

Enhancing Students' Understanding of Bi-Polarity in the History Classroom

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Introduction

Back when I was a history student in my secondary school days, I thought I had understood the dichotomy between Communism and Democracy, and how this ideological divide set the basis for the outbreak and development of the Cold War. However, my understanding of this dichotomy was challenged over the years when I began to recognize that merely *stating* the differences was insufficient to account for a global “event” that lasted almost half a century. Rather, it was the tension caused by the ideological differences between the USA and the USSR, and which manifested itself in different aspects throughout the period of the Cold War, that had led to the deterioration of relations between both superpowers. My decision to specialize in intellectual history – the study of ideas across time and space – during my university years eventually prompted me to re-visit some of the ideas and concepts related to Cold War history which I encountered during my schooling years. If I were to think about one important understanding from my university days which could be brought into the teaching of history in classrooms, it would be that *ideas* assume varying meanings across time and space, and that it would be worthwhile to track these changes.

My recent teaching experience in a contract school also led me to believe that it was possible to consider linking certain understandings behind intellectual history

with the teaching of historical concepts in the classroom. Once, I had to teach the concept of *détente* to a class of Secondary Four students. The students' confusion about the concept and the subsequent implication this had on their understanding of the Cold War struck a discordant note with me for two reasons. First, the students' confusion about *détente* appeared to reflect their overly simplistic understanding of the Cold War as a monolithic struggle between the USA and the USSR. Second, their understanding of the various stand-offs between both superpowers also hindered their understanding of the moments during the Cold War when both superpowers had actually co-operated. In other words, their approach towards understanding the Cold War did not differ from the way they conceived the two World Wars. More specifically, they did not deviate from the thinking that “wars” in general entailed total hostility and military standoffs. It is perhaps such misconceptions about the nature of the ideological tensions and bi-polarity during the Cold War which prompted me to critically consider how teachers have approached the teaching of the Cold War, and how we treated the concept of bi-polarity in the history classroom.

Studying the Cold War

Owing to the construct and constraints of school curriculum and the syllabus, it is natural for knowledge about the Cold War to be structured around key developments. Such approach is both rewarding and

challenging – while students are able to study in-depth the key developments which broadly shaped the political trajectory of both the USA and the USSR after the Second World War, important developments such as *détente* and the Sino-Soviet split may have been accorded lesser attention. A deeper analysis of these events could have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of Cold War history. While the current syllabus has ensured that students are still able to gain an awareness of these events through the timeline and brief description of developments in the 1970s, several pertinent questions remained: First, how can teachers convey these developments effectively without confusing students or presenting them with an overly complicated account about the Cold War? Second, how can teachers help enhance students' understandings of concepts such as bi-polarity so that students can develop a deeper understanding of Cold War history? This paper proposes a few possible pedagogical approaches which may be of use in helping to correct student misconceptions about the concept of bi-polarity, and in turn, help deepen their understanding about developments that took place during the Cold War period.

This paper seeks to explore the ways in which the concept of bi-polarity can be stretched to help students achieve more nuanced understandings about the Cold War and its developments outside of the few key events which have been accorded more attention in the syllabus. The paper examines the ways in which an understanding of second-order concepts such as Chronology, Change and Continuity, can be used to further illustrate the versatility and malleability of bi-polarity as a content concept.

Situating the concept of bi-polarity within the syllabus

Fundamentally, it is pertinent to recognize that the first-order concept of bi-polarity is one which binds the entire Unit 3, and a large part of Unit 4, together. The concept of bi-polarity manifests itself in different ways. Students first understand the Cold War as a competition of opposing ideologies, that the capitalist democracy of the United States was pitted against the command economy of the Communist USSR. This is the most vital point of initial contact students have with the concept of bi-polarity, which allows them to form a basic overarching understanding of the Cold War as the contestation of two political ideologies at opposite ends of the political spectrum. This concept of bi-polarity is then widened when students subsequently examine the political and socio-economic competition for spheres of influence both within and outside of Europe, especially since the Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis may be regarded as clear instances of the USA and the USSR using proxies to curtail and curb each other's influence globally. The ideological, political and socio-economic competition between the USA and the USSR would eventually lose its *raison d'être*; with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the concept of bi-polarity ceased to exist within contemporary discourse.

