
UNIT 13 GLIMPSE OF POST-WAR WORLD-I

Structure

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, you will learn about the:

- political changes after World War II, more specifically the processes of decolonization, the Cold War and the international balance of forces;
- non-aligned world and its aspirations, its leaders and their aims;
- challenge posed by socialism; and
- issues of concern in the twentieth century.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

You have read about the changes after the World War I in your earlier Units. In this Unit we will analyse and also to some extent describe the political changes that took place in the Post–World War II scenario. These changes encompassed developments that altered the international balance of forces and brought new actors to the fore in their independent capacity, in the form of newly liberated nations. The political changes following the War reflected this changed balance of forces achieved by decolonization. The post-War world also saw the acceleration of the pace of revolutions that began in the first half of the century, with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, and the emergence of new socialist states, most notable being the Chinese, the Vietnamese and the Cuban revolutions and the heroic struggle for liberation in Algiers against the French rule. National liberation and socialism changed the complexion of world politics, lending new dynamism to peoples’ movements for emancipation.

In view of the heroic role of the Soviet Union in defeating fascism and supporting the cause of national liberation it emerged as a determining political force in the post-War world, as did the United States, which had entered the war on the side of the Allies. The post-War world was thus also characterized

by a competition and conflict between these two countries, which, in view of their very different political systems, assumed the form of antagonism between the ideologies of socialism (represented by the Soviet Union) and capitalism (represented by the US). This conflict involved and brought within its fold, although not directly, the entire world, and took forms that avoided direct confrontation or war, between them that is, even though it was sometimes quite intense.

In this Unit we will give some space to this Cold War as well, and to the non-aligned movement composed of countries that came to be known as the Third World, because these greatly affected Europe. Since this is primarily a course on European history, we will not go into the trajectories of experience of nationhood in the new nations, emphasizing instead their influence on developments in Europe, and of European developments on them in the period covered.

13.2 THE CHANGED BALANCE OF FORCES IN EUROPE

Germany, a formidable political force until then, was defeated and the Nazi regime completely dismantled. It was divided into four zones of occupation, pending a later settlement, and then finally into two nations the German Democratic Republic (GDR) which adopted the socialist model of social and political development, and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which was capitalist and aligned with the western nations in its economic and political policies.

England, which had suffered extensive bombings from the German forces was devastated and had to depend on the US for its economic recovery. More than that, it became impossible for England to hold on to its huge Empire status, with result that many of its colonies one by one gained independence, beginning with the Indian sub-continent in 1947. For France this process was more prolonged, but it no longer enjoyed its earlier political position, both the US and Soviet Union now able to play a more decisive role in international relations.

The Soviet Union had suffered the major losses in the war, but derived its post war strength from the national liberation and emergence of people's democracies in Eastern Europe, which were firmly aligned with it. Japan, suffered not merely by being on the defeated side, but from the tragic and cruel devastations from the atom bombs dropped by the US on the towns of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, whose after effects remain till today even though Japan is now a strong economy. Also Japan was temporarily placed under US rule.

The US was the only country that emerged unscathed from the war, as the battlefield was far removed from its territory. On the contrary it found its economy stimulated by the war due to requirements of war and armaments industries mainly, and played a major role in the reconstruction of Post-War Europe, gaining economic and political strength even from this Post-War role.

13.2.1 The Immediate Issues and Attempts to Resolve Them

The immediate issues before the European nations were wide in scope and conflicting given their different interests, although the central contradiction was that between socialism and capitalism. The political arrangements and the economic solutions arrived at reflected this major conflict of two systems. With fascism now defeated, the urgency was of rebuilding strong political institutions on the foundations of either liberal-democracy as had existed in the pre war situation in western Europe, or following the experience of the Bolshevik revolution and the Soviet regime, along the principles of socialist democracy. Neither alternative was easy, given the hardships and economic crises following the war, and the re-emerging hostility to socialism on the part of the western world once Germany had been defeated.

