

SNUAC Asia Square Brown Bag Seminar Series, Spring 2025

Peripheral Conquests in a Bipolar World: Why Some States Attempted Armed Emergence During the Cold War

Dylan Motin

This seminar explores the puzzle of territorial expansion in the Cold War era: why, despite the danger, did a few states attempt to alter borders by force? The presentation analyzes why only a handful of minor powers – Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Vietnam – launched expansionist wars during a bipolar period typically seen as hostile to revisionism. Drawing from realist theory, the seminar will make the case that territorial expansion under bipolarity was possible, but only under specific conditions. Success or failure hinged on two core factors: the availability of strategically valuable resource clusters and the stance of the two great powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, expansionist states faced opposition when their actions disrupted the great powers' efforts to maintain favorable regional balances. Conversely, when a minor power's conquest helped check a rival great power's influence, Washington and Moscow were more likely to tolerate or even support the revisionist bid. This argument explains why the Cold War, despite its rigidity, still allowed room for territorial opportunism. These insights speak not only to the logic of past conflicts, but also to contemporary challenges in a world no longer shaped by bipolar discipline.

Dylan Motin holds a Ph.D. in political science. He is currently Visiting Scholar at the Seoul National University Asia Center and Non-resident Kelly Fellow at the Pacific Forum. His research expertise revolves around international relations theory, and his main interests are balance-of-power theory, great power competition, and Korean affairs. He is the author of "Territorial Expansion and Great Power Behavior during the Cold War: A Theory of Armed Emergence" (Routledge, 2025), "How Louis XIV Survived His Hegemonic Bid: The Lessons of the Sun King's War Termination" (Anthem Press, 2025), and "Bandwagoning in International Relations: China, Russia, and Their Neighbors" (Vernon Press, 2024).

Date & Time: May 27th, 2025. 12:00–13:00

Place: SNUAC Room 304 (3rd Floor)