The concept of bi-polarity is also an important concept which helps to unify other content concepts that explained the reasons for the outbreak of the Cold War in Europe (as outlined in the Upper Secondary History Teaching and Learning Guide.¹) The *ideological* dichotomy between *democracy* and *communism* was an ideological manifestation of the bi-polarity dominating the post-war order. It was within this context that policies such as *containment* helped to cement the

superpower rivalry which had shaped the post-1945 narrative. Subsequently, the concept of *proxy wars* which was highlighted in the unit on the Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis could be seen as the extension of the concept of bi-polarity beyond Europe, where the superpowers heavily influenced the nature of the localized conflicts. The very fact that the Cold War played an important role in influencing the timing and nature of decolonization in individual Southeast Asian states meant that a consideration of the concept of bi-polarity is essential in helping students establish the contextual circumstances in which the superpower rivalry featured in these local narratives, and their interactions with local dynamics.

A further consideration of the concept's significance in Unit 4, however, further complicates and problematizes students' understanding of it. In Unit 4, students are invited to analyze the impact of the Cold War rivalry on the decolonization process of Southeast Asian states, thus situating the contextual development of the bi-polar Cold War within the framework of local politics. An understanding of the internal-external dynamics between the Cold War and the local struggle for independence, however, is not monolithic in nature as the Cold War rivalry took on different meanings for various countries at different times. For example, the bi-polarity of the Cold War, and the heightened fears of the Communist threat, did speed up decolonization in some instances like Malaya and Indonesia, but it also hindered Vietnam's route to independence.

From a teacher's perspective, an enhanced understanding of the concept of bi-polarity has multi-fold benefits for students in general. First, students would be able to apply such understanding to their reading of sources in the source-based case studies and detect the subtle

shifts in attitudes of various stakeholders involved in events such as the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis (both of which are examinable topics for the Source Based Case Studies (SBCS) component). Second, an understanding of the nuances in events which happened in the post-Cuban Missile Crisis years up till the resurgence of the Cold War (during Ronald Reagan's presidency) may be essential in enabling students to construct an analysis of the significance of Reagan's actions and the meaning of his political and military strategies. Third, a nuanced understanding of the concept of bi-polarity will also benefit students who may decide to further their interests in history at the Junior College or the university levels. Indirectly, a recognition of the complexity of bi-polar dynamics will be useful in elucidating the ever-changing nature of European intervention in Southeast Asian politics after the second World War, thus adding another layer of sophistication into the students' understanding which could be reflected in the quality of their essays.

Understanding the wider implications of bi-polarity through chronological sequencing

In the history classroom, chronology is often said to be the most widely recognized but yet misunderstood concept. Students often perceive chronology simply as the linear progression of events within a fixed period of time. Historical chronology, however, may be more than that, and is generally defined as "a matter of convention" that "deals with the practicalities of time measurement" (Blow, Lee and Shemilt, 2012, p. 26). Students' understanding of developments during the Cold War may comprise knowledge of the time period or of events spread across a chronological order, unfolding in a predictably linear fashion. However, an understanding of chronology goes beyond

being able to place events or developments across a timeline. Students also must be able to demonstrate knowledge of chronological “conventions” (such as using specific vocabulary that can indicate a “sense of the period”) and develop analytical “frameworks” of past events that can be used to evaluate the importance of particular historical developments.

Teachers can help students to acquire a stronger awareness about the periodization of the Cold War by getting them to sequence and analyze the multitude of events which unfolded in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, before helping them to categorize the developments into the various stages of the Cold War. In this light, students will be able to better analyze the ways in which the concept of bi-polarity unfolded: from the ideological premise of a dichotomy between the USA and the USSR to the full-blown political and economic competition for spheres of influence in Europe and beyond.

