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Surveying the world order, 1945–89

STUDENTS WILL INVESTIGATE

In this chapter, students will examine the background and origins of the changing world order, spanning from 1945 to 2011.

Aspects to be covered include:

- The emergence of the superpowers and the Cold War
- The role of the United Nations during the Cold War
- United States post-World-War-II foreign policy



Modern History
syllabus

United Nations Secretary General Trygve Lie (left) and architect Wallace Harrison applying mortar to the cornerstone of the UN Headquarters building, New York City, USA, October 1949



Introduction

The first half of the 20th century saw two world wars, the Great Depression, the rise of dictatorships in Europe and Asia, genocide, the use of the nuclear bomb against Japan and the emergence of the Cold War. The combined cost in lives, economic ruin and environmental damage should have awakened politicians and generals to the need for cooperation to avert future destruction of the kind that had been suffered around the globe. But the League of Nations had failed in its charter to reduce conflict and promote peace. The League was founded on the Wilsonian ideal of **collective security**, but it failed because the major powers, including the United States and the Soviet Union, were not members, and Britain and France did not have the capacity to enforce its rulings. After 1945, if history was to teach politicians and policy makers anything, it was that peace and security would have to be sought in greater international cooperation.

In 1945 the United Nations was established to achieve this type of international cooperation. Guided by the principles of state **sovereignty** and equality among all nations, the central organs included a General Assembly, where all member states could debate issues, and the Security Council, which could intervene in disputes that could potentially lead to war. The UN also established a number of institutions and organisations to promote development, and shared similar values to the US, with its liberal, democratic universal outlook, and the belief in freedom for all people.

But the emergence of the Cold War stifled the effectiveness of the UN in its early years. **Superpower** rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union, both of which were trying to shape the world according to their own economic, political and social systems, meant that their aims were often at odds with each other. The **veto** system in the Security Council was often used as a way to block the geopolitical designs of the other side. For example, Security Council approval to go to war against North Korea in 1950 was only achieved because the Soviet Union had temporarily withdrawn from the body and could not exercise its veto.

The period after 1945 heralded the arrival of the 'American Century'. Emerging from its long isolation, the US adopted a more **interventionist** foreign policy. American politicians began to acknowledge that without US participation in the international system, the European recovery would be threatened by communism and the future of free global trade would be less prosperous for the US. The US also began to regard its values – especially the concept of 'freedom' – as universal, and sought to support governments that shared those values. At times, it even removed, or attempted to remove, governments that did not share those values, as was the case in Iran in 1953 and Cuba in 1961.

The postwar period ended in November 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. For months, pro-democracy forces in East Germany had been calling for change as other parts of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union sought to reform the communist system. When the peaceful revolutions of 1989–1991 suddenly ended the seventy-year experiment with communism in Europe, the world entered a new phase in which the US would be the sole superpower.

collective security

The principle that an aggressor state should be opposed by the entire international community

sovereignty

The idea that all states should be free from outside interference to determine their own political future

superpower

A powerful and influential nation usually which possesses nuclear weapons

veto

To stop any decision in an organisation with a single vote

interventionist

Willingness (in the case of a powerful nation) to become involved in international affairs



Smithsonian
Institution – The
origins of the
Cold War

Overview of the Cold War world and superpower rivalry

Our study of world order after 1945 – in which sovereign countries in the international system compete or cooperate to achieve their national interests – finds its roots in the Cold War and the changes that took place when **communism** collapsed in the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991. For over 45 years, the United States and the Soviet Union had been bitterly divided over their incompatible social, economic and political systems. The competition between the ideologies of **capitalism** and communism spilled over into an intense political and military rivalry, as both sides attempted to stamp their influence on the world. It was nuclear weapons that made this conflict more dangerous than the great power rivalries of the past, when alliances sought to bring balance to the international order. The development of nuclear weapons that could be delivered over greater distances with greater accuracy meant that alliances based on the size of conventional forces were made redundant.

communism

The political and economic system in which the means of production are owned by the state

capitalism

The political and economic system in which the means of production are owned by private businesses and run for profit

Rebuilding Europe after World War II

The Soviet Union had made a much greater sacrifice in men, land and resources than the Americans in their fight against German fascism. The Soviet Red Army remained in its Eastern European positions at the end of the war and the United States, still fighting a war in the Pacific, was largely powerless to stop it. The superpower conferences throughout 1945 laid down some basic principles about the organisation of the world and the practical realities of rebuilding. But the obvious fundamental economic, political and social differences between the two sides made cooperation





difficult. The US believed that the path to recovery and prosperity lay in strong open markets and the self-determination of all people, while the Soviet Union under Stalin was much more focused on maintaining Soviet security and promoting the survival of communism. These basic differences meant that a proper recovery of Europe, ruined by six years of fighting and by Hitler's scorched earth policy, was delayed.

