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# The Cold War: an ideological conflict that continuously confronted the classic Theories of International Relations



## La Guerra Fría: un conflicto ideológico que enfrentó continuamente a las Teorías clásicas de las Relaciones Internacionales

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**Abstract:** Historically people have understood the Cold War as a series of events that proved the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union without there ever being a direct conflict. To understand how the Cold War transformed the international system into what it is today we have to analyze what happened during the period of time in which such event took place. The purpose of this essay is to view this event from two main perspectives (realism and idealism) and to explain how this specific ideological conflict changed the way we perceive international relations nowadays.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Theories of International Relations, International System.

**Resumen:** Históricamente, la gente ha entendido la Guerra Fría como una serie de eventos que demostraron la rivalidad entre Estados Unidos y la Unión Soviética sin que haya un conflicto directo. Para comprender cómo la Guerra Fría transformó el sistema internacional en lo que es hoy en día, tenemos que analizar lo que sucedió durante el período de tiempo en que tuvo lugar dicho evento. El propósito de este ensayo es ver este evento desde dos perspectivas principales (realismo e idealismo) y explicar cómo este conflicto ideológico específico cambió la forma en que percibimos las relaciones internacionales hoy en día.

**Palabras clave:** Guerra Fría, Teorías de las Relaciones Internacionales, Sistema Internacional.

Historically people have understood the Cold War as a series of events that proved the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union without there ever being a direct conflict. To understand how the Cold War transformed the international system into what it is today we have to analyze what happened during the period of time in which such event took place. The purpose of this essay is to view this event from two main perspectives (realism and idealism) and to explain how this specific ideological conflict changed the way we perceive international relations nowadays.

To understand how realism and idealism were constantly opposing each other, we must know the bases of each theory. Ever since World War I, International Relations have existed as a discipline, and with it came the need to explain the events that took place all over the world. To accomplish an analysis of the international scope, the creation of theories that provided the bases to the discipline and sustained the knowledge that originated from it was indispensable. Therefore two theories were adapted to fit the requirements of the discipline.

On one hand, realism, as a theory to explain international relations, arose during the Cold War. It happened at that moment in history because much of its approach consisted of justifying the actions of the United States to maintain its hegemony (Salomón, 2002). This theory is known for its anthropological pessimism that appears when it faces the possibility of collective interests. Because the International system is anarchic, in realism conflict naturally arises, especially because of the idea that all countries seek to increase their power. Another important factor of this theory is the national interest, based on the fact that the State is the main actor and its security is one of its primary concerns. From these characteristics it can be concluded that in realism, moral principles cannot be applied to political action.

On the other hand, idealism is a tradition in which international relations move towards freedom, peace, prosperity and progress. It arises from the assumption that the transformation of international relations comes from modernization and all social, political and economic changes of recent centuries. Liberal thinkers propose that international cooperation must be promoted in order to achieve peace, welfare and justice worldwide. In this theory an international society is possible, and it's a goal that can be reached through institutions that regulate the actions of the States.

It is possible to consider the Cold War as a proof that the international system is in a perpetual state of war. According to Sarquís (2005), the international system is anarchic because no State rules over any other and also because there are no international laws that apply to every country and regulate their actions. Even though the system is anarchic it is not chaotic, there is some sort of organization which is precisely what the Cold War transformed, creating a new world order that two superpowers tried to be in control of.

The Cold War was an ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, or in other words capitalism against "communism". Analyzing some speeches that John F. Kennedy delivered at the beginning of the 60's and comparing them to those of the soviet leader Khrushchev, it is clear that there is a difference between the terms that are used to describe the political and economical organization of the USSR: The soviets determined themselves as socialists while north Americans found it easier to describe as communists those who didn't practice free market policy. Taking this into account it can be said that the USA launched a contention of communism policy while the USSR took their expansionist policy very seriously. This was the main issue that led to the decades of opposition between the two countries. Clearly their national interests were in each other's path and in order to move forward, someone had to step out of the way, or be forced to do so. It could be said that the Cold War was a battle for power: the US wanted to maintain it and the USSR sought to obtain it.