Besides being able to sequence events and developments, students would also need to develop an understanding of *concurrency* – where events and developments could happen in tandem with each other and not necessarily after one another (Blow, Lee and Shemilt, 2004, p. 28). This means that students should be able to see how the linearity of chronological progression is multi-layered. For example, students would need to first understand the relationship between developments in Europe and Southeast Asia in order for them to analyze the implications of the Cold War extending beyond Europe and the ways the bi-polarity of the Cold War tensions affected the political trajectories of nationalist movements in Southeast Asia. To illustrate this, my group mates and I developed an activity which could be used in the

classroom to teach the notion of concurrence within chronology during the Cold War, and help students make sense of the linkages between developments in Europe and Southeast Asia.ⁱⁱ

In this activity, teachers will first get students to arrange the events in chronological order on two separate timelines, one for Cold War developments in Europe and the other for developments in Southeast Asia.

Instructions for classroom activity:

1. On a piece of butcher paper, the teacher will draw two horizontal lines with ample spacing between the line.
2. The teacher will then make a mark at the start of the line with the year ‘1945’ and another one at the end of the line with the year ‘1950’.
3. The teacher will divide students into groups of 4s or 5s.
4. The teacher will then get students to arrange the events from Group 1 in chronological order along the top timeline.
5. After which, the teacher will get students to arrange the events from Group 2 in chronological order along the bottom timeline, making sure the events are chronologically aligned with the events along the top timeline.
6. The teacher will then get students to make connections between two sets of events on the top and bottom timeline by drawing lines between them and writing down the explanation.
7. The teacher could help to prompt students by using clues such as “economic” or “ideological”.
8. The teacher will then get students to share their responses.

Group 1: International Developments

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| <p style="text-align: center;">Truman Doctrine</p> <p>The Truman Doctrine, which promised <u>economic and military assistance</u> to countries “resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”, was introduced in March 1947. It was seen as the logical implementation of the <u>containment policy</u> adopted by the United States in response to Stalin’s speech on the inherent conflict between capitalism and communism. The containment was conceived of as an <u>ideological</u> response to perceptions of the Soviet Union attempting to “spread its influence and dominance over the world”.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Marshall Plan</p> <p>The Marshall Plan was announced in June 1947 by American Secretary of State, George Marshall and committed the USA to giving <u>economic aid</u> to reconstruct Europe and its economies. The Marshall Plan was seen as the <u>economic arm</u> of the Truman Doctrine by providing economic assistance to countries such as Britain and the Netherlands which were recovering from the structural damages of WWII. In doing so, this prevented the populations in post-war poverty from succumbing to communism as the more attractive political alternative. The Marshall Plan was extended to the Soviet Union and its satellite states but this provoked Stalin who perceived it as a form of economic imperialism and rejected the offer.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Cominform</p> <p>The Soviet Union set up the Cominform in September 1947 to politically unite the communist states in Europe - all the satellite states of the Soviet Union were members. The Cominform was seen as a <u>response</u> to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan by uniting the satellite states and French and Italian communist parties with the Soviet Union as one political bloc. The Cominform, and subsequently its economic branch Comecon, was thus set up to align the <u>ideological and economic actions</u> of the <u>global communist movements</u> with that of the Soviet Union’s. In this light, the Cominform was the Soviet Union’s attempt at establishing a international communist alliance.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Bandung Conference</p> <p>The Bandung Conference which took place in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement. This movement was made up of countries which just <u>gained independence from colonial rule</u> and sought to break the ideological dichotomy of the Cold War by advocating the third <u>ideological</u> strand of <u>non-intervention</u>. The countries in the Non-Aligned Movement hoped to reduce their reliance on either American or Soviet economic aid so that they were not <u>ideologically and economically dominated</u> by either superpower.</p> |