The Soviet Union had very specific postwar aims. It wanted its wartime allies to accept a Soviet **sphere of influence** along its western border, in countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. Stalin believed that the war was the result of conflict among capitalist powers and that conflict would inevitably return in the future. He wanted to avoid the Soviet Union being encircled by capitalist powers. Consequently, the countries of the **Eastern bloc** were forced to adopt systems of government sympathetic to communism. Over time, this stance became more entrenched as the Soviets cracked down on any attempt at democratic reforms that threatened communism – as was the case in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The second demand of the Soviets was over the future of Germany and its capital, Berlin. While the Americans wanted to rebuild a strong Germany, which they saw as a vital component in a Europe-wide economic recovery, the Soviets wanted to keep Germany permanently weak. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, which was attended by the leaders of the US, the Soviet Union and Britain, the Allies agreed that Germany would be divided into four sectors, with the major Allied powers – the US, the Soviet Union, Britain and France – each controlling one zone. Early in the Cold War, disputes over Berlin led to significant tension between the two superpowers. The Americans, the British and the French regarded the division of Germany as temporary, and by 1948 they were arguing for reunification. The decision by the three to introduce a new currency led to a crisis that eventually resulted in a permanent separation between East and West Germany, and Berlin with it. During the crisis, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered a blockade of Berlin, which was geographically located deep inside the Soviet sector. In response, the Americans introduced airlifts of supplies, which continued for nearly a year. Although Berlin was of no strategic significance in the Cold War, its position as an 'island of capitalism in a sea of communism' meant that it was highly symbolic. More than a decade later, in August 1961, the Berlin Wall was erected – the most visible symbol of the Cold War.

sphere of influence

The demand of a major power to be surrounded by smaller neighbours that are sympathetic to its political system

Eastern bloc

The countries of Eastern Europe, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania



Getty Images/PhotoQuest

SOURCE 1.1 The Yalta Conference, 1945. It was hoped that the cooperation between Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union would continue after the war in the effort to rebuild Europe. But fundamental differences between the capitalist and communist blocs made cooperation impossible.



The Truman Library – Ideological foundations of the Cold War

SOURCE 1.2 The Soviet sphere of influence in Europe, 1947

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Getty Images/Mondadori Portfolio



SOURCE 1.3 On 1 October 1949, a second front was opened in the Cold War when Mao Zedong (centre) declared the People's Republic of China under Communist Party rule.

Containment

One of the key policy aims of the Americans was to contain communism within Eastern Europe. President Harry Truman showed that he was willing to do this with military support and funding, as in the case of Greece and Turkey, and with economic assistance in the form of the US\$15 billion Marshall Plan. He believed that without a strong economic recovery in Europe, the threat of communism would hang over the fragile continent.

But a second front was opened in the Cold War when, on 1 October 1949, after a long-running civil war with the Nationalists, the Chinese communists declared the People's Republic of China. In many ways this second front was much more concerning than the situation in Europe. Fears soon spread within the United States government about the potential for communism to spread rapidly throughout Asia. When North Korea also adopted a communist system and tried to press its claims on the South below the 38th parallel (the line of latitude 38 degrees north), a United Nations force led by US troops waged a three-year war, which was inconclusive and resulted in a permanent division between South and North Korea.

The spread of communism in China, North Korea and Vietnam led to fears in the US that, unless the spread of communism abroad was checked, the countries across South-East Asia would fall 'like dominoes'. This led the US to send military advisers to

Vietnam and then, by the mid-1960s, to escalate to a full-scale military commitment in what would become at home in the United States an expensive and deeply unpopular war.

One of the unique features of the Cold War, when compared with earlier wars, was the development of nuclear weapons. This meant that a direct confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union would have catastrophic consequences. When the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb in August 1949, balance was restored to the international order and a **bipolar** world emerged. Nuclear arsenals grew in size until the mid-1970s, when the two sides had a combined arsenal of 70 000 nuclear warheads. This gave rise to a new type of diplomacy in which both sides needed to take into account the destructive nature of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear firepower meant that both sides were deterred from delivering a first strike because they understood that the retaliation would be so great that it would mean virtual suicide. US President Dwight Eisenhower spoke of massive retaliation, and this was to become the central plank in the deterrence doctrine, which later developed into the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD). In October 1962, the world came close to nuclear war. When a United States U2 spy plane identified the construction of missile bases in Cuba, the Americans authorised a quarantine of international waters around Cuba in an effort to prevent Soviet ships from delivering nuclear weapons to the island. This sparked a confrontation between the two sides, which included an angry exchange of letters between Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev and US President John F Kennedy that give insight into the thinking of both men. Khrushchev accused Kennedy of delivering ultimatums that would be humiliating for the Soviets to accept; Kennedy argued that the Soviets began the dispute. The Cuban missile flashpoint revealed to both sides a fundamental lack of understanding of each other. As a result, a hotline was established between the Kremlin in Moscow and the White House in Washington, DC, and the event started the process of curbing the development of nuclear weapons.

bipolar

A system in which the majority of political, economic and military power is held between two states





Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 1.4 US President John F Kennedy addresses the nation on 22 October 1962. The Cuban missile crisis was the most serious dispute between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Détente and beyond

