has changed. More recently, unprecedented global political instability and superpower rivalry have brought commentator's attention to the endemic shift of the US-China rivalries in the South China Sea and the trade war (Liff 2019, 455; Sorenson *et al.* 2022, 21). Nevertheless, the search for stable global order during the present and gradual decline of the US's post-Cold War order and the rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have escalated more interest in the old question of order and

stability in international politics (see also Acharya 2021; Acharya and Buzan 2019). Considering the present global calamities, it is vital to revisit retrospective readings from Europe after 1945. While it is true that the present has mutated from past lessons, the history and maxim of Realism in world politics is a good reminder of cyclical attributes of human history and international affairs (Donnelly 2000, 12; Forde 1995, 38). This brings this commentary article to the question of the international political structure and political stability and instability in Europe before 1945 (1900-1945) and the period after 1945 (1945-1989). Why was the period from 1900 until 1945 unstable and from 1945 until 1989 relatively stable?

### **How The Multipolar Structure in Europe Before 1945 Contributed to the Instability of Two Great Wars (1914-1945)?**

Before the multipolarity structure characterized in 1945, power configuration in Europe. Many major powers, the United Kingdom (UK), the US (US), Germany, France, Italy, and USSR (USSR after 1917), that dominated the politics and power configuration in Europe before 1945 created a problematic situation in managing and balancing among them. The great powers failed to establish stable conditions before 1945 (Haas 2007, 16). Two great wars occurred during that period. Moreover, the first Great War broke out in 1914-1914, and the second was in 1939-1945. The multipolarity structure could be applied in analysing why they failed to create stability, and finally, two great wars broke out in Europe, the first in 1914 and the second in 1939 (McKeil 2023).

The power relations between major European powers during the first and second decade of the twentieth century paved the way to the first great wars in 1914-1918 (Mearsheimer 1990, 24). German heavy industry surpassed that of the UK in the late nineteenth century (Kennedy 1989, 26). German's economic growth in the early twentieth century was twice that of the UK (Mohd 2021, 929). In the 1860s, Britain had about 25 percent of the world's industrial production, but by 1913 that had shrunk to 10 percent, and Germany's share had risen to 15 percent. Germany transformed some of its industrial strength into military capability.

Nevertheless, the emergence of German in Europe challenged the other contending powers, especially the UK and France (Nye Jr. and Welch 2011, 14). UK and France formed an "*entente*" in 1905. Russia (before the formation of the USSR) also felt threatened by the emergence of German as a new European solid power and foreign policy (Mathew 2006, 534). Russia joined to create a greater alliance with Great Britain and France. Three powers formed the "triple entente" in 1907. Germany felt insecure about the security cooperation between the UK, France, and Russia. Germany created another security alliance with Austria-Hungary and Turkey-Ottoman (Viotti and Kauppi 1993, 26). The War between major European powers in August 1914 was closely related to the unstable multipolarity structure in Europe's regional politics. The assassination of Frank Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo in June 1914 and its aftermath was a "precipitating cause" and was the factor that contributed to the outbreak of the First World War. Without the power structure and multipolarity operation that ran the power configuration in Europe in the early decades (1900-1914) of the twentieth century, the

outbreak of War in August 1914 was nearly impossible (Waltz 2000, 23). The power configuration under the multipolarity structure was responsible for the outbreak of War in August 1914 (see also Mearsheimer 2014).

Meanwhile, the second great conflict in 1939 could be interpreted as an impact of the unsettled conflict of 1914-1918. There were more effective ways to settle the grievances from the First World War than the Versailles Treaty (Mearsheimer 1982, 8). The punishment towards Germany (as was stated in Versailles Treaty) was not the best panacea. The absence of the US in the League of Nations contributed to the unstable condition in Europe (Haas 2003; Copeland 2000). If the US joined the League of Nations and stayed in Europe to preserve the balance of power (as the US did after 1945), it could create a stable European political situation (Baldwin 1993, 21).

Hypothetically, Hitler might not have risen to power, and Second World War might not break out (Kennedy 1989, 67). As a more substantial power, the US could manage European politics and economic growth. The US isolationism policy negatively impacted the European economy and the world during the great depression in the 1930s (Mckeil 2023). The rise of Hitler and the power configuration in Europe were closely related to the dire economic situation. The excellent power configuration in Europe in the 1930s contributed to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The Second World War had related to the failure to reconstruct a stable world economy after 1918. If the US had played its role (as preponderant power) in the 1930s, Europe might be World War II could have been avoided. The War might be breaking out in Europe, but not a global war as it occurred in 1939-1945. The multipolarity structure in Europe before 1945 contributed to the instability of two great wars, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. Thus, the situation before 1945 in Europe might be different if one more substantial power or only two dominant powers had emerged and dominated European regional politics (Mohd 2021).

### **How Did the Bipolarity Structure After Second World War Influenced the Stability and Peace in European Society?**

The international political formation in Europe changed after 1945 from a multipolar (with six major powers) to a bipolarity structure (with only two, the US and USSR). Was the bipolar international political structure responsible for "the long peace" in Europe from 1945-1989? How did the bipolar structure influence Europe's stability and benign condition after Second World War? With only two major powers in the political construct, it was easier to manage and balance each other. The peacefulness and stable condition of the post-war era in Europe (1945-1989) arose due to three major systemic factors (Nye Jr. and Welch 2011, 25). First, the bipolar structure of the distribution of power in the European region; second, the relative rough equality in military power between the US and USSR and, finally, the appearance of nuclear weapons.