Group 2: Developments in Post-WWII Indonesia

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| <p style="text-align: center;">Indonesian Independence</p> <p>Sukarno unilaterally declared the <u>independence of the Republic of Indonesia</u> on <u>17 August 1945</u> based on the favourable circumstances of the <u>power vacuum</u> and the <u>impending return</u> of the Dutch colonial authorities to Indonesia. The declaration of independence was not well-received by the Dutch who eventually attempted to re-assert its <u>political control</u> and <u>dominance</u> in Indonesia.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Dutch Police Action</p> <p>The Dutch attempted to regain control of Indonesia through firm measures such as <u>the First Police Action from 21 July to August 1947</u>. The outbreak of a communist revolt in East Java in 1948 convinced Dutch officials that further police action was required and this led to the <u>Second Police Action in December 1948</u> which saw the Dutch taking <u>political and military control</u> over the city of Yogyakarta and all the major Republican-controlled cities in Java and Sumatra, and <u>exiling key Republican leaders</u> such as Sukarno.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Purge of Communist Leaders</p> <p>The Republican leaders of the Indonesian government was able to effectively suppress the Madiun Revolt of 1948 by <u>catching and executing Musso, killing other Indonesian communist leaders and generated mass support for the Republican government</u>. As a result, the USA supported the Republic of Indonesia and its struggle for independence against the Dutch.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Acceptance of Independence</p> <p>The extent of American support could be seen from how in January 1949 the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for the reinstatement of the Republican government, and the USA <u>exerted implicit pressure on the Dutch through the UN and the threat of withholding the Marshall Plan</u> to return to the negotiating table with the Republican government. This eventually led to the <u>formal acceptance of Indonesia's independence by the Dutch government in December 1949</u>.</p> |

By getting students to explain the linkages between developments in Europe and Southeast Asia, teachers would be able to illustrate how the bi-polarity of the ideological and economic competition in Europe had spillover effects and this carried implications for the political developments in Southeast Asia. Students should be able to then explain how the American threat of withholding the Marshall Plan from the Dutch, an action based on its ideological considerations of the Communist threat in Indonesia, was instrumental in forcing the Dutch out of Indonesia and expediting the process of obtaining independence for Sukarno and the rest of the Indonesian nationalists. In this light, students would be able to appreciate the *concurrency* of historical developments between different geographical areas.

The linkages between developments in Europe and Southeast Asia are also instrumental in getting students to see how the concept of bi-polarity carried wide-ranging implications beyond Europe and could be utilized to enhance their analysis of the decolonization process in Southeast Asia. More importantly, knowledge of chronology would also be useful in helping students understand other historical concepts such as change and continuity, as teachers could then bring in these concepts to further illustrate the relationship between developments. The next section examines how an understanding of bi-polarity could be further enhanced through the use of historical concepts such as change and continuity.

Understanding bi-polarity through change and continuity

Students often perceive change and continuity as developments occurring independently of each other and this is a

misconception in itself because the isolated notions of change and continuity can both co-exist at the same time (Seixas and Morton, 2012). The content in the coursebook – usually organized along key events and developments – may have lent credence to the view of change as “watershed events”. In order to help correct misconceptions that changes are intrinsically tied to events, teachers would need to help students see the interactions between change and continuity (Blow, 2011).

The notions of change and continuity are not dormant concepts – they are largely framed by the questions which historians and by extension, history teachers ask in their historical study and curriculum planning (Seixas and Morton, 2012). This in turn entails helping students view the significance of developments in relation to a broader timeline (Blow, 2011). Given students’ tendency to merely describe changes but not understand them, teachers need to help students illustrate the importance of historical patterns so as to get them to understand fully the changes which happen (Foster, 2013). In other words, teachers need to emphasize to students that changes do not necessarily only happen as a manifestation of a watershed event, but rather changes can occur in smaller and more isolated instances. This could be especially relevant for students who perceive the Cold War as the ideological competition between two monolithic blocs and might find it difficult to understand the subtle yet significant developments in the 1970s.