Also, since the earlier hierarchy of nation-states was no longer valid, new political arrangements were made by the victorious powers. The demarcation of territories and boundaries was influenced by the strength of either socialist or capitalist perspectives in the specific region, i.e., by whether the western world or the Soviet Union held sway, and also the domestic conditions within the territories that were reorganized. Left wing resistance to fascism in the various countries contended for power with the right wing fascist groups in all the countries. Ethnic considerations also prevailed.

In Yugoslavia, for example, the royalists opposed the communist National Liberation Front led by Josip Tito, but they were defeated. In Poland the areas that had been under German occupation and those under Allied influence found themselves in conflict. Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria became 'peoples democracies' with multi-party systems, but strong communist parties, and closely allied with the Soviet Union. With the withdrawal of all belligerent troops from Austria the country emerged as a neutral state, along the lines of Switzerland. Thus the question of reorganization of territories and boundaries in Europe became linked with the question of re-establishment of political institutions.

In every country there was also the challenge of reviving the economy and more specifically the transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy that implied choice of policies and path of development. Thus questions of economy also became intimately linked with the nature of state i.e., in the direction of socialism or capitalism. In this context the US, put forward what came to be known as the 'Marshall Plan', which meant essentially the transfer of more than ten billion dollars to Europe over a period of twenty years for the reconstruction of the economies of the European countries. It was argued that this infusion of money for the devastated economies would help counter the growth of communist alternatives in these countries by ensuring economic stability and a political climate in favour of capitalism and more specifically the US as opposed to the Soviet Union.

Apart from this, the agreement for formation of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was signed on April 4, 1949 between the US and some European countries, with the expressed purpose of 'containing communism'. The countries that came together for this alliance, which became essentially a military alliance against the Soviet Union, were United States, Britain, France, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxemburg,

Norway and Portugal. Later, Greece and West Germany also became part of NATO.

13.3 THE CHANGED BALANCE OF FORCES IN THE WORLD

Before World War II millions of people across the continents lived under colonial rule, whose destinies and, to a great extent, the quality of life, was determined by the imperialist nations that ruled over them. They were simply unfree and subjects of other nations rather than citizens. After the war, between 1945 and 1980 nearly all the countries of Asia and Africa, the islands in the western Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean became independent nations. Naturally this process affected the ruling countries that had waged the war in the first place.

By 1950 except for Indo-China the whole of Asia had been decolonized. During the 50s and 60s it was the turn of Africa, the British Caribbean colonies during the 60s, the smaller islands between 60s and 1981, also the Indian and Pacific islands in late 60s and 70s. By 1970 the only large areas left colonized were the settler regimes in Central and Southern Africa, and of course Vietnam, which gained its victory in the 70s. All this did not come easy. Thousands were imprisoned in India for instance, and the partition that accompanied independence of India and Pakistan has been a tragedy of immense proportions. The Japanese, French and British had to be driven out of the national territory of China by the communist led militias, which they did by 1949. There were long and labored national liberation movements, while years of armed struggle were needed in Algeria, Indo-China, Malaya, Angola, Mozambique and other places before national independence could be achieved. In the 50s Sukarno led the national struggle in Indonesia. The protracted nature of decolonization also becomes clear from the fact that the apartheid regime in Southern Africa could be overthrown only in the last decade of the century, and Britain returned Hong Kong and Portugal returned Macao to China only in 1997.

In the area now known as Middle East there emerged strong democratic regimes, in Iran a strong communist party as well. Iraq had a secular government. These were oil and mineral rich areas, where the independent regimes eventually collapsed, due primarily to the engineering of their politics by the forces of imperialism led by the US. Similar was the situation and fate of Palestine.

The first major effect of decolonization was the sheer increase in the number of nation-states, and of state members in the international system, which had to be accommodated within the dialogues and negotiations of international relations, and even if not treated equally in practice, at least to be accounted for formally. Subjects of interest to them, such as economic development, racial equality, and rights of indigenous people had to be incorporated. The language of legitimacy and participation had to replace that of coercion in international dealings.

