Introduction: Understanding the Cold War

The history of international politics since 1945 was dominated, down to the 1990s by the origins, development, and sudden end of the Cold War. Although defined in a number of radically different ways, the Cold War fundamentally distinguished the post-Second World War period from the earlier years of the twentieth century in political and socio-economic terms and in its rapid technological changes. The change it produced following the most destructive interstate global conflict in history fundamentally altered the international system. But there were other international developments emerging in the Cold War which provided a link to the post-Cold War world and continued to develop after the post-war conflict had ended. These included the growing importance of the mass media, the role of international organizations, the growth of transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the impact of globalization, which together served to erode the power and significance of sovereign states. Some of these developments arguably had positive consequences even if, as with the anticipated new world order, they did not fully fulfil their aims or expectations. Other developments had unforeseen and negative consequences in much of the post-Cold War Western world dominated by 'new' types of armed conflict and increasingly dysfunctional economic relationships. In addition, the growing managerialism that imposed more and more authoritarian regulations on aspects of every-day life in the developed world resonated unhappily with the bureaucratic diktats of the defeated Cold War adversary.

The end of the Cold War produced drastic international changes but some similarities with the old order it replaced and an overview of the Cold War, and the new system it represented remains necessary, if controversial, for an understanding of the post-Cold War era with its continuities and changes. The book aims to highlight these interpretative challenges by taking a more detailed look at the Cold War's various phases over the first five sections of the book. The post-Cold War years can only be understood in a preliminary way by adopting the same mix of overview and detailed analysis of a much altered and less stable international system. The aim is also to present some alternative interpretations that may assist different reflections on the important links between international influences and domestic policies on foreign policy in a less state centric more interconnected world.

The Antecedents of the 1945 International System

The new post-war system that emerged in 1945 was now, for the first time in modern history, dominated by two extra-European powers. Relations between the European states had been destabilized by the unification of Germany in 1871. Prior to this, a balance of power within the continent had preserved stability only as long as the manpower and resources of Germany were not united. The problem of Germany after its unification was a problem that could not be solved without the intervention of non-European powers—the US and the Soviet Union (partly a European and partly an Asian power). Europe could no longer resolve its own problems and assistance from outside was required to overcome Germany in the last two years of the First World War, when the US became involved. American reluctance to shoulder the burdens of maintaining peace in the inter-war years became the key element which permitted the re-emergence of a powerful Germany. Containing the German threat required in the 1920s the kind of commitment that the US was not prepared to make until the 1940s. The role of the US, as either a hegemonic power or as a key global player in a bipolar world, was by then a dramatic new feature of international politics after 1945. It had only one obvious challenger in

the form of the Soviet Union whose land-based empire extended into Asia, but whose victory in the great land battles against the Third Reich provided the opportunity for it to play an important if not dominant European role.

It is easy to portray the decline of European nation states as a direct result of two European wars and the enormous shift in the global balance of economic and military power. After the violent power struggles between 1939 and 1945, the divisions in Europe became part of a global struggle in which the continent's position was fundamentally altered. Whatever the significance of Europe in terms of the peace settlement and the rise of international tensions, the continent was now only one part of a new global power political equation. Disagreements soon began to appear, as the victors in the war struggled to come to terms with a new global system of power and influence that was far from being a predominantly European one. One purpose of this book is to try and portray a Cold War developing out of the Second World War *not* because there were post-war differences in and over Europe, but because the world as a whole had radically changed.

The onset of the Cold War conflict has been given a number of different historical roots and chronological starting points. The development of two large land-based empires, particularly in the nineteenth century, could have paved the way for what has been seen as an inevitable clash. The economic and human resources they possessed were likely to produce growing international power and influence and a greater sense of rivalry. This certainly fits with a realist explanation of international relations, but it ignores the ideological conflict between communism and capitalism which is thus subordinated to geopolitical rivalries and a competition for resources. Yet the two land-based empires with rival ideologies had coexisted since 1917 and the relations which developed after 1945 were clearly different from those existing before the First and Second World Wars. Whatever the role of geo-politics and ideology—and both are important—the timing of the Cold War was connected to radical changes in the global power balance produced by the Second World War *and* to a new sense of ideological rivalry. In Western Europe elite fears of domestic instability and the destruction of the social and economic status quo which the Second World War produced were particularly important.