During the late 1960s, both sides in the conflict welcomed a period of **détente**, or a relaxation of tensions. The entry of China into the nuclear club in 1964 made for a so-called **multipolar** world in which the superpowers had to redefine their relationships with each other. Deep divisions between the Soviets and the Chinese also led to the Sino-Soviet split. The United States exploited this conflict when, in 1972, US President Richard Nixon visited China and promised diplomatic relations between the two countries, which had been suspended in 1949. China was beginning to take its place among the family of nations, and the US was recognising the communists as the legitimate rulers of China. China resumed its seat on the United Nations Security Council in 1971.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of détente was in Europe, the cradle of the Cold War. West German leader Willi Brandt adopted a policy known as **Ostpolitik** – or ‘Eastern policy’ – in an effort to build closer economic ties with the Eastern bloc. In exchange for greater cooperation between the Warsaw Pact countries (the Soviet Union and seven satellite countries) and to minimise suspicions, Brandt recognised the borders of the Eastern bloc and, significantly, recognised the division of East and West Germany. The success of Brandt’s policy meant that the threat of war on the continent of Europe was diminished. At the same time, the countries of Western Europe were forging closer ties in the early stages of the European Union.

Détente also had its failures. The right wing in the US accused the Soviets of using détente as an opportunity to achieve nuclear parity with the US. Tensions in the Middle East – where the US tended to side with Israel, and the Soviets with Israel’s Arab southern neighbours – led to a series of conflicts, including the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. When the American-backed Shah of Iran was ousted in an Islamic coup in 1979, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in the same year, Cold War tensions were renewed. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is generally marked as the moment of the end of détente and the renewal of the Cold War.

détente

A period of relaxation in tensions, such as that between the superpowers from 1962 to 1979

multipolar

An international system that has multiple centres of power

Ostpolitik

German ‘Eastern policy’, which was a central plank in détente in Europe



Superpower rivalry and the Cold War

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Reagan and Gorbachev

The election of former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan as President of the United States in 1981 introduced a new set of tensions. Reagan was a tough-talking anti-communist who was elected on the back of his criticism of the Soviets and détente. In 1983, at the National Prayer Breakfast, he labelled the Soviet Union the 'evil empire'. Reagan proposed an extension of the arms race – this time using space-based technology in the building of a missile defence shield. He proposed the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), or the so-called Star Wars program, at a cost to American taxpayers of billions of dollars. The space-based anti-missile defence shield was only at the laboratory stage of development, but it caused a great deal of concern in the Soviet Union. The Soviets did not want to be drawn into another arms race, especially with an ongoing war in Afghanistan. Reagan's commitment to the program was so great, it squandered an opportunity to pursue a 'zero option' to eliminate nuclear weapons during the Reykjavik summit in 1986.

RONALD REAGAN (1911–2004)

Alamy Stock Photo/World History Archive



Ronald Reagan was President of the United States between 1981 and 1989. He came to office towards the end of détente, after the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Reagan campaigned throughout 1980 as a staunch anti-communist who

believed that the Soviet Union had taken advantage of détente to achieve nuclear parity with the US. Over time, Reagan's attitude towards the Soviet leadership changed as he sought greater cooperation with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985.

All that changed in March 1985, when Soviet reformer Mikhail Gorbachev rose to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev tried to make a decisive break with the political leadership of the past. He was a firm believer in socialism but argued that it required significant reforms if it were to be saved. His twin policies of **perestroika** (economic restructuring) and **glasnost** (openness) ultimately led to a pro-democratic movement, which resulted in the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. This was not Gorbachev's intention. He had inherited the leadership of a country that was in a deep economic malaise. Productivity was low, goods of poor quality were being produced, and absenteeism from work and alcoholism at work were rife. Gorbachev encouraged innovation and provided incentives for factory managers in an effort to bring some life back to the Soviet economy. He even banned vodka sales, earning himself the nickname 'Comrade Orange Juice'. *Perestroika* meant introducing modest market forces. Moreover, Gorbachev believed that for too long the people had not had a say in the running of the country. He encouraged *glasnost*, a new openness that would allow freedom of the press and an honest public discussion about the challenges facing the Soviet Union. Political reform would inevitably follow.

perestroika

The policy to restructure the Soviet economy after 1985

glasnost

Social and political reforms that aimed at greater 'openness' in the Soviet Union after 1985



Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 1.5 Ronald Reagan (left) and Mikhail Gorbachev (right) were able to achieve high levels of cooperation in order to downplay Cold War tensions. They started regular meetings called superpower summits, where the two leaders met face to face.

Gorbachev's foreign policy also led to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. As far back as 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the Soviets had shown their willingness to crack down on calls for democratic reform by sending in tanks and troops to quell dissent. Over time, the **Brezhnev Doctrine**, as it came to be called, was an assurance to Eastern bloc leaders of the security of their regimes. When Gorbachev decided that he could no longer afford to fund this guarantee, and instead wanted to divert the budget to pursue an economic and social policy to lift the living standards of Soviet citizens, he repealed the Brezhnev Doctrine. As a result, pro-democracy uprisings in Poland, Hungary and East Germany, as well as other places in Eastern Europe, were given a huge boost. Throughout the summer of 1989, communism was swept away as free, multiparty elections delivered change to citizens who were frustrated by poor living standards and political oppression. For the most part, with the exception of Romania, 45 years of communism in Eastern Europe ended peacefully.