The relationship of the new nations to countries that had earlier ruled them was one of, both, co-operation and antagonism, co-operation being expressed through seeking assistance and aid and antagonism through bargaining for

their own interests as opposed to having their wealth and economy being exploited for the benefit of the nations earlier ruling them and now more developed than they were. The associations formed by these new nations combined the agendas of national freedom and development, expressed through the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U.) founded in 1963 to pressurize the colonial powers to give up the remaining regions under their control as to develop co-operation among themselves, and the Non-Aligned Movement (N.A.M.) to forge a unity for better prospects in a world of inequalities. A landmark of this assertion was the Bandung Conference, in Indonesia, in 1955, attended by leaders of twenty-nine nations, to oppose imperialism, racism and atomic weapons and to argue for independent development of the countries that came to be characterized as the 'Third World'. At the same time they also appealed for and got both Soviet and US assistance and campaigned with the United Nations (formed at the initiative of the developed countries and based in the US from 1945) for their interests. Other such associations were Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to take care of their regional and specific interests in a world dominated by the western powers.

We will not go into the details of their aspirations for a middle path and their own specific paths to socialism and democracy through co-operating with each other. But it is important to underline here that just as the colonization and political control over these countries had contributed to shaping the history of the European nations that colonized them, so also the decolonization process and the existence of the former colonies as independent nations contributed to shaping post-War Europe. In fact it is not possible to understand the history of Europe without placing it in the context of the world as a whole, particularly from the sixteenth century onwards which marked the beginnings of capitalism and world economy that linked development of the European countries with underdevelopment of the Asian and African countries.

In the post-War world this becomes apparent from the fact that inter-imperialist rivalries were subdued by the necessity of co-operation among themselves to meet the common and united assertion of the newly independent nations. This was reflected in new international initiatives and formation of international organisations to which the new nations were admitted, but in a relationship that allowed for the domination of the imperialist countries in important decision-making and the steering of world affairs in their common interest. Secondly, this was reflected also in their diplomatic and coercive moves to isolate the Soviet Union by binding the non-socialist world into the capitalist system hegemonised by western Europe and the US, increasingly more the US. Most notably this was reflected in the war in Indo-China, Vietnam, the economic blockade of Cuba, the massacres of communists in Indonesia, and subverting the non-aligned leaderships to install leaders friendly to the west. Wars were now no longer on the soil of Europe, but exported to other continents. The changed balance of power in the world also forced the capitalist west to form new international economic organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), not simply for aiding the 'Third World' in following the capitalist path of development, but in also ensuring that these countries remained dependent on them even if politically they were

sovereign nations. We can see some of the consequences of this US and European co-operation in their own interests in the crises that have been erupting in west Asia, notably China, not to speak of Afghanistan (to give only the most obvious examples). The G-8, a grouping of the richest nations has emerged as a powerful body. The British tried to maintain their strategic political and cultural interests through the Commonwealth. It is often said that the formation of the six-member European Coal and Steel community in 1952 led, through very protracted and difficult steps no doubt, but eventually to an economic cooperation, both in the face of decolonization and domination of the US, to the European Union in 1992.

All this marked a new offensive against both independent development of the 'Third World' nations and the growing strength of the socialist countries, which formed a formidable bloc.

But on the other hand the isolation of the Soviet Union was broken. The Chinese revolution of 1949 meant both the emergence of a new socialist state and the fact that socialism had become an international phenomenon, supportive of national liberation and thus linked with anti-imperialism, all factors that necessarily affected the unchallenged dominance of Western Europe. Nationalist leaders throughout Asia and Africa, even if not communists themselves, were influenced by socialist ideas: Nehru, Yassar Arafat, Nasser, Tito, Nkrumah, to name just a few, and the FLN in Algeria. There were important revolutionary victories in Vietnam, Mozambique, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, all of Latin America veered towards socialist alternatives, and anti-imperialist regimes took root in Egypt, Iraq and Iran. As one political commentator has pointed out: 'Socialism emerged as the central fact around which most of the aspirations and conflicts on the global scale were shaped'. (Aijaz Ahmad)

