

# The year that put an end to the old bipolar world

by Alastair Buchan

For some years past scholars and analysts, official or academic, have been predicting the end of the postwar structure of international politics. In this system there were really only two primary centres of power and responsibility, Washington and Moscow, which, through a mixture of their strategic and their economic strength, have exercised so high a degree of influence over the policy of almost every other developed country, virtually all of which were allied to one or the other, as to make the word "imperial" applicable to their role. By contrast, the historic areas of European imperialism, the countries of what we now call "the developing world", have remained largely non-aligned in this bipolar struggle or relation.

But this apparent similarity in the function of the two super-powers has concealed an essential difference in their conception of their long-term interests. The Soviet Union believed 20 years ago, and still believes, in the validity of its imperial function, not simply for ideological reasons but because its leaders have been educated to think primarily in terms of power. The United States has never regarded its own hegemonic position as more than transitory. The Sino-Soviet dispute has been a source of deep anxiety in Moscow for a decade. The United States, by contrast, has been encouraging the development of European unity and Japanese economic growth for much longer than that. A bipolar world has always suited the Soviet Union, given the opportunity it has provided — on the one hand, to erode the influence of the other super-powers in Europe, in Asia or in Africa, and, on the other, to limit the risks of major conflict by having only one adversary partner in the control of crises.

But far-sighted Americans have always doubted their own countrymen's readiness to sustain a hegemonic role indefinitely — given the dynamic and experimental nature of American society. This distaste for dominance is not something that has been forced on the United States by recent events, but was evident in the thinking of American planners in the immediate postwar — indeed the wartime — years. It is only in the limited field of strategic nuclear deterrence that the United States has had doubts about its readiness to accept the principle of polycentrism, or about its ability to share its responsibilities with its major allies.

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For ten years the old bipolar world under which we have all grown up has been gradually eroding: the continuing Sino-Soviet dispute, General de Gaulle's defiance of the United States, the growing autonomy of Romania, the accelerating drain on the American balance of payments, the "Nixon Doctrine", the economic growth of Japan. But it was not until 1971 that the two superpowers, and the rest of the world with them, came face to face with the logic of their own aspirations, through a series of dramatic events, some of which were only indirectly related to each other.

The most sensational of these was, of course, the opening of direct relations between Washington and Peking, starting with the ping-pong diplomacy of April, moving through the lifting of American embargoes on trade with China in June to Henry Kissinger's melodramatic appearance in Peking on July 15 and Secretary of State Rogers' statement of August 2 that the United States would no longer under all circumstances oppose China's entry to the United Nations. Why did the American policy of 20 years' standing change so secretly and so rapidly?

Perhaps it was because Washington saw an increasing number of countries with which it had close relations — Canada, Italy, Ethiopia, Austria and others — entering into normal diplomatic intercourse with Peking so that it ran the risk of itself becoming isolated rather than continuing to isolate; perhaps it was from a recognition that, if the Western world was becoming more polycentric, there was everything to be gained from encouraging polycentrism in the Eastern world. Whatever the true explanation, the beginnings of Sino-American normalization unleashed emotions elsewhere in the world which it was beyond the power of the United States to control, so that in late October China was admitted to the United Nations by an overwhelming majority vote without any concession on the Taiwan question. A quarter of a century of debate and doubt in the chanceries of the world was ended as if a candle had been snuffed out.

President Nixon has said on several occasions that Washington has no intention of making trouble between Moscow and Peking, but it is not easy for the Russians, given the popular fear of China that exists there, to take such professions on trust. The Western postwar grand strategy of "containing" the Soviet Union ceased to have validity some years ago when Moscow began to establish strong positions of influence in Southwestern and Southern Asia and in North Vietnam. In my view, its objectives there are only partly aimed at the circumscription of Western influ-