The emergence of two power blocs

The two superpowers were keen on expanding their spheres of influence in different parts of the world. In a world sharply divided between the two alliance systems, a state was supposed to remain tied to its protective superpower to limit the influence of the other superpower and its allies. The smaller states in the alliances used the link to the superpowers for their own purposes. They got the promise of protection, weapons, and economic aid against their local rivals, mostly regional neighbours with whom they had rivalries. The alliance systems led by the two superpowers, therefore, threatened to divide the entire world into two camps. This division happened first in Europe. Most countries of western Europe sided with the US and those of eastern Europe joined the Soviet camp. That is why these were also called the ‘western’ and the ‘eastern’ alliances.

The western alliance was formalised into an organisation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which came into existence in April 1949. It was an association of twelve states which declared that armed attack on any one of them in Europe or North America would be regarded as an attack on all of them. Each of these states would be obliged to help the other. The eastern alliance, known as the Warsaw Pact, was led by the Soviet Union. It was created in 1955 and its principal function was to counter NATO’s forces in Europe.

International alliances during the Cold War era were determined by the requirements of the superpowers and the calculations of the smaller states. As noted above, Europe became the main arena of conflict between the superpowers. In some cases, the superpowers used their military power to bring countries into their respective alliances. Soviet intervention in eastern Europe provides an example. The Soviet Union used its influence in eastern Europe, backed by the very large presence of its armies in the countries of the region, to ensure that the eastern half of Europe remained within its sphere of influence. In East and Southeast Asia and in West Asia (Middle East), the United States built an alliance system called — the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation.
(CENTO). The Soviet Union and communist China responded by having close relations with regional countries such as North Vietnam, North Korea and Iraq. The Cold War threatened to divide the world into two alliances. Under these circumstances, many of the newly independent countries, after gaining their independence from the colonial powers such as Britain and France, were worried that they would lose their freedom as soon as they gained formal independence. Cracks and splits within the alliances were quick to appear. Communist China quarrelled with the USSR towards the late 1950s, and, in 1969, they fought a brief war over a territorial dispute. The other important development was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which gave the newly independent countries a way of staying out of the alliances.

Why the superpowers needed any allies at all? With their nuclear weapons and regular armies, they were so powerful that the combined power of most of the smaller states in Asia and Africa, and even in Europe, was no match to that of the superpowers. Yet, the smaller states were helpful for the superpowers in gaining access to
(i) vital resources, such as oil and minerals,
(ii) territory, from where the superpowers could launch their weapons and troops,
(iii) locations from where they could spy on each other, and
(iv) economic support, in that many small allies together could help pay for military expenses.
They were also important for ideological reasons. The loyalty of allies suggested that the superpowers were winning the war of ideas as well, that liberal democracy and capitalism were better than socialism and communism, or vice versa.

ARENAS OF THE COLD WAR
The Cuban Missile Crisis that we began this chapter with was only one of the several crises that occurred during the Cold War. The Cold War also led to several shooting wars, but it is important to note that these crises and wars did not lead to another world war. The two superpowers were poised for direct confrontations in Korea (1950 - 53), Berlin (1958 - 62), the Congo (the early 1960s), and in several other places. Crises deepened, as neither of the parties involved was willing to back down. When we talk about arenas of the Cold War, we refer, therefore, to areas where crisis and war occurred or threatened to occur between the alliance systems but did not cross certain limits. A great many lives were lost in some of these arenas like Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan, but the world was spared a nuclear war and global hostilities. In some cases, huge military build-ups were reported. In many cases, diplomatic communication between the superpowers could not be sustained and contributed to the misunderstandings.
Sometimes, countries outside the two blocs, for example, the non-aligned countries, played a role in reducing Cold War conflicts and averting some grave crises. Jawaharlal Nehru —
one of the key leaders of the NAM — played a crucial role in mediating between the two Koreas. In the Congo crisis, the UN Secretary-General played a key mediatory role. By and large, it was the realisation on a superpower’s part that war by all means should be avoided that made them exercise restraint and behave more responsibly in international affairs. As the Cold War rolled from one arena to another, the logic of restraint was increasingly evident.

However, since the Cold War did not eliminate rivalries between the two alliances, mutual suspicions led them to arm themselves to the teeth and to constantly prepare for war. Huge stocks of arms were considered necessary to prevent wars from taking place.

The two sides understood that war might occur in spite of restraint. Either side might miscalculate the number of weapons in the possession of the other side. They might misunderstand the intentions of the other side. Besides, what if there was a nuclear accident? What would happen if someone fired off a nuclear weapon by mistake or if a soldier mischievously shot off a weapon deliberately to start a war? What if an accident occurred with a nuclear weapon? How would the leaders of that country know it was an accident and not an act of sabotage by the enemy or that a missile had not landed from the other side?

In time, therefore, the US and USSR decided to collaborate in limiting or eliminating certain kinds of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons. A stable balance of weapons, they decided, could be maintained through ‘arms control’. Starting in the 1960s, the two sides signed three significant agreements within a decade. These were the Limited Test Ban Treaty, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Thereafter, the superpowers held several rounds of arms limitation talks and signed several more treaties to limit their arms.

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