#### ***The Bipolar Structure of the Distribution of Power***

The bipolar structure was responsible for Europe's mild and stable conditions from 1945

until 1989. These arguments are based on three main reasons. Firstly, the number of conflict dyads is fewer, leaving fewer possibilities for conflict and War; secondly, deterrence is more accessible because the imbalance of power is limited and more easily averted and thirdly, the prospect for deterrence is more excellent because miscalculation of relative power and opponents' resolve are fewer and less likely (see Mathew 2006). In a bipolar structure, only two significant powers dominate the system and European continent, namely the United States and USSR. The minor powers such as Belgium, Poland, Luxemburg, West Germany, Bulgaria, East Germany, and other minor powers in Europe find it challenging to remain unattached to one of the major powers because the significant powers generally demand allegiance from lesser states (see also Sorenson et al. 2022).

Nonetheless, in a multipolar structure, by contrast, three or more major powers (Germany, Russia, France, the UK, Italy, Austria-Hungary) dominate the continent. Minor powers in such a structure have considerable flexibility regarding alliance partners and can opt to be free floaters. Therefore, War and conflict are more likely in a multipolar than in a bipolar structure.

### ***The Rough Equality in Military Power between Those Two Major Actors***

It can be argued that both structures, either multipolar or bipolar, are more peaceful when equality is most significant among the poles. Power inequality invites war by increasing the potential for successful aggression; hence conflict and war are minimized when inequalities are least (Waltz 1988, 621). The power inequalities among the European imperial powers influenced German foreign policy during 1900-1918 and 1933-1945. The regional political situation differed after 1945 when only two powers dominated European regional politics.

Furthermore, the equality of power between the US and USSR under a bipolar structure from 1945-1989 contributed to a peaceful Europe. Both actors achieved and maintained power equality during the Cold War period. Roughly the US and USSR had equal strength, especially in the continent of Europe. Security institutions were created to maintain both sides' equal positions. NATO, led by the US, and Warsaw Pact, led by USSR, achieved their primary objective of maintaining equality and stability. The international political structure based on bipolarity and the equality of power influenced the stability in Europe from the late 1940s until 1989.

### ***The Appearance of Nuclear Weapons***

War using nuclear weapons is significantly risky and costly. The more horrible (extremely unpleasant) the prospect of War, the less likely it is to occur. Both sides of great powers, the US and USSR, think thoroughly before deciding on War because the risks and negative impacts of nuclear War are horrifying for both sides. War under the nuclear era is different from the previous period. Deterrence is most likely to hold when the cost and risks of going to War are significant. Deterrence is also most robust (strong) when conquest is most difficult.

## **Was the Bipolar International Political Structure Responsible For "The Long Peace" in Europe from 1945-1989?**

Nonetheless, there was an emergence of a bipolar structure which is responsible for Europe's regional political stability (long peace) from the late 1940s until 1989. Was the bipolar international political structure responsible for "the long peace" in Europe from 1945-1989? The "long Peace" in Europe is also related to and influenced by other factors, such as the security institution in Europe (Copeland 2000, 28). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Warsaw Pact contributed to stability after 1945. However, the security institutions of NATO and Warsaw Pact are not free from the bipolarity structure. With the emergence of a bipolarity structure, creating two effective and efficient security institutions in Europe was possible. NATO was strongly initiated and supported by the US, and the Warsaw Pact by the USSR. Without solid support from the US and USSR, both security institutions could not play an influential role in balancing and creating stability in Europe. The creation and effectiveness of the NATO and Warsaw Pact are strongly related to the bipolarity structure that dominated the power configuration in Europe from the late 1940s until 1989. The USSR's weak position directly influenced the Warsaw Pact's position, which was finally dissolved in July 1991. Hence, the stability of Europe from 1945 until 1989 was strongly influenced by the bipolar structure. The security institutions in Europe (NATO and Warsaw Pact) could not play an influential role without the emergence of a bipolar structure.

### **In Search of Order and Stability: The Present Way Forward**

Two key lessons can be translated into present reminders of order and stability in international politics. First, history has shown how the international political structure strongly influenced the degree of stability and instability in Europe. Meanwhile, the different political structure has influenced the different levels of stability before and after 1945. The bipolar structure strongly influenced and determined Europe's power configuration and stability after 1945. The second bipolar structure is more stable than the multipolarity structure. With only two great powers (the US and USSR), managing and balancing each other is more accessible. With the prevalence clashes between the US and China at the heart of the ASEAN, it is fair to reconsider the Cold War logic of bipolar structure of the European order and stability.

Nonetheless, there are three significant reasons why the bipolarity structure is more stable and peaceful than the multipolarity structure: First, the number of significant power conflicts is fewer, reducing the possibility of great power war. Second, operating an effective deterrence system is more manageable because fewer great powers are involved. Third, because only two powers dominate the structure, the chances of miscalculation & misadventure are lower. The instability of Europe before 1945 was strongly related to the multipolarity structure. Many great powers existed: Great Britain, France, The US, USSR, Italy, Japan, and Germany. The existence of multipolarity posed challenges in managing them. Thus, striking a balance between them took work. Hence international political structure strongly influenced the degree of stability. Before 1945

because of/ closely related with the multipolarity structure and after 1945 because of the bipolarity structure. Indeed, this commentary article focuses more on the past lessons from the European order and stability, yet there is more pragmatic persuasion to consider and apply the global history of power rise and decline within the big ocean of international politics. After all, the present alarming rivalry of the US-China in our neighbouring sea is a clear signpost to learn from history and political realism.

### Acknowledgement and Declaration

This study was not supported by any form of grant and financial assistance. The Author would also like to show our gratitude to SINERGI's anonymous reviewers and their constructive feedback in improving the quality of the manuscript.

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