General theories do not serve to explain the timing of the Cold War and, for those not primarily focused on power, realism serves no purpose as it takes no account of ideas or ideologies. The Cold War's origins for them are better located in the success of the Russian Revolution and the irreconcilable ideological conflict it produced. As better communications made the transmission of ideas on a global basis easier and cheaper, the conflict between two ideological state systems assumed global proportions. The Cold War was therefore about competing ideologies that, for the first time, threatened the social and economic status quo on which national ruling elites in capitalist countries depended. Thus, domestic interests and the pursuit of ideological goals superseded the old international

Realism

The Realist school of international relations theorists was born out of the failure of liberal thinkers in the inter-war period to attach sufficient weight to the importance of power as a determinant of international relations—and in particular to Hitler's aggressive desire to maximize the territorial expansion and military power of the Third Reich. In contrast to liberals, who put their faith in international cooperation and the importance of states working together, realists, noting the lack of any single international authority and the anarchical nature of the international system, point to the necessity of survival through self-help. States are seen as competing with one another to achieve security from external threats which can be achieved only through relative gains in military and economic power. As states pursue this goal they are defined by realists as unitary actors competing to maximize their power in ways determined by the nature of the international system. Hence, there is little or no linkage between domestic and foreign policy with the latter determined exclusively by external considerations. As regards the Cold War, realists see it as a power political competition between two competing power systems led by the US and the USSR, with their development of new and more powerful weapons. Hence, the ideological and domestic considerations are not seen as important determinants of the Cold War.

rivalries and alliances that had been geared to the competing interests of all sovereign states. In such an analysis, the domestic social and economic systems and their political philosophies assume significance in shaping the global conflict, and explanations of the Cold War have to define the relationships between power political and ideological requirements. Economic development and the maintenance or prevention of social mobility in Latin America, Africa, as well as in the developed states of Europe then become crucial in the origins and development of the conflict.

The Origins of the Cold War

The initial failure to agree on how to resolve the rivalries which arose in part from the wartime shift in the global balance of economic and military power and the concomitant increase in international tensions, owed much to domestic economic and political forces. It was not simply the existence of rival ideologies, but the fact that the challenge to the pre-war social order in much of Western Europe was strengthened by the war itself, and by the forces for change it had unleashed. By the end of the Second World War, it was clear that states would have to assume responsibilities for more than the maintenance of territorial integrity and the external pursuit of economic and military interests. Citizens throughout the globe expected improvements in their social and economic welfare, and that governments would promote these goals. Demands for social reform, with better conditions for the lower classes, had been feared and foreseen by those appeasers who sought to avoid war, like the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. By 1945 their wartime ally in the East had been strengthened by the war and threatened revolution rather than reform. For the first time since the French Revolution, a movement for radical social change was accompanied and supported by a powerful state. The Cold War was in fact a battle for the domestic and international survival of states, social elites, and ways of life. In such circumstances, students should be aware how much elites on both sides have been prepared to invest in distorting the truth. In terms of strengthening their position and attracting mass support, it has always been vital to blame their opponents for instigating the conflict and to portray the actions of their own states as defensive and reactive. This has led to all sorts of distortions and misunderstandings of the nature of the global struggle and the ways in which regional conflicts have been linked to it.

The quest for international power and influence both contributed to the breakdown of the victorious wartime alliance in 1945 and assumed greater importance in the disagreements over the new world order, because of the combination of the domestic and the international. Global status and prestige could influence the balance of domestic forces, and the appeal of radical ideologies, more so than in the inter-war years. Power politics and ideologies were always interlinked. While Europe may well have been seen as the most valuable region where these were played out, it was as much the failure to agree on how to allocate power, influence, and responsibility on a global basis between three main areas (Asia, Europe, and the Middle East) that was central to the power political disagreements in 1945.

