If we were to write a brief list of world events in 2009, it might include: the North Korean and Iranian governments continuing with their own highly destabilizing nuclear programmes; fears of state failure in Pakistan; increasing violence in Afghanistan; and the United States announcing an increase in its troop numbers there. Presumably, it would also have to include pirates cruising the Indian Ocean hijacking ships; the cycle of violence in Israel and Palestine showing no sign of abating; China’s continuing rise; Putin and Medvedev’s attempts to define the role of post-communist Russia in the international system; and Europe