The revolutions in Eastern Europe only made calls for democratic reform within the Soviet Union louder. When Gorbachev relented and allowed free elections in June 1991 – elections in which democrats could stand – Boris Yeltsin was elected President of Russia. Yeltsin's election as head of the largest state in the Soviet Union opened up a number of constitutional questions concerning the real seat of power. To what extent was a democratically elected Russian President subject to the direction of the Soviet leadership? An attempted coup by communist hardliners in August 1991 to oust Gorbachev failed, but the drift towards the end of the Soviet Union was becoming more apparent. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved.

The end of the Cold War left the US as the sole superpower in the world, leading many to speculate on the future of conflict in the world. Two theories by prominent international relations scholars in the US dominated – Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' and Samuel P Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'.

Brezhnev Doctrine

The Soviet guarantee to intervene militarily in any Eastern bloc countries where anti-Soviet democratic or market reforms threatened the stability of the regime



Interpretations



The end of history or a clash of civilisations?

SOURCE A: FUKUYAMA AND THE END OF HISTORY

I argued that a remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world over the past few years, as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism. More than that, however, I argued that liberal democracy may constitute the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government' as such constituted the 'end of history'. That is, while earlier forms of government were characterised by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions.

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1992

SOURCE B: HUNTINGTON AND THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS

In this new world the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations. Violence between states and groups from different civilizations, however, carries with it the potential for escalation as other states and groups from these civilizations rally to the support of their 'kin countries'.

SP Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to Source A, what systems of government has liberal democracy conquered?
- 2 What does Fukuyama mean when he argues that liberal democracy might represent the 'end of history'?
- 3 According to Source B, what will be the source of conflict after the Cold War?
- 4 Why does Huntington believe that violence between civilisation groups has the potential to quickly escalate?

- 1 Outline the different visions of the United States and the Soviet Union for the rebuilding of Europe after World War II.
- 2 Where did US President Truman hope to contain communism? Was this successful?
- 3 Which events led the US to fear that countries in South-East Asia would fall like dominoes?
- 4 Explain how the development of nuclear weapons changed the character of diplomacy.
- 5 Outline the successes and failures of détente.
- 6 Explain Reagan's attitude towards the Soviets before Gorbachev came to power in 1985.
- 7 How did the three policies *perestroika*, *glasnost* and the repeal of the Brezhnev Doctrine contribute to the end of communism?



Challenges of the United Nations during the Cold War, 1946–91

The dream of collective security through the United Nations – the second attempt, after the failures of the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s – emerged at the same time as the Cold War. During World War II, the international community witnessed two nuclear explosions, the Holocaust, the deaths of tens of millions of soldiers and civilians, and mass displacement. This cataclysm convinced the world’s leaders that a new world order had to emerge in place of the old. Unfortunately, deep divisions among the world’s new superpowers meant that the new global organisation would face a series of challenges and agreement on central issues of war and peace would be difficult to achieve. Of course, there were some successes. The development of human rights, international justice and development programs under the organs of the UN assisted many of the world’s peoples.

The central aim of the UN was to promote and maintain international peace and security through the principle of collective security. In the context of the two generations prior to its establishment in 1946, where great power rivalries and alliances had led the world into two global wars, the UN sought to provide a body in which disputes between equally sovereign nations could be heard and resolved. It was built on a tradition of international relations where principles such as sovereignty and **self-determination** were respected in the global order. The establishment of its central organ – the Security Council – reflected the great powers of the time: China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States.

One of the main challenges the UN faced was that the Security Council members each had the power of veto over big decisions to do with international peace and security. This meant that many of the major conflicts of the Cold War would simply preclude UN involvement. In the UN’s first major international action in the Korean War (1950–53), the Soviets were absent after boycotting the Security Council over its failure to recognise the communists as the legitimate rulers of China. Their absence meant that the US could push through a resolution for military action against North Korea without the Soviet veto.

Given the fact that many of the disputes in the early period after the establishment of the UN revolved around the spread and containment of communism, the UN was limited in its ability to act. Ultimately, it was up to the nations to abide by the principle of collective security. The second UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, famously said that the UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell.

The other main organ of the UN was the General Assembly, a forum for all member states to have their concerns raised and debated. The first General Assembly session was held in London on 2 February 1946, and its first resolution was to promote the peaceful use of atomic energy and to prevent the spread of atomic weapons throughout the world.

In many ways, the Soviet system was incompatible with the UN system. For example, at the end of the war, Soviet ideology still embraced the idea that the communist revolution would be worldwide in scope. Although the UN attempted to bring the world together, Soviet ideology was firmly rooted in the idea of ‘two camps’ – of communism and capitalism. This is not to suggest that all nations were lined up behind one side or the other. Indeed, there were a large number of non-aligned states, including Yugoslavia, India and Indonesia.

George Kennan was a high-ranking diplomat in the US Embassy in Moscow, and his ‘Long Telegram’ of February 1946 argued that the Soviet Union was not serious about participating in the UN and would only do so if it meant extending its own power. He wrote, ‘Moscow has no abstract devotion to UNO ideals. Its attitude to that organization will remain essentially pragmatic and tactical’.