The Decline of Europe and Global Economic Relations

The end of a Europe-dominated world was indicated during the war by the, albeit temporary, loss of many parts of its empire. The European states system had been central to great power relations in the first half of the century (and, indeed, for long before that) as well as to the development of international relations theory. After 1945, it was the nature of Europe's relationship to the broader global balance of power that was crucial. Whatever the significance of the continent in terms of the rise of international tensions, it was now only one part of a new power political equation. The ending of European control over large areas of the globe, often referred to as decolonization, was one indication of the increasing shift of the focus of international politics. Large numbers of newly independent states were to change the nature of the newly formed United Nations and focus attention on the relationship between the industrialized world and the less developed areas (which relied on the production for export of raw materials and foodstuffs). At the same time, new regional power configurations had to be considered in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East and these assumed significance for the global Cold War conflict because some were seen as increasingly significant in global terms.

Important questions emerged about the economic and trade relations between these areas, with newly independent states emerging in the twenty years after the war and the developed world, including the former imperial or colonial powers. The debate about the structural nature of these relations remains unresolved. Some see economic problems being created in the developing nations because of the alleged failure to give free rein to market forces. Others claim that capitalism in the developed world operates to the increasing detriment of the less developed world through its control over raw material prices and investment capital flows. At the same time, the terms of trade of the rich countries improved at the expense of the poor ones. Whether this was linked to the effect of colonialism is another unresolved, but highly charged, debate about global economic relations, which is subsumed within controversies over the nature and effect of globalization and the emergence of problems which require global cooperation to solve. In the post-Cold War world, environmental pollution and climate change, along with international crime and disease, are phenomena outside the control of individual nation states and can be seen as eroding their power.

The process by which European rule over much of the world came to an end was accompanied by political and economic changes within Europe. It was these changes that indicated the weakening of the nation state and its exclusive role in international relations. The European colonial powers began to construct economic and institutional links between themselves, which undermined sovereignty and began the process of defining a common European approach to international and domestic affairs. The current study discusses these European developments, which began with economic integration in Western Europe, and the expanding international economy, but focuses more on the nature of the new regional conflicts and the role of the US and USSR in influencing them. European integration and the increasing contact between elites with loyalties not centred solely on the nation state seemed for some to signify the beginning of a new era in international affairs, again with a legacy from the Second World War. Equally important for Europe is the continued existence of global inequality and the extreme poverty experienced by millions of people in the less developed world. The debates about economic development are briefly touched upon in parts of the book, to indicate that world politics do not simply take place between the rich nations with the power to dominate international affairs. The period ends with the near collapse of the global post-Cold War international capitalist economy under the growing weight of the neo-liberal consensus following the failures of communism.

Bipolarity or Hegemony?

The post-1945 world is normally defined as bipolar because of the disparity between the military capabilities and economic resources of the world's two most powerful states and the lesser powers, and because of the alignment of many states with one of the opposing ideological blocs before 1989. After 1990 it became possible to talk of a 'unipolar' world, simply because the US now seemed much more powerful than any other state, in both military and economic terms. Yet the concept of bipolarity does require some qualification. At the end of the Second World War, only Britain and the US had the ability to act militarily in large areas of the world, but only the US had escaped the problems caused by the devastation of war and only the US had the economic strength to dominate the global economy and its institutions. Thus, it is possible to argue that the world after 1945 can already be seen in terms of the exercise of hegemonic power by the US. After emerging from a relatively isolationist position and its regional dominance in the western hemisphere, the US arguably began to extend that dominance to many other areas of the globe and the Cold War was not defined by a bipolar world but by the attempts to preserve or terminate US hegemony.

The original US desire to end isolationism was based on a belief in a set of universal values, which American wartime planners hoped to see established on a global basis. Non-discriminatory trade, the end of power political arrangements, the removal of imperial trade blocs, and the political values of self-determination and democratic government were seen as necessary for the preservation of peace; they were also seen as important for the successful development of capitalism and the maintenance of national prosperity. These ideals and traditions helped define and justify the goals of post-1945 American foreign policy in ways which would otherwise be more meaningfully interpreted as a quest for hegemony. US wartime planners put forward ideas that claimed to favour

a principled world order based on universal values that have been seen as benign and beneficial, especially when placed alongside the more brutal regimes which emerged under the ideological auspices of fascism and communism. Yet the exercise of American power was not far below the surface. The blend of international concerns and national self-assertion became a potent ideological mix as what was best for the world was juxtaposed with what was best for America.