Although it seems counter-intuitive to understand bi-polarity through the notion of change and continuity, an understanding of the latter might be useful in helping students achieve a nuanced understanding of Cold War developments. Indeed, the concept of bi-polarity has been largely

“stable” insofar as the bi-polar competition between the USA and the USSR dominated the world order during the second half of the twenty-first century, but there were changes in-between which could be better illustrated through the lens of change and continuity. For instance, the Reagan administration has often been termed as the era of the “second Cold War” with the USSR. This enhanced understanding of the Cold War needs to be viewed through the lens of the limited successes brought about by détente. In other words, students would need to have a brief but substantiated conceptual understanding of American-Soviet relations in the 1970s in order to fully appreciate the dynamics of the Reagan-Gorbachev interactions in the 1980s.

To help students achieve a historical understanding of bi-polarity during the Cold War, teachers would need to bring across to students a few key ideas. First, the ideological competition between the USA and the USSR never ceased during the course of the Cold War, even if there were brief moments of respite which allowed both superpowers to co-operate in some areas. Second, co-operation between both superpowers was more evident during the first few years after the Second World War and the decade after the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the moment of nuclear brinkmanship convinced both superpowers that a limited form of co-operation was necessary and viable. Third, the notion of bi-polarity was challenged in a few instances - the rise of the non-aligned movement in the 1950s and the Sino-Soviet split in 1961 meant that both democracy and communism were not monolithic movements and their dominance in the international discourse was constantly undermined. By conveying the subtleties of such changes to students, teachers will be able to help students see both the continuities and changes of the bi-

polarity during the Cold War, and the ways in which such changes and continuities interacted. In doing so, students will be able to appreciate these changes as historically significant moments, as well as the interactions between the changes and continuities in superpower competition and relations during the Cold War.

The idea of change and continuity could be conveyed through the following activity which teachers could carry out with students:

Instructions for classroom activity:

1. (similar to the earlier activity) The teacher will draw one horizontal line on a butcher paper.
2. The teacher will then make a mark at the start of the line with the year ‘1950’ and another one at the end of the line with the year ‘1979’.
3. The teacher will divide students into groups of 4s or 5s.
4. The teacher will then get students to arrange the Cold War developments in chronological order along the timeline.
5. After which, the teacher could ask students the following guiding questions:
 - a. What changed in terms of Sino-Soviet relations over the years?
 - b. What changed in terms of Cold War dynamics over the years?
 - c. What changed in terms of American-Soviet relations over the years?
 - d. What persisted in terms of the Cold War over the years?

Scaffolding and brief background information can and should be provided to students, based on their readiness levels and aptitude. To further guide students, the teacher could ask students to examine the following:

1. Changes/continuities in the way the United States perceived the USSR and vice versa;
2. Changes/continuities in the way China perceived the USSR and vice versa;
3. Changes/continuities in the nature of the Cold War conflict as an ideological conflict over the years;
4. Changes/continuities in the dynamics of the international system over the years (Hint strongly at the Bandung Conference, a development especially useful for students studying Book 4 as well).

| Cold War Developments | |
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| February 1950 | 25 June 1950 |
| China and the USSR signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. Both countries promised to come to each other's aid if either country was attacked. | The Korean War breaks out in the Korean Peninsula, with North Korean forces crossing the 38 th parallel and invading South Korea. The USSR has been repeatedly accused of assisting the North Korean forces. |
| October 1950 | 1955 |
| Chinese forces joined the North Korean forces to fight against the American-led UN forces at the Yalu River after repeated warnings to the United States that China would join the war if the American-led UN forces crossed the 38 th parallel. | The Bandung Conference was the first large-scale meeting of newly-independent Asian and African states in Bandung, Indonesia which led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The states sought the 'third way' of non-alignment in the face of growing Cold War bi-polarity, to reduce reliance on Soviet or American aid. |
| 1961 | August 1961 |
| The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations saw the Chinese Communist Party denouncing the Soviet interpretation of communism, and called the Soviet Communist Party 'traitors'. Their troops also clashed with each other at the common border in 1969. | The construction of the Berlin Wall saw the fortification of the Cold War boundaries, physically separating West Berlin from the surrounding East Germany, and preventing East Germans from escaping to or through West Berlin. |

