



CONCLUSION: THE CHANGING WORLD ORDER, 1945–2011

What conclusions can be drawn from the often chaotic and changing shape of the world order in the 66 years between 1945 and 2011? Three key forces stand out. First is the central role of the United States in influencing the shape of the modern world when it emerged from its self-imposed isolation in 1941 to shoulder its share of global responsibility, in what is often referred to as the American Century. Second, the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc in Eastern Europe brought an end to the Cold War and ushered in a new global order that was characterised by the triumph of liberal democratic values. This period coincided with a renaissance of the United Nations during the 1990s. As it turned out, this period was short-lived and the advent of the ‘war on terror’ meant that the nationalist impulse was once again revived. Third, the rise of China and other centres of power challenged the unchecked economic, military and political power of the United States.

The US emerged from World War II as one of the two superpowers. Its industrial capacity and strong economy gave it a central role in the European recovery, and at the same time it had to check the expansion of the Soviet Union in the east. Over time, the Cold War developed into a dangerous superpower rivalry that was overshadowed by the threat of nuclear weapons. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the US as the only superpower in the world. Throughout the 1990s, it seemed that US political and economic





values had become universal, as liberal democracies were created around the world. Whether this was an opportunity to consolidate American power in the world or to promote the universal ideals of the United Nations is unclear. For the uneasy peace of the final decade of the century was shattered on the morning of 11 September 2001.

When 19 hijackers crashed four planes into locations around New York and Washington, DC, killing more than 3000 people, US foreign policy took a more militaristic turn. What followed was the prosecution of the so-called war on terror – a problematic term for a conflict that lacked a clearly defined enemy. It involved a war in Iraq that lacked UN support and eroded American moral authority in the world. In the 2000s, the US's role in the world changed. The promise of freedom offered by liberal democracies was being rejected by countries in the Middle East, as America unsuccessfully attempted to impose its social system in the region. The US ended the period with a financial crisis, which originated in the American banking system but spread throughout the world. The crisis caused a deep recession, and economic centres of power emerged to counter American financial might.

The second major event of the period was the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. Much-needed political and economic reform of the communist system by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev after 1985 sparked a series of political upheavals that resulted in the end of the system. By the end of 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen; by the end of 1990, East and West Germany had been reunited; and by Christmas Day 1991, the Soviet Union had dissolved. The consequences in Eastern Europe and Russia were significant. A series of rapid political and economic reforms brought lasting changes to the social systems of the Warsaw Pact countries, but in Russia, the corrupt and chaotic manner in which state industries were privatised led to the emergence of an oligarchy. After 2000, new leader Vladimir Putin rejected the cronyism of the 1990s as well as the trend toward Westernisation of Russia. He sought to reassert Russian power in Eastern Europe with a new nationalism and anti-Westernisation.

The third major trend of the modern world has perhaps been most surprising of all. By 2011, China had risen to become the world's second largest economy, with a growing middle class and an expanding military and political presence on the global stage. If the rise of one power and the decline of another were to be marked on a calendar, then the global financial crisis of 2008 could be regarded as a key moment in the shift away from the United States and towards China as a global force. Since the fall of communism in Europe, China – itself a communist country – has opened up to become the world's largest exporter of manufactured goods. Countries around the world are eager to sign trade deals with China.

In the chaotic world of international relations, nations rise and fall, and it is difficult to make predictions too far into the future. Over the course of decades or centuries, new historical forces shape the contours of the modern world. How statesmen and stateswomen respond to these forces can lead to war or to peace. Perhaps the final word in dealing with the tides of history should be given to the 19th-century German politician Otto von Bismarck, who said, 'A statesman ... must wait until he hears the steps of God sounding through events, then leap up and grasp the hem of His garment'.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 What impact did the Cold War have on the functioning of the United Nations between 1945 and 1991?
- 2 To what extent was the United States' rejection of isolationism a factor in shaping international relations between 1945 and 2011?
- 3 To what extent did ideology play a part in the leadership of Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin between 1985 and 2011?
- 4 How important was the end of communism to the international order after 1991?
- 5 How did American foreign policy change after 11 September 2001?
- 6 Explain the significant challenges to American hegemony in the 21st century.
- 7 Outline the main challenges to the survival of the European Union in the 21st century.
- 8 How has conflict in the Middle East been shaped by global forces?
- 9 Evaluate the success of the UN as a peacekeeper in the post-Cold War period.
- 10 To what extent are the core values of the UN – to promote peace and security – possible in the 21st century?