The challenge of the Soviet Union has been from the start portrayed as a dynamic force, driven by a crusading Marxist ideology, linked to global expansion which the US sought to resist in the name of universal values, rather than specific interests associated with the preservation of its hegemony. It may be more plausible to see the Soviet challenge as born, not from an assertive ideological triumphalism, but from a sense of weakness and a desire to achieve bipolarity and equality. And the US must also be judged in the context of a triumphalist ideology, which it has sought—and continues to seek—to extend far beyond American shores. Yet seeing two hegemonic powers battling it out for primacy, with the outcome of such an equal contest uncertain until the last, is a highly questionable portrayal of the post-1945 world and one possible explanation of why the Cold War's end surprised so many with its suddenness. The disparity between the two powers' capabilities was at times considerable and, if one interprets the Cold War world as a series of challenges to American hegemony, it is possible to find greater continuity between the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods.

In analysing the world of the two Cold War protagonists, there is also a need to take account of the emergence of the non-aligned movement, the impact of a powerful, communist China, and the tendency of newly independent states to try and manipulate the superpowers to help secure their own regional goals. All such things run counter to simplistic notions of bipolarity and from the end of the 1960s onwards, as the Soviets mounted a military challenge, the dominance of the two so-called superpowers was consistently eroded. Even before that, the control and influence exerted by the US and the USSR over their respective blocs faced a number of challenges and relations within their blocs, which form another important feature of the Cold War world. Nevertheless, it was a world in which domestic interests, as well as foreign policy goals, often dictated support for one of the two main rivals and one where the need to attract global support for the values and social and economic systems each held dear assumed unprecedented international importance.

Cold War, as Distinct from Hot War, and the Role of Armaments

Central to the prospect of 'hot war' arising from alleged military threats was the role of nuclear weapons, which revolutionized thinking about war. As global war (referred to as 'hot war', as opposed to Cold War or limited, regional conflicts) became potentially ever more horrific, the use of force by the nuclear powers against each other threatened to have disastrous consequences. One problem, which was never solved, was to try and integrate the use of nuclear weapons into a rational military strategy which did not risk large-scale national destruction. As strategists wrestled with this dilemma, military power became less useful as a means of forcing smaller states to comply with the wishes of the great powers. Combined with the Cold War need to win over international opinion this placed greater emphasis on prestige, status, the appearance of strength, and the preservation of credibility. While economic resources and key strategic areas remained of some significance, particularly in the 1940s and early 1950s, unlike in the inter-war years, competition in areas of no economic or strategic importance became a feature of Cold War international politics and the ideological battle for credibility.

At the same time it was necessary to find ways of fighting the Cold War which did not run too great a risk of developing into hot war. This distinction, between measures short of international armed conflict (Cold War) and preparations to fight a hot war, is an important one which needs to be borne in mind particularly when analysing the nature of, and reasons for, the arms race. Yet the Cold War cannot be fully isolated from military conflict, because the deployment of armed forces was seen as necessary to deal with internal conflicts, or to prevent the emergence of unfriendly governments. Also, the militarization of an essentially ideological threat was perceived as vital for the mobilization of popular support for the Cold War struggle. In order to do this, governments were prepared to exaggerate or invent an actual and immediate military threat, when what they really feared

was an ideological challenge or a potential, long-term military danger. This was particularly significant in the 1940s, when the Soviet leadership had most reason to fear the greater material wealth of the US, and when the American, and particularly Western European, elites had most reason to fear the strength of left-wing political movements, whose credibility had been enhanced by active resistance to fascism during the war and who promised radical social reform afterwards.

