12 The Cold War and its Hot Spots

The nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary (Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes, 1588–1679).

With the defeat of the Reich and pending the emergence of the Asiatic, the African, and perhaps the South American nationalisms, there will remain in the world only two great powers capable of confronting each other – the United States and Soviet Russia. The laws of history and geography will compel these two powers to a trial of strength, either military or in the fields of economics and ideology (Adolf Hitler, April 1945).¹

History does not repeat itself, but certain echoes from the past may reverberate in later centuries. In 1945, for instance, the position of the United States was curiously similar to that of Britain in 1815 (see Chapter 6). In those two widely separated years each country had emerged from a long and arduous war not merely victorious, but richer and more powerful than ever before. Nowhere was this more obvious than at sea. In April 1945 the US Pacific Fleet assembled for the attack on Okinawa 18 battleships, 12 cruisers, 16 fleet carriers, 18 escort carriers and some 150 destroyers. When they were later reinforced by the British Pacific Fleet, the latter could only contribute one battleship, three fleet carriers (only six were in commission in the entire Royal Navy), six cruisers and 15 destroyers.² And, if the US Navy, with 1200 major warships, dwarfed that of Britain, it made the other navies of the rest of the world seem microscopic.³

This naval supremacy was solidly supported by an economy that had grown by 50 per cent since 1939 and now produced one third of the world’s manufactured goods. While other once-great powers, whether defeated or victorious, were struggling to restore their ravaged lands and feed their hungry people, the metropolitan territory of the United States was untouched by war and its people,
who had suffered relatively fewer casualties even than the British, enjoyed the highest standard of living in the world. When the Second World War ended on 15 August 1945, the New York Herald Tribune did not exaggerate in boasting: ‘We cannot if we would shut our eyes to the fact that ours is the supreme position. The Great Republic has come into its own; it stands first among the peoples of the earth.’

In terms of national power this was an estimate very widely accepted in 1945. In many countries American supremacy was viewed optimistically and encouraged lively expectations of material assistance and protection. Among former enemies there was some despondency and apprehension. In Russia, however, the reaction was different. The Soviet Union had, so its leaders and people believed, won the Second World War by defeating the main forces of the main enemy on the main front, inflicting 10 million out of the total 13.6 million casualties suffered by Germany. In the process the Soviet Union had sustained losses, both human and material, that greatly exceeded those of any other belligerent. It now wanted, as Britain and France had wanted in 1918, full compensation. And it had both the will and the means to obtain it. In Europe nobody else had any significant military strength except the United States and Britain, who were withdrawing all the forces not needed for the occupation of a defeated Germany and demobilising most of them as fast as they could. The Red Army, too, reduced its strength by two thirds, but that still left 175 divisions supported by 25 000 tanks and 19 000 aircraft, an array of military power quantitatively superior to any alliance likely to be cobbled together against it.

Politically the position of Russia was even stronger. Although Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), the dictator of the Soviet Union, had been reinforcing his domestic position ever since the Great Patriotic War took a turn for the better in 1943, by intensifying his reign of terror, this was not known outside the Soviet Union. Public opinion in the United States and other countries was almost as impressed by the supposed achievements of communism as it was by the genuine victories of the Soviet armies. Rose-tinted spectacles were widely worn by Western politicians and journalists, not only during the Second World War but in its immediate aftermath, when they analysed or reported on Soviet conduct. In March 1946 it came as a shock when Churchill made a famous speech at Fulton in the United States about the ‘iron curtain’ that had descended across Europe ‘from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic’. He