COLD WAR AND AFTER

The phrase ‘new world order’ may prove to be an enduring rhetorical legacy of President George Bush. The answer to the question of whether there is in fact such a new international system is actually not entirely one-sided, or even two-sided. The Cold War is over and communism is waning. On the other side of the ledger, the nation-state remains the basic unit in international relations, national military force and economic power the main measuring sticks of influence in that world. Yet beyond these traditional fundamentals there has been an enormous transformation in the relations among and the factors bearing upon nation-states. The remainder of the discussion will attempt to address these great shifts, with some suggestions about useful analytic perspectives and future policies.

The Cold War ended very abruptly. Many in the intellectual community had staked out positions emphasizing the importance of the indefinite gradualism of détente and accommodation between the two sides, while experts on the Soviet Union and international relations generally did not foresee the fundamental weakness and ultimate collapse of the Soviet system. In fairness to the experts, very few others as well accurately predicted how the future would unfold. The end of the Soviet Union immediately transformed the constellation of power in the world. This is true in part because of the stark and intense character of the confrontation between the two superpowers, but primarily because of the extensive range of capabilities included in the term ‘superpower’. From a purely technical perspective, the two enormous nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union were not the only ones capable of extraordinary destruction. Modernization of British and French nuclear forces has brought them on a strategic par with the superpowers in terms of ability to bring utter devastation to other nations. The USA and the Soviet Union also supported very substantial conventional military organizations. If the American reliance on air power over time roughly corresponds to traditional British sea power, a parallel can also be drawn with traditional Soviet, and Russian, emphasis on enormous ground capabilities. Yet, whatever the military arsenals of third powers, analysis of international relations in comprehensive terms was very understandably drawn to conceptions of
‘bipolarity’ as a result of the prominence – and dominance – of the Soviet–American conflict. The conflict in total involved a great deal more than sheer military power, conventional as well as nuclear.2

As mentioned earlier, a range of cleavages, ideological, diplomatic and geopolitical, significantly divided the two superpowers and set them against one another. There was the philosophical confrontation, in practical as well as conceptual terms, between communism and capitalism. There was the equally stark confrontation between two very different conceptions of the history of man; on the one hand the gospel according to Karl Marx, and on the other the diversity of a broad western commitment to liberal democracy and generally open economic markets. Each of the superpowers commanded a large economy. Each maintained general authority within two large alliance blocs, granted such notable exceptions and non-conformists as France and Yugoslavia during the Cold War. There was an appropriately stark division between the two camps bifurcating Europe, which was in turn an arena of the two vastly destructive world wars of the twentieth century. There was a self-reinforcing quality to not one but a series of divisions that characterized the Cold War competition.

Throughout the Cold War, continuing into the age of détente engineered by Nixon and Kissinger in the 1970s, there was constant fencing for position and advantage in seemingly endless conflicts and confrontations around the world. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the most direct and dangerous confrontation between the two superpowers, was one result of this contest. The victory of the Soviet Union in the formation of the communist Castro government in Cuba led directly to US efforts to destroy the regime, which in turn along with the general strategic arms race encouraged Moscow to place offensive nuclear missiles on the island. Certainly external revolution linked to Moscow was one important factor during the Cold War; yet too much was made by tense American analysts of the deviousness, effectiveness and reach of a communist movement which was viewed as seamlessly linked through strong political bonds to Moscow.

None the less communist ideology, in more limited and much more ambiguous ways, was an important dimension of the Cold War international competition. Communist parties tied together through an international association were important components in the Soviet conquest of Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Ho Chi Minh, the great leader of the Vietnamese revolution, did spend time in Moscow and was an active participant in the Communist International in the period between the two world wars. Communist party activity at some level was no doubt significant in the political and revolutionary education of Fidel Castro.