Military alliances, such as NATO, SEATO, and the Baghdad Pact were important manifestations of the Cold War. Yet, they have been seen from the start as military alliances geared to 'hot war', when they were actually far more important as political symbols of a will to resist communism, just as the Warsaw Pact in the East symbolized the resistance to capitalism and particularly to German capitalism. NATO was not an alliance preparing to attack the Soviet Union, or even one seen as capable of winning a conventional war in the defence of Western Europe; nor was the Warsaw Pact an organization geared to the expansion of Soviet power through the use of military force. Yet, they were both portrayed as such. The fact was that threat perception in the military sense did not drive force deployments or the level of armaments. More specifically, the strategic need to defend a particular area did not lead to consideration of the ways in which this could be done effectively by military means. Nor did the requirements of Western European defence, for example, produce the force levels needed to guarantee security, or the rationale for foreign-policy-makers to act on. Rather, it was political considerations, especially the need to keep Western Europe together as part of a liberal-capitalist unit, which dictated the development of military strategy. The latter was then used to provide and justify the rationale for the political needs which had produced the strategy in the first place. The result was that the actual military requirements to carry out the strategy were never met in any of the three Western military alliances mentioned above.

In such a situation, the role of armaments and the concept of security have to be carefully considered in a Cold War context. Negotiations and discussions on arms levels formed a constant feature of Soviet–American relations and they consumed a vast amount of resources. Nuclear weapons in particular, and the strategies behind their development and possible use, were continually in the public eye. They had, and have, an obvious deterrent role (although the exact nature of such a role is highly debatable). In many ways, armaments can be seen in the context of global conflict as predominantly symbolic of the role of the military and of the technological dynamism characteristic of the contrasting economic systems. Arms negotiations became protracted and detailed, but were often designed to secure advantages which, like the weapons themselves, would serve the appearance of greater strength or power. Equally and crucially, the political pressure from public opinion for governments to become involved in them was intense. The need to prevent hot war was a continuing feature of the Cold War and the need to appear committed to disarmament, peace, and stability a vital component of the battle for hearts and minds, even if the timing and nature of the process was up for debate and the commitment to it not always genuine.

The Nature of the Cold War World

The military threat and danger presented by the Cold War have generally been exaggerated, both at the time and in the literature. The military threat was, and has been often proclaimed as, the crucial element in the origins and development of the conflict, even though power has arguably become more associated with prestige and influence. The control of resources and the development of military capabilities, in practical terms, have perhaps become less important in the nuclear age especially in relation to a global war that is increasingly hard to contemplate. Instead, the Cold War brought a perceived need for states to control their citizens and ensure that their perceptions of the outside world reinforced the legitimacy of either a totalitarian communist or a democratic capitalist state. In this new situation, the very existence of an ideological rival was for a time seen as an unacceptable threat. The refusal to accept the long-term existence of rival sovereign states was a feature of the early period of Cold War, which strengthened or helped produce highly secret government agencies. Intelligence organizations also began to play more significant roles in overseas espionage and subversion. They were designed to operate covertly and to subvert or overthrow hostile or potentially hostile regimes in ways which could be denied by the governments ostensibly controlling them.

At the same time, propaganda became more extensive and significant in relation to domestic as well as foreign affairs. More effort was devoted to providing

'information' to citizens and to ensuring that 'subversives' were marginalized or eliminated. It was important, for example, for the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin to try and convince his citizens that domestic opponents of his brutal and tyrannical regime were imperialist spies who deserved exile or death. At the same time, it was important for Western governments, not only to play on the horrors of the Soviet regime, but to present it as a threat in ways which would win support for a policy of confrontation and the pursuit of ambitious foreign policy goals. As a result, there is a need to examine if such dangers were exaggerated in both quantitative and qualitative terms largely in order to achieve maximum domestic effect.

The Use of Terminology in Western Interpretations of the Cold War

The initial increase in rivalries and tensions in and after 1945 produced a new international vocabulary, which itself is a feature of a particular Cold War mindset. In the West many of these words display a subtle condemnation of the ideological opponent and reinforce a world-view in which Cold War confrontation stems from the activities of the communist states, rather than from their counterparts in the capitalist world. Moreover, this itself produces justifications for policies which assume a fundamental sense of righteousness in international as well as domestic terms. To try to produce an objective international analysis of the Cold War, it is necessary to question some of the standard Cold War terminology used in the West and to relate the conflict to the more traditional goals of great powers. At the same time, one must look more closely at the changes that occurred in the Cold War international system and their links to domestic forces and ideational influences. Thus, the two rival systems can be assessed more objectively and without the ascription of blame to the ideological opponent. When blame is given to one side it is often done as part of fighting, rather than explaining, the Cold War.