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| <p style="text-align: center;">October 1962</p> <p>The Cuban Missile Crisis happened, where the USA discovered Soviet nuclear deployment in Cuba on 16 October 1962 and President Kennedy announced the naval blockade of Cuba on 22 October. Tensions were eventually defused when Khrushchev decided to remove all tactical missiles from Cuba.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">5 August 1963</p> <p>Kennedy and Khrushchev signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty. The treaty, signed by the USA, the USSR and Britain, prohibited the testing of nuclear weapons except underground. It went into effect on 10 October 1963.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">May 1972</p> <p>Following the policy of détente, both the USA and USSR held Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in May 1972 in an attempt to limit, and later reduce the number of nuclear weapons that they possessed. They also signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in May 1972, limiting their possession of anti-ballistic missile sites to two for each superpower.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">December 1979</p> <p>American-Soviet relations deteriorated after the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The USSR sent in troops to Afghanistan to restore political order. This resulted in President Jimmy Carter cancelling the ongoing arms limitation talks and imposed embargoes on grain and technology against the USSR.</p> |

There are a few student conclusions that could be achieved from this activity. First, students should be able to see how the international Communist movement was not monolithic in nature by the 1960s – the Sino-Soviet split meant that mutual co-operation between China and the USSR, such as the military assistance provided by China during the Korean War, was no longer viable and China ceased to be an ally until Moscow's overtures to Beijing during Gorbachev's term. As such, students should not find it *surprising* to find sources espousing Chinese perspectives criticizing Soviet actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Second, the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement and independent countries choosing not to remain allies of either the USA or the USSR meant that the ideological dominance experienced a limited but

significant form of challenge. Third, students should be able to establish the limited forms of co-operation between the USA and USSR during the immediate decade after the Cuban Missile Crisis, as there was a temporary but significant thaw in American-Soviet tensions.

An understanding of these contextual developments will thus provide the most useful learning point for students from this activity: that while the USA and the USSR did co-operate in some areas the ideological divide between both superpowers still remained a thorn in American-Soviet relations. In other words, détente could perhaps have ended the Cold War but the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, an action which did not sit well with Washington, shattered this possibility. As such, while there were

significant changes from the 1950s to the late 1970s which provided the impetus for an improvement and deterioration in key relations, the ideological divide and competition between the USA and USSR never ceased to exist and continued to persistently pose a problem in American-Soviet relations and allowed both superpowers to largely maintain an ideological hegemony during the second half of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the ways in which the concept of bi-polarity can be unpacked and more effectively conveyed, and expounded in ways that can support students' understanding of developments during the Cold War. The approach is derived from my own personal observations both as a student and as a teacher. I believe that getting students to understand the Cold War as an ideological struggle between the USA and the USSR is a fundamental step before building on such understanding to help them better appreciate the fluctuations in the concept of bi-polarity. In order to illustrate the importance of bringing in historical concepts such as chronology, change and continuity to teach the concept of bi-polarity, this paper has suggested some activities which could be carried out in the classroom. To help students achieve a more sophisticated understanding of Cold War developments and their implications on the decolonization process in Southeast Asia, teachers should consider exploring the various facets of bi-polarity and help students unpack the concept in tangible terms so as to map out its intricacies and nuances.

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ⁱ A list of the content concepts for Unit 3 can be found from page 51 onwards of the Upper Secondary Teaching and Learning Guide.

ⁱⁱ I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Liew Zhen Hao and Muhammad Alif Bin Zaini from the National Institute of Education (NIE) which have helped made this activity possible during our group presentation in class for a module on the Teaching for Historical Understanding in Secondary Classrooms.