Within the imperialist countries, the emancipatory ideas that the 1917 revolution had inspired, gained new grounds after the Second World War. Racism, women's equality, dignity of working people, minority rights, became part of popular movements in these countries as across the world. There was spread of all kinds of trade unions, mass organisations of women, students, theatre people, writers and other cultural activists. The 1960s were particularly years of anti-establishment sentiments, most notably the student protests that rocked the regime in France, and the later anti-Vietnam protests in the US itself. The UN as a body grew in this context to form associated bodies like UNESCO etc. to reflect the aspirations of freedom, peace, gender equality, against racism, for the rights of indigenous people etc., although it has remained dominated by the more powerful nations.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Explain the changes in balance of power following the Second World War in about 100 words.

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- 2) Discuss the formation of different international organizations and the purpose behind this in about 100 words.

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13.4 THE COLD WAR

It is in this context that we must understand the fierce rivalry between the Soviet Union and the US, which has been given the nomenclature of the ‘Cold War’. It has been described as “peace time unarmed warfare” between “superpowers”, a “diplomatic war” characterized by ideological hatred and political distrust in which there was no armed conflict among the superpowers. Thus war was never declared and diplomatic relations were maintained among the countries. It is seen as a bipolar confrontation between the United States of America and the Soviet Union that also involved allies or satellites of the superpowers. But as we can see from the description of the changes across the world after the war (in the section above), such a description is not only too narrow, it is also factually not entirely correct.

The ‘Cold War’ that began soon after the war and continued till the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 was, to begin with, a result of the realignment of the political forces in Europe and the change in the balance of political forces across the world. They wanted to go back to isolating the Soviet Union once the war had been won, and to them the greatest enemy now was communism. Their politics henceforth was directed not only at containing the Soviet Union, but also destroying the possibilities of socialist alternatives wherever they occurred. The arena was once again the world, but the battlefield shifted to wherever national leaderships refused to fall in line with the imperialist imperatives. Even real non-alignment was not acceptable to them. On the other hand the Soviet Union was no longer isolated in the wake of the successful revolutions in China, Vietnam, Cuba, Chile, the peoples democracies in Eastern Europe, and the huge success of national liberation in Africa and Asia, not to mention the upsurges in Latin America. All these countries received friendly support from the Soviet Union. India’s steel plants are a good example. Cuba would not have survived as an independent nation without Soviet support. The Chinese revolution gained a great deal from Soviet support, until differences arose between them in the 1970s.

Apart from the more complex factors involved, it is not factually correct to look on this period as ‘cold’ and not characterized by heat and violence. Again, to quote Aijaz Ahmad, “The 45 years between the end of the Second World War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union were years of an unremitting, ferocious, historically unprecedented civil war on the global scale.” It is only true that “there was no shooting war between the US and the USSR.” Close to two hundred wars were fought in the Third World for defeating independent and socialist initiatives of the newly independent states. Both the countries carried on intense propaganda to popularise their ideology. The Soviet Union set up the Cominform (the Communist Information Bureau),

'Radio Moscow' and supported some communist parties in other countries. The United States of America set up a Radio News programme called 'Voice of America' and supported the anti-communist political parties and movements in other countries. In March 1947 President Truman announced his 'doctrine' for opposing and 'containing' communism. The Marshall Plan similarly aimed at bringing the European nations under the fold of a capitalist path of revival of economy and tying them together through aid. Aid with conditions, became important instruments of domination. On the other hand, in the 1960s and 1970s, anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa were led by Communist parties, and figures such as Ho Chi Minh and Samora Machel were heroes in the entire world. While Soviet Russia and Communist China supported them, the US and the capitalist countries of Europe were opposed to them.

Three areas of conflict and which became theatres of war were Korea, Vietnam and later Afghanistan. In Korea and Vietnam the war was result of US aggression to prevent the northern communist regions from unifying with the southern regions to form complete nations under communist regimes. Even after the defeat of North Korea in 1953 the US continued to deploy its troops in South Korea. They also used aid for ensuring their domination. In Afghanistan US interference and support to feudal warlords led to Soviet support to a democratic regime, and it thus became an arena of serious conflict whose repercussions are felt to this day.