The use of the word 'security' by both sides has provided Cold War justifications for actions and policies that would previously have been interpreted differently. It has come to mean much more than protection from invasion and the avoidance of war. The fine dividing line between 'security' and imperial expansion needs to be carefully considered in relation to the Soviet Empire in Asia and to its satellites in Eastern and Central Europe. More importantly, the American use of the term 'national security' involves the merging of a number of old concepts into a radically new one which has underpinned much of Western Cold War rhetoric after 1947. Essential to this is the belief that any state controlling large geographical areas, containing significant quantities of natural resources, in a way unacceptable to the US, presents a threat to the 'national security' of the US. This means that, rather than having to deal with a specific military danger in a vital area (as Germany presented to Britain's essential maritime trade routes before the First World War), Washington's 'national security' is threatened by a more general global menace. In part, this is a reflection of a shrinking world in which more rapid aircraft and the arrival of the missile age have brought all members of the global community closer together. Without unrestricted access to the world's resources, the US could be forced to impose domestic controls over raw materials and production which would threaten free enterprise, the American way of life, and thus 'national security'. Also, the adoption of communist or capitalist ideologies by newly independent states, or changes from one system to the other in any part of the globe, would have implications for Western or Soviet credibility and, in conventional Cold War terms, constitute a threat to 'national security'. In the pre-Cold War era, attempts to control access to important overseas resources and the installation of, or influence over, a particular foreign government would normally have been referred to as 'imperialism', not as a threat to national security.

Another feature of historical and social science writing in the West is the way in which phrases such as 'Soviet expansion(ism)' and 'Soviet behaviour' flow freely from the pages of many books on international politics after 1945. In the US, the Soviet Union came to be regarded as a revolutionary state not prepared to accept the norms governing international relations. The attribution of traits reflecting abnormal human actions is used in many different situations to demonize an enemy to whom rational analysis is not then applied. The term 'American expansion', which was arguably far more extensive than that achieved by the Soviets after the end of the war, is hard to find, while the US and its Western European allies hardly ever suffer from international behavioural problems. In addition, although as will be seen, the Soviet Union expected additional post-war rewards from its wartime efforts, what it did secure came directly from

the war. It acquired territory and satellites not from post-war expansion but from its unscrupulous wartime deal with the Nazis and from the accepted military need to defeat Germany. Many general works on international politics imply that the Soviets 'behaved' in expansionist ways which aroused Allied disapproval after the war and neglect to point out that during the war the main Allied fear was of the Soviets *not* expanding and defeating the Germans.

Of course, a relative lack of evidence from Soviet archives, despite greater access to them over the last few decades, precludes any definitive judgements about Moscow's goals and ambitions. And it is quite clear that, not only did the Soviet Union have imperialist ambitions to expand its power and influence, but also its treatment of its own citizens and of those under Soviet occupation was appalling. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that the US and Britain were simply reacting to Russian 'behaviour' in occupied Europe or to ambitious Soviet diplomacy. Nor should it be assumed that Washington and London were lacking in expansionist goals themselves. Both countries, like the Soviets, planned to extend their influence after 1945 and gain new military bases from which to project their power on an increasingly global basis. Indeed, the US military planned to acquire bases in Western Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, South, South-East and East Asia, including China, as well as island bases in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

One way around the problem of Cold War terminology is to view all the great powers, particularly the wartime Big Three (Britain, the Soviet Union, and the US), as seeking to maintain or enhance their influence. This projection of power and influence into new areas is one way of broadly defining imperialism and it is no bad thing for students of international politics to approach the post-war world from the perspective of imperial rivalries. This removes the need to consider ideological differences as a cause of the initial breakdown of cooperation and only requires that they be considered, along with the other changes brought about after the war, as defining elements of a Cold War world that later emerged from the initial international competition for control and influence in the 1945–6 period.

