Adversaries and Critics

When Sir Winston Churchill wrote the sixth and final volume of his history of the Second World War, he took as his theme: ‘How the great democracies triumphed, and so were able to resume the follies which had so nearly cost them their life’. These words were written in 1953: that is to say, in the year Stalin died, six years after the ‘Cold War’ may be said to have started and seven years after Churchill himself had spoken, in Fulton, Missouri, of an ‘Iron Curtain’ descending across the continent of Europe. How far has his forecast proved correct? Had the democracies learned nothing from their experience? Since he wrote these words, the democracies have committed plenty of follies: misjudgements, missed opportunities and just plain mistakes. There is nothing very novel or surprising about this. Such follies abounded in the 1920s and 1930s, but the democracies had perhaps learned one thing: the need jointly to devise in advance means for managing, and as far as possible, guarding against, their more serious consequences. The lesson was forced upon them by the circumstances in which they found themselves in 1945. The principal means devised was the North Atlantic Treaty, signed in 1949, by which the North Atlantic Alliance was created.

Every generation probably regards its moment in history as being one of special importance. The Chinese salutation ‘may you live in interesting times’ is a reflection of this. For the generation which emerged from the Second World War, either from service in the armed forces or having grown up during it, this has seemed particularly true. The war was a watershed, in personal as well as in historical terms. In so far as it is ever possible to draw a line arbitrarily under past events, relegating them, so to speak, to history, this appeared possible in 1945, when the ‘post-war era’ began. There is a case for saying that it has not yet ended. The world is still living in the aftermath of decisions, policies and
attitudes which took shape at the end of the war and in the years immediately following it. The events of those early years have a very direct bearing on the current scene. The next section looks at the principal features of this scene.

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First and foremost is the overriding shadow of the East–West conflict. Soviet behaviour, which in practice meant Stalin’s behaviour, aroused serious misgivings among his wartime Allies. But there was still hope that the cooperation between the Big Three could be maintained; this was seen as a necessary basis for peace and stability, and for the enormous task of reconstruction in the post-war world. So great efforts were made by the Americans and British to preserve it. All too soon, however, it became apparent that this hope was to prove illusory and the efforts fruitless. The fundamental differences which underlay a wartime partnership based on expediency began to reassert themselves. The difference between the East and the West was, and still remains, one between two opposing and irreconcilable forms of society. The difference is both ideological and political. It is as much a difference between two views of the rights of the individual vis-à-vis the State as between a power bent on a policy of expansion and those determined to maintain their independence.

In basic terms, the West comprises those countries which profess the values of freedom of speech, political and religious tolerance, democratic representation and respect for individual human rights. More important, for the most part it comprises countries which also try to put these values into practice and are prepared to defend their independence in order to be able to do so. It would be foolish and naive to claim that the countries of the West have always been successful in their efforts, or even that they have all been consistent in making the attempt. There have been and still are plenty of examples of failure. Several Western countries have had, for shorter or longer periods, regimes which have shown scant regard for at least some of these values or have abandoned them altogether. None of them has been without blemish throughout the last 40 years. But the failures, regrettable though they undoubtedly are, give substance to the thesis; they are recognised as such, as lapses from a standard whose generality