The Cold War and related conflicts started almost at end of World War II, when Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill arranged a meeting denominated the Yalta Conference, in which they discussed the situation of Germany and the possible solutions to end the war (Spielvogel, 2007). It was stated that Germany had to be demilitarized and in order to control it; it would be divided into four zones. Around this time idealism seemed like the theory that could explain the mechanics of the world because the States were willing to cooperate, proving that it is possible to achieve common good. The powers that emerged from the war got together for a cause and their main objective was progress in peace. Everything seemed fine until the greed for power started to get in the way of the goals that had been established. Berlin had to be divided between the United States, France, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union as well, and in 1946 Churchill said that an iron curtain had fallen over the European continent, metaphor that was used during the Cold War to refer to the ideological division of the time. Soon the Berlin Wall became the real iron curtain and also the symbol of the bipolar system.

This conflict affected the world order socially, economically and politically, shifting around the moments of peace that the UN was hoping to maintain. There were critical times in which “the planet was on the edge of destruction, such as the Missile Crisis” (Deutsch, 1992. p.49), during which the world population panicked, mainly in the US and England, hundreds of bunkers were built (McKenzie, 2012) because people were sure another war was about to breakout. This is proof that fear is one of the easiest ways in which domination can take place.

Throughout this chaos, the system managed to fall back into the idealist path and the States made alliances in order to fulfill their goals. It is here when things get more complicated, yes, States cooperated to accomplish something but the world was divided in two: The US and its allies (NATO), and the USSR and its allies (Warsaw Pact). The military alliances were there to make sure the rules of the game didn't change; and if they did, to act as quickly as possible to get the advantage. Idealism doesn't really explain this selfishness and this constant need for power, but realism does. It's here when things get more complicated and the theories start to need some of each other's concepts to survive.

It is said that there never was a direct armed conflict between the two superpowers but the indirect conflicts that took place during this period of time must be taken into account considering that both countries were involved in most of them. The rivalry between the two countries led to the strife for power that realists talk so much about and in the process dragged them into a few foreign wars.

A clear example of this was the Korean War. At the beginning of the 50's Korea was divided in two: North Korea (with a People's Republic) and South Korea (with a pro-American doctrine). Stalin was interested in getting some territories in Asia back and decided to support North Korea by attacking the south of the peninsula. The US, afraid of the expansion of communism went to the rescue of South Korea, responding to the attack and proving once again that cooperation is possible, and even more so during a conflict.

In 1962 there was another confrontation, the USSR started to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, they represented a counterattack to the American

nuclear weapons in Turkey (Miller, 2003). Kennedy's team found soviet ships transporting more missiles to Cuba and decided to block the island. The US had to compromise and settle with a deal where they agreed not to invade Cuba in exchange for the ships to leave. Right at this moment security became the main national interest for the US, and as the realism stated, it acted in a way that it would protect and achieve that interest. The tension that took place in this specific moment in history switched the dominant theory again and following idealist ideas the red phone was installed creating a direct line between the Kremlin and the White House in order to be able to resolve future issues before they got out control.

The struggles that took place during the Cold War kept the world population on alert because of the possibility of a nuclear war. The Missile Crisis was the period of strongest tension, but there were other situations that put entire cities in danger, such as the Vietnam War and the Prague Spring. The only control there was on the possible breakout of world war III was the enormous arsenal that both sides had accumulated for their protection, which became useless due to the consequences that would've been brought on if any of the two decided to act on it. They both had developed weaponry to destroy the world a few times, when did they think they would actually use it?

The Cold War managed to prove that the international system is anarchic; the possibility of war is always present. Nowadays, the effects of this period can still be seen. The current situation of Ukraine, for example, where on one side there is Russia, trying to establish control in Crimea, and on the other there is the US, not being able to resist the urge to be the world police and at the same time control the Russian expansion.

For almost half a century, the world was in constant change, the people lived with the worry of what could happen. As the international relations changed, the theories that sought to explain them had to evolve as well. When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union was disintegrated, a new world order was established, a new system in which the US was left as the strongest power and continues to be so, oppressing the less-developed countries and continuing to rule over the international decisions and actions.

The United States used and continues to use idealism to justify their actions, they believe in progress, but only for capitalism (Hernández, 2003), they believe in cooperation when it brings the most benefits to them and they believe in freedom and democracy so much, they go around the world enforcing it. The US pretends to be idealist, when on the inside, every organ of the State is realist. During the Cold War, the only thing it fought for was power and it went after the USSR when it realized they had exactly the same interests.

Historically and even more so during the Cold War, situations change very quickly, going from the struggle for power to the creation of alliances, from a war to agreements and from moments of extreme tension to cooperation, opposing realism and idealism at all times.

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