The use of the word 'containment' is another misleading term in standard Western historiography because it is often applied to American policy throughout the Cold War period. In fact while 'containment' can be deemed to contribute to the first stage of any offensive strategy, the idea that it was a consistent US policy employed as the ultimate response to Soviet power throughout the period is misleading. US policy went through a number of stages related to changing perceptions of how best to deal with the Soviet challenge. The period from 1946 to 1948 may be seen as a defensive response but, from 1948 until at least the mid-1950s, if not the early 1960s, the US moved to an offensive strategy designed to destroy the Soviet satellite empire not to contain it.

Phases of the Cold War

The chronological divisions in the book correspond to changes in the nature of the Cold War or in Soviet–American relations (and the two things are not synonymous), as well as events since the Cold War. The first phase, up to 1953, was when the Cold War developed from the tensions and mistrust arising out of early attempts to agree on the nature of the post-war order and conclude peace treaties with Germany's allies. In the first and very intense phase of the Cold War, from 1947 to 1953, the ideological commitment of the Soviet Union and the capitalist states to differing economic and political systems was reinforced by the demands of post-war reconstruction. Survival in the short term was deemed to depend either on the success of Western democracy and free enterprise or on the maintenance of totalitarian, communist controls. In addition, the ability directly to control and exploit certain areas of the globe was seen as vital by both British and Soviet policy-makers, who both initially feared that the adoption of US principles was a recipe for maintaining or increasing US power and influence at their expense. Thus, there emerged a mix of old-fashioned imperialism and new ideological imperatives. The former helped prevent cooperation while the latter subsequently gave an entirely new meaning to imperial and interstate rivalries. It was a period in which confrontation, fuelled by competing, universal ideologies, then developed to such an extent that some on both sides saw the other's long-term existence as an unacceptable threat. However, there was a fear of another war and a reluctance to prepare for one on both sides, with the Western powers privately convinced that the Soviets would not deliberately start a major conflict (even though they did not reveal this publicly). War was only deemed possible through accident or miscalculation. In effect, this meant the

extension of control or influence by one side without any realization that it would be so unacceptable to the other side that war would be preferable. In the West, the Cold War was nevertheless deemed to be winnable by means short of hot war (international armed conflict).

By the early 1950s, the fighting of the Cold War was perhaps at its most aggressive. In the West, German rearmament (deemed most likely to provoke armed Soviet aggression) was planned and attempts were made to devise more aggressive means of undermining Soviet control within its satellite empire. In the East, Stalin finally agreed to endorse and support a North Korean attack on South Korea. Western Cold War strategists then had to consider the implications of fighting a limited war. Along with the death of Stalin in 1953, Churchill's idea of encouraging more Western contacts with the Soviet bloc as a means of sapping the strength and appeal of communism, led to what became known as a 'thaw' in East–West relations. However, the 'thaw' was an attempt to stabilize relations and avoid armed conflict rather than a 'thaw' in the Cold War of propaganda and subversion. The need to avoid armed conflict increased steadily once the US and the Soviet Union exploded their first thermonuclear weapons in 1952 and 1953. The hydrogen bomb was thousands of times more powerful than the atomic bomb. It made the prospect of global war more fearsome and eventually made the pursuit of peace and arms agreements more necessary. More urgent consideration had now to be given to ways of preventing the aggressive fighting of the Cold War from leading to a hot war. The fears that an offensive strategy might lead to a thermonuclear confrontation eventually contributed to the modification of the American policy of undermining, and ultimately destroying, the Soviet system (often referred to as 'rollback'), as did the realization that changes would be difficult to achieve without a major war.

The Soviets had ostensibly also accepted the idea of peaceful coexistence in the mid-1950s, but ideological competition remained acute. In fact, in some ways, the Cold War was extended after the death of Stalin because of his successors' heightened interest in Asia, Africa, and regions of the less developed world. This increased the importance of competition for hearts and minds in these largely neglected areas and took the Cold War into a new era. Soviet–American Cold War competition now extended to all parts of the globe. By the end of the 1950s, this competition for influence between the communist and capitalist world was further intensified by the emergence of the newly independent nations in Africa and Asia and the importance of the future alignment of those non-self-governing territories earmarked for independence. The issue now was less the control of important resources or political stability, as initially it had been in Europe, than the need to claim ideological successes in terms of the progress of socialism or capitalist democracy. This did not remove the need for the power and status of the Soviet and American states to be enhanced. It meant that the success of one protagonist, whether in terms of greater influence in Africa, Europe, or even outer space, was an integral part of great power competition.