The United Nations

self-determination

The idea that nations can freely elect their own governments without outside interference





American–Soviet rivalry at the United Nations

One of the most famous incidents of superpower rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States took place in October 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis. US Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, challenged the Soviet Ambassador, Valerian Zorin, to come clean about the missile program in Cuba.

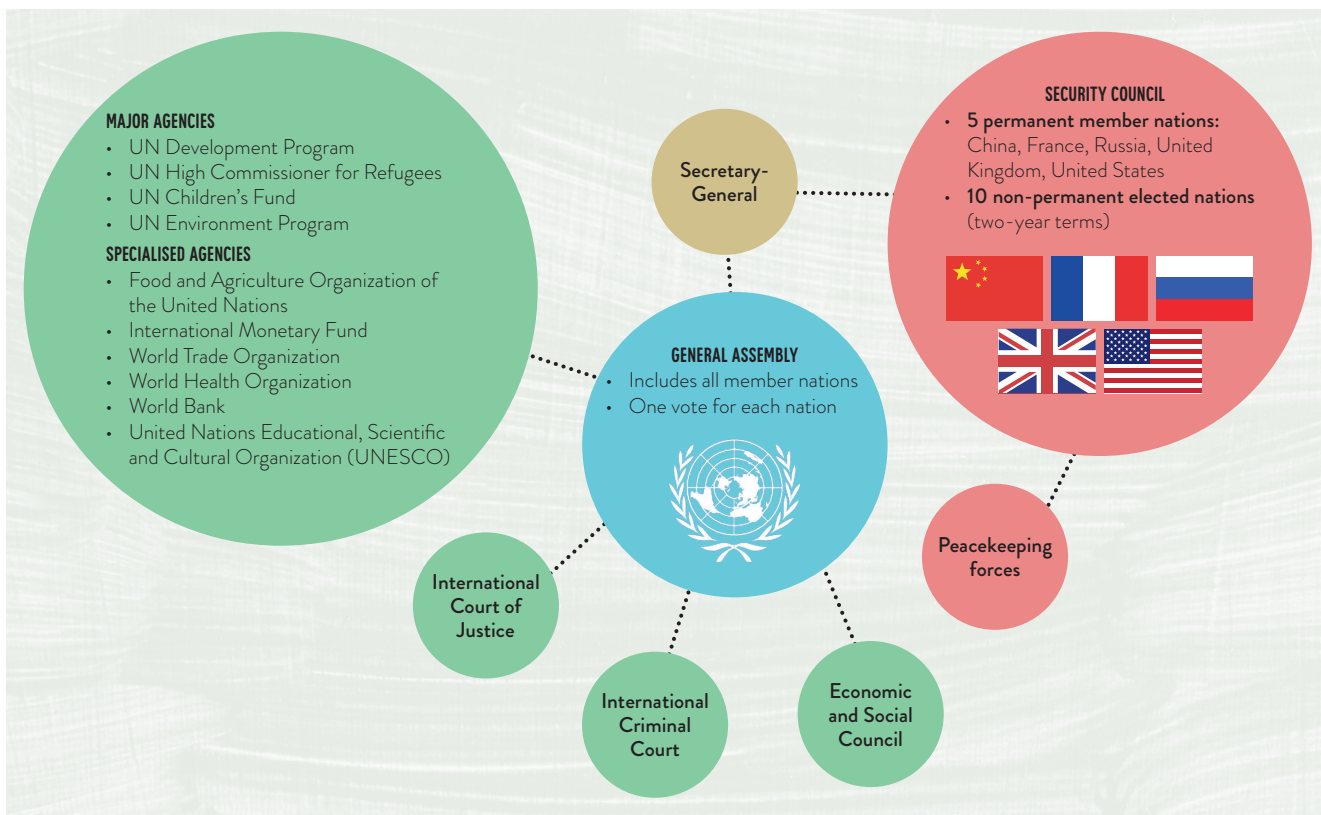
Stevenson demanded an answer to the following question: ‘Do you, Ambassador Zorin, deny that the USSR has placed, and is placing, medium- and intermediate-range missiles and sites in Cuba? Yes or no – don’t wait for the translation – yes or no?’

Zorin replied, ‘I am not in an American courtroom, sir ... you will have your answer in due course’, to which Stevenson replied, ‘I am prepared to wait for an answer until Hell freezes over’.



Getty Images/Bettmann

SOURCE 1.6 Adlai Stevenson (far right) addresses a UN session in October 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis.



SOURCE 1.7 The structure of the United Nations

The United Nations and development

In addition to promoting peace and security, the United Nations also has a number of specialised agencies to deliver rights, development and humanitarian work across the globe. International declarations created by the UN include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948),



the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1958) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

These declarations are supported by a range of agencies to assist with the development of children (UNICEF), settling refugees (UNHCR), eradicating hunger (World Food Programme), ensuring environmental protections (UNEP) and women's empowerment (UN Women).

In addition to these, there are a number of other global organisations with close links to the UN. These include the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which help minimise conflicts that emerge from financial differences; the World Health Organization, which promotes better health and coordinates responses to global health crises; and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for education, scientific and cultural training and conservation.



Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations

ARTICLE 1

The Purposes of the United Nations are:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;
3. To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and
4. To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.

Charter of the United Nations, Chapter I, Article 1, 1945

QUESTIONS

- 1 According to Article 1, what is the central purpose of the United Nations?
- 2 What are the two principles that support friendly relations among nations?
- 3 What kinds of problems does the UN hope that international cooperation will solve?

- 1 Explain what is meant by the term 'collective security' in the context of the United Nations.
- 2 How is the UN an expression of the idealist school of international relations?
- 3 Assess the view that all states are equal, as expressed by the UN.
- 4 Identify the permanent members of the Security Council. Do these powers still reflect the main seats of power in the twenty-first century? Give reasons.
- 5 Outline the role of the General Assembly.
- 6 Explain how the Cold War stifled the development of the UN.
- 7 Outline the ways in which the UN has sought to promote development in the world.



The emergence of the ‘American Century’

It was with great reluctance that the United States emerged from its self-imposed neutrality in December 1941 after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. This attack on the American naval fleet forced the US to enter the war, reversing its long-held policy of abstaining from involvement in international conflict. Of course, the US had pursued its own imperial agenda in the Philippines and Latin America, but it was anxious to remain free of conflict with Europe. Since its foundation, the US had had a long tradition of **isolationism**, avoiding alliances or commitments that would threaten its independence. The first half of the 20th century had cost tens of millions of lives and condemned a generation in the West to grinding poverty. But the failures of 1914–45 would convince the Americans that their future prosperity lay in taking a leading role in establishing and maintaining a stable and peaceful international order. The US would have to permanently abandon isolationism and attempt to spread its own political and economic values around the world. By the end of World War II, the US was a superpower, its currency was a global reserve, and it had a leading hand in the establishment of the United Nations. Such was the emergence of the American Century. However, in order to understand why American involvement in the world was so at odds with its own traditions, we must first uncover where these traditions came from.

isolationism

The political decision to withdraw from unnecessary involvement with other nations

A brief overview of American isolationism

In his farewell letter in 1796, President George Washington encouraged Americans to take advantage of their geographic distance from Europe and questioned why the United States should ‘entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice’.¹ President Thomas Jefferson’s 1801 inaugural address reinforced Washington’s view, stating that his foreign policy would mean ‘Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none’.² In 1823, President James Monroe warned European powers that North or South America was off limits to further colonial expansion, and that in return the US would not meddle in European affairs. He told Congress, ‘Our policy, in regard to Europe ... remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers’.³ The Monroe Doctrine would become a cornerstone of US foreign policy.

While the US managed to maintain its neutrality throughout the 1800s, the forces of national and imperial rivalry were building up in Europe, and eventually unleashed World War I in 1914. It was a conflict that would see the US abandon its longstanding policy of isolation after Germany provoked America into the war by declaring unrestricted submarine warfare against its merchant ships in April 1917. American commercial ships, ferrying supplies across the North Atlantic to Britain, were now the target of German attacks. American troops were sent to Europe to relieve war-weary British and French troops, who had been holed up in trenches on the Western Front for nearly three and a half years.

Towards the end of 1918, as victory over Germany looked imminent, US President Woodrow Wilson outlined the terms for Germany’s surrender and the abdication of the country’s leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points’ formed the basis for an armistice, and many of the points reflected the democratic values of the US. The president argued for a more transparent international system of diplomacy and trade, and his great brainchild was the League of Nations, an international body set up to solve disputes and promote peace and security in the world. To Wilson’s bitter disappointment, the US Congress voted against joining the League, and its ineffectiveness would lead some observers to label it a ‘toothless tiger’. America retreated back into isolation.

The United States’ failure to get involved with the rest of the world took a dramatic turn with the crash of the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. A huge stock market bubble, driven by speculation and fuelled by debt, had capped off the decade of the ‘roaring twenties’. Markets were awash with money looking for investment opportunities and returns. Some of this money had made its way to Germany, where it had been invested in the rebuilding of the country after World War I.





American capital had played a key role in bringing stability and prosperity to a Germany that was sinking under the heavy burden of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Optimism ruled the day. America was booming and Germany was finally recovering.

The stock market crash need not have led inevitably to the Great Depression. But the panic induced by market falls led to American investors calling in what little money they had to cover the debts on stocks that were now worthless. This meant that loans were called in from all corners of the world, including Germany, the rest of Europe and Australia. Confidence in the economy collapsed overnight, investment stalled and waves of unemployment followed. The policy of 'beggar thy neighbour' compounded the problem as countries put up high tariff walls to discourage the purchase of imports, and devalued their own currencies to make their exports more competitive. In practice, 'beggar thy neighbour' meant countries shoring up their own economies at the expense of those around them.

In the end, failure to cooperate resulted in the Great Depression, which persisted across the world right through the 1930s, and the huge economic commitment of World War II was then partly responsible for turning the wheels of industry fast enough to restart investment, spending and employment. The works of 19th-century English economist John Maynard Keynes were also instrumental in leading government intervention in the hope that public spending would aid a recovery. When the guns of World War II fell silent in 1945, Americans were unsure whether the world would relapse into conditions similar to those of the Great Depression.

The American Century

The term 'American Century' finds its origins in an editorial by media magnate Henry Luce – who founded *Time* and *Fortune* and owned *Life* magazine – published in *Life* on 17 February 1941. The editorial is a call to the United States to play a larger role in world affairs. Writing in the months before America's entry into World War II, Luce argued that the US had a moral and practical responsibility to end its isolation. Despite not being in direct conflict at the time of writing, America could not absolve itself of the responsibility for the state of the world. The first half of the 20th century, in Luce's words, was a 'profound and tragic disappointment ... a baffling and difficult and paradoxical century'. World War I and the Great Depression, and now World War II, were in part a result of the United States' failure to embrace its duty as one of the most powerful nations in the world. The big promises of the 20th century had failed to materialise.

Luce saw a relationship between the state of the world and America's ongoing prosperity. He wrote that the failure to understand this relationship had led to the 'bankruptcy of any and all forms of isolationism' and he condemned the 'virus of isolationist sterility' among America's political class. Luce issued a call for the US to embrace a distinctly American form of internationalism, with the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution at its core. It would be one that would be the 'product of the imaginations of many men'. Luce argued that freedom, growth and individual satisfaction would be the cornerstones of a new American order. In fact, Luce argued, American internationalism could already be seen in the cultural products of Hollywood, clothing, jazz and technology. Luce believed that there were four areas in which American leadership was needed:

- the US as the promoter of global, free trade and of open seas and skies to support it
- the proliferation of American knowledge, skills and artistic expression
- the US as good Samaritan, with a particular emphasis on feeding the hungry
- the promotion of American ideals, including justice, truth and charity.



Getty Images/Time & Life Pictures

SOURCE 1.8 Henry Luce, author of 'The American Century'



The American Century

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The American Century

America cannot be responsible for the good behavior of the entire world. But America is responsible, to herself as well as to history, for the world environment in which she lives. Nothing can so vitally affect America's environment as America's own influence upon it, and therefore if America's environment is unfavorable to the growth of American life, then America has nobody to blame so deeply as she must blame herself. In its failure to grasp this relationship between America and America's environment lies the moral and practical bankruptcy of any and all forms of isolationism. It is most unfortunate that this virus of isolationist sterility has so deeply infected an influential section of the Republican Party. For until the Republican Party can develop a vital philosophy and program for America's initiative and activity as a world power, it will continue to cut itself off from any useful participation in this hour of history. And its participation is deeply needed for the shaping of the future of America and of the world.

Henry R Luce, 'The American Century', *Life*, 17 February 1941

QUESTIONS

- 1 What argument is Luce making about the importance of the relationship between America and the world environment?
- 2 Identify three words that Luce uses to describe isolation. What does this reveal about his attitude towards isolation?
- 3 What does he argue will be the consequences if America does not end its isolation?

Getty Images/MW/Getty Images



SOURCE 1.9 US President Roosevelt (left) and British Prime Minister Churchill (right) jointly signed the Atlantic Charter, an outline of Anglo-American political and economic values.

America in the postwar world

In August 1941, US President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill issued the joint Atlantic Charter – a series of principles that they hoped would shape the postwar world. The Charter included eight common values that restated the concepts of sovereignty, self-determination, free trade and collective security. Of course, the principle of self-determination meant that Britain and the European powers would have to give up their empires. The Charter represented a rejection of American isolation and a recognition that the United States would have to participate in keeping the world free from hunger and want.

The eighth principle, which addressed the issue of future peace, began as follows.

“ They believe that all of the nations of the world ... must come to the abandonment of the use of force. Since no future peace can be maintained if land, sea or air armaments continue to be employed by nations which threaten, or may threaten, aggression outside of their frontiers, they believe, pending the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security, that the disarmament of such nations is essential. ”

The Atlantic Charter, 1941



The cataclysm of World War II had convinced the Americans that they had a role to play in the maintenance of peace and the spread of prosperity. At the end of the war, they played a vital role in helping to rebuild Europe through the European Recovery Program, known as the Marshall Plan. The US\$15 billion plan sought to assist the economic recovery of Europe through capitalist principles under the shadow of communism in Eastern Europe.

The United States also saw as its responsibility the upholding of what it regarded as a set of universal values, including freedom, self-determination, state sovereignty and free global trade. We have already seen that this was done under the shadow of the Cold War in the postwar period, as the Soviets attempted to block attempts to implement these values across the globe. The Soviets believed that American political values were tied to capitalist exploitation.

- 1 Outline the United States' tradition of isolation.
- 2 What were some of the threats to isolation in the 165 years between 1776 and 1941?
- 3 Find three reasons Luce believed that the US should embrace the American Century.
- 4 Identify the American values embedded in the American Century.
- 5 What role did the Cold War play in preventing these values from achieving widespread acceptance in the world?

The fall of the Berlin Wall

The city of Berlin was fundamental to the development of the Cold War. It was the location of the war's early crises, and the wall that divided it after 1961 was of enormous symbolic significance. Throughout the summer of 1989, East Germans began to demand greater freedoms of movement. Their leader, Erich Honecker, was a staunch and inflexible communist who resisted any hint of change.

Tensions had been simmering in East Germany throughout 1989, and they were heightened by the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the East German state in October 1989. Pro-democracy marches and protests, and calls for reform, were growing louder as the neighbouring countries of Hungary and Poland also embraced *glasnost*. Borders had already opened in some Eastern European countries. As early as 1988, Hungary had opened its borders with Austria, leading to a spike in the number of people seeking political asylum in the West German embassy in Budapest. Poland had held its first free elections in June 1989.

It seemed that the ageing, hardline Honecker was becoming increasingly out of step with the attitudes of his fellow Eastern bloc leaders, and even with Gorbachev. The events in Tiananmen Square in China saw the Chinese Communist Party brutally crack down on demonstrators. Honecker approved of this, and one of his leading Politburo members, Egon Krenz, had expressed solidarity with the Chinese.

But it was Gorbachev who gave the East German protestors the impetus they needed to keep increasing their calls for change. At an event to mark the 40th anniversary of the creation of the East German state, Gorbachev remarked that 'life punishes those who come too late'. This seemed to be a swipe at the slow pace of change within East Germany compared with the rest of Eastern Europe. Gorbachev also commented to international reporters that socialist leaders 'who do not react to the realities of life' would find themselves in danger of being overthrown.

At the celebrations, East German protestors chanted 'Gorby! Gorby!' on the streets, much to the anger of Honecker, who was determined to stick with the old state socialism. Throughout October, tensions between the protestors and the regime grew stronger. Mass arrests and beatings of protestors





Alamy Stock Photo/imageBROKER



SOURCE 1.10 On the evening of 9 November 1989 and into the next day, thousands of Berliners climbed on top of the wall and tore parts of it down with sledgehammers and chisels.

by the East German police marked the beginning of the month. On 9 October 1989, 70 000 people took part in a candlelit parade to call for change. This time, against all expectations, the East German police did not react.

Honecker could not rely on the Soviet troops to step in as Gorbachev had ordered them to remain in their barracks. In mid-October, Honecker was removed as leader of the East German state.

The new East German Politburo spokesman, Günter Schabowski, was holding a press conference in front of international media on 9 November 1989. His answers to a series of questions about the timing of a new law promising greater ease of travel between East and West Germany provided the spark that ended European communism. Schabowski

had not read his briefing notes carefully enough, and under persistent questioning from an Italian journalist about the timing, he announced, 'Immediately. Without delay.'

The words were broadcast on Berlin television that evening and hundreds, and then thousands, of Berliners streamed down to the wall around key points, including Checkpoint Charlie and the Brandenburg Gate. East German border guards, settling into another night on patrol, were unsure about the gathering crowds. They were ordered not to fire on the crowd.

East and West Berliners, who had been separated for 28 years, began to climb on top of the wall and proceeded to dismantle it with hammers and picks. On the evening of 9 November 1989, the symbol of the Cold War was torn to the ground in jubilant celebration.

A 1.3-kilometre section of the wall still stands at the East Side Gallery. More than 100 paintings mark the longest remaining fragment of the wall as a tribute to freedom and unification. Perhaps the most famous painting is one by Dmitri Vrubel, depicting Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker locked in a kiss, titled *My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love*.



The Berlin Wall memorial



Alamy Stock Photo/travelstock44

SOURCE 1.11 This famous painting on the remaining section of the Berlin Wall at the East Side Gallery depicts Brezhnev and Honecker's 'fraternal kiss' at the 30th anniversary of the creation of East Germany in 1979.



Chapter summary

Between 1945 and 1989, the world was shaped by the Cold War. The threat of direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union overshadowed much of the work of the newly established United Nations. The existence and growth of nuclear weapons arsenals on both sides made the threat of conflict more perilous. That the values of the UN were closer to those of the US than the Soviet Union added to the tension. During this period, the US emerged from its century-and-a-half period of isolation.

When Mikhail Gorbachev implemented a series of political and economic reforms in the Soviet Union after 1985, these led to the sudden collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The absence of the Soviet Union and superpower rivalry left the US as the sole superpower in the world.

Further resources

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Endnotes

- ¹ George Washington, Final Address to Congress, in Ireland, TP, 'Creating the entangling alliance: The origins of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization' in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 76, 1982, p. 196.
- ² Jefferson, Thomas, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1801, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp.
- ³ The Monroe Doctrine, 1823, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/monroe.asp.

CHAPTER REVIEW

- 1 Why did the Cold War undermine the functions of the United Nations between 1945 and 1990?
- 2 How was the Cold War rivalry between the Soviets and the Americans different from traditional great power rivalries?
- 3 Outline the different values and ideologies of the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Nations.
- 4 What was the American Century?
- 5 Explain why the US ended its self-imposed isolation and become more internationalist after 1945.
- 6 Explain the forces that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.
- 7 To what extent was the collapse of the Soviet Union the most important event in international relations in the 20th century?
- 8 Evaluate the view that the participation of the US in the international order was important for both American and global peace and prosperity.
- 9 To what extent do you agree with the view of Dag Hammarskjöld, who said that the UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save it from hell?
- 10 In groups of three, create a 10-minute panel discussion, in which each person argues for one of the main developments in international relations after 1991. The three positions could be:
 - A The fall of Soviet communism was the most important development in the international order.
 - B The US would lead a new world order based on a shared set of universal values.
 - C The UN should take a greater role in promoting peace and prosperity.