The US meanwhile had also gained its eminent status due to the lead in the possession of nuclear weapons, although the Soviet Union soon emerged as a challenger even in this field by 1949 and an arms race, encompassing nuclear weapons became a feature of the entire second and third half of the century. Although this did not lead to a third world war, entire generations of people grew up under the threat of a nuclear war.

Therefore it is in a very qualified sense that we can say that peace and stability was maintained during the years of the Cold War, through the years of 'détente' or co-existence of the two 'superpowers' or the competing ideologies of socialism and capitalism.

13.5 LAST QUARTER OF THE CENTURY AND COLLAPSE OF SOCIALISM

This balance of political forces and the advance of emancipatory politics received a setback with the crises within the socialist countries and the eventual collapse of the socialist states in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989-90, and following that a unipolar world, the new economic order, and the overwhelming domination of the US ("the sole Superpower").

This reversal was a result of many factors, and can be said to begin from the 70s, coinciding with the victory in Vietnam, but also a series of counter-revolutions beginning with Chile. Thereafter Latin America was subjected to the most oppressive repression, through a series of coups and political manipulations resulting in the establishment of dictatorships friendly to the US. It was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that Latin American countries were again able to assert themselves effectively through a series of policy changes that challenged the US economic dominance in their lives.

The most important factor was the crisis within socialist economies, arising to some extent from the fact that most socialist revolutions had been achieved in countries that were backward and a much lower level of economic development when the socialist regimes were established. They had to develop very fast to provide benefits to their citizens that the advanced capitalist countries had achieved. Moreover, governed by their ideology (socialism), they were concerned with achieving the higher standards of livelihood along with equality. This involved policies which either became unsustainable or caused hardship, or were seen by their citizens as a loss of promise. The crises led to the collapse of the socialist regimes. A factor also, particularly in the case of the Soviet Union, was its investment in helping revolutionary regimes across the world in their anti-imperialist struggles (Cuba is the most well known example) and newly emerged nations in their independent development projects (India's steel industry is one example), which meant fewer resources for themselves. The most important factor for their collapse is, however, the unsustainability of the sheer expenditure and resources required by the socialist countries, notably, the Soviet Union, in order to maintain 'the balance of power' amidst the combined military pressure exerted by the NATO alliance, even as differences and conflicts emerged between the Soviet Union and communist China. The nuclear and the arms race had a direct impact on their growth rates and development of consumer industries. Differences arose with China, on the other hand the US adopted a policy of open door and rapprochement with China. The collapse of the socialist regime in the Soviet Union was followed by the collapse of these regimes in the countries of Eastern Europe, which in turn has meant domination of the US but also greater pressure on the national leaderships of third world nations by the US. The US now with impunity dominates the international bodies like the Security Council and the UN, bending them to its own purposes, and has been able to intervene in various states to dictate their economic policies and also their political set ups. Iraq, Afghanistan, the support to Gaza, and the numerous conflicts across the world are a result of the unchallenged might of the imperialist countries to once again dominate the world without actually ruling other countries.

Check Your Progress 2

1) What do you mean by the Cold War? What were its consequences? Explain in about 100 words.

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2) Why did socialism fail? Answer in about 100 words.

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13.6 LET US SUM UP

As you would have seen the post-Second World War years saw many new developments across the world, which advanced humanity's march forward towards freedom and equality. It also saw the birth of popular movements on issues of livelihood, dignity and cultural aspirations. Much of this was inspired by the ideas and the example of the socialist experiments. The decline of socialist regimes has had the adverse effect of strengthening imperialism, the economic subjugation of the economies of the developing countries. It has also had the effect of increasing, as a consequence, the inequalities among nations and within nations. It has led to intense conflicts over the resources of the world, which in the conditions of desperation and attempts to divert this desperation for a better life, getting diverted into struggles over religion and identity. The policies of divide and rule, reminiscent of the hey days of imperialism, again characterize the uni-polar world.

13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 13.2
- 2) See Section 13.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 13.4
- 2) See Section 13.5