However, the 1960s saw the competition to preserve or gain ideological allies come near to military confrontation in Cuba in 1962. The Cuban missile crisis, when some US policy-makers were prepared to attack Soviet missiles, was a head-to-head Soviet–American confrontation that contributed to what some have argued was the end of the first Cold War. The risk of hot war was such that both sides were now prepared to accept long-term peaceful coexistence. Fighting the Cold War to eliminate their rival's control over its sphere of influence, in order to undermine their position as a great power, arguably ceased to be the ultimate aim of the superpowers. What mattered was a more traditional competition for greater global influence. In these circumstances the arms race, conducted under the banner of deterring war, became even more of a battle for status and influence rather than serious preparation for global war.

However, in the 1960s, when the Soviets began for the first time to approach nuclear parity with their American rivals, the nature of the apparently bipolar world began to change. Washington faced serious challenges to its economic and military supremacy, while the growing split between the Soviets and their communist Chinese allies became a permanent rupture and resulted in border clashes. The Americans, having embarked on a massive programme of military expansion at the start of the decade, found themselves in a less advantageous position at the end of it. For the first time, their military supremacy was threatened by the expansion of Soviet nuclear arms and the development of an ocean-going navy which further increased perceptions of the Soviet Union as a world power equal to the US. American economic dominance was also challenged from within the Western world,

particularly by the rapidly expanding German and Japanese economies and by the French attempt, under Charles de Gaulle, to win greater independence from the American-dominated international economic order. From 1963 onwards, international politics thus became a more general competitive battleground with alliances and regional power blocs assuming greater importance in a less bipolar world.

The emergence of a more multipolar world in the 1970s meant that new ways of attempting to manage Soviet–American relations within the changed international system had to be found. China's emergence, and the growing economic strength of Western Europe and Japan, presented new challenges to US hegemony. As the hegemonic power was defeated in Vietnam, new social forces appeared to be challenging the supremacy of democratic capitalism within the Western world. In the 1970s, faced with this new situation and with economic problems exacerbated by the oil price rises, greater efforts were made to maintain international stability. Détente offered the prospect of regulating the Cold War by agreement. For the Americans, it could prevent further erosion of their military superiority and maintain their general credibility which was being damaged by the continuation of the Vietnam War. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Adviser and later Secretary of State, was eager to take up the challenge to American power from an increasingly multipolar world by the use of détente. Traditional power political goals were incorporated into a process of détente designed to control Cold War competition in order to retain maximum American influence and prevent further communist successes. The Soviets were also attracted to détente, because it offered economic benefits and the prospect of encouraging revolutionary change in the Third World with less risk of hostile Western responses or intervention.

Yet at the end of the 1970s—a decade of revolutionary change in many parts of the less developed world—the conflicting expectations of détente produced Soviet–American dissatisfaction and led to a return to greater confrontation. Often referred to as a second Cold War, the 1979–85 period saw tensions in Europe over the deployment of more advanced nuclear missiles and continuing crises in the less developed world which involved one or both of the superpowers. As in 1945, this eventually produced both domestic and international reactions which produced another major Cold War confrontation, despite the more multipolar world. The rise of a more socially conservative and individualist Right in the West was matched in the mid-1980s by the emergence of a new generation of leaders in the Soviet Union, who were prepared to embark on a programme of radical reform and foreign policy reorientation. It was precisely when these forces were both encouraging international confrontation and redefining economic and social policy that the Cold War ended or, perhaps more accurately, was ignored or transcended by Gorbachev. While designed to preserve the basis of a reformed Soviet state with reduced influence over the constituent parts of its Empire, reform unleashed forces that Gorbachev initially did not want to control and by 1991 could not. The result was that the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe was followed by the disintegration of the USSR which Gorbachev had neither sought nor expected. In a similar way the forces which produced the economic crash and the war on terror in the first decade of the new millennium have had unforeseen and uncontrollable consequences which may significantly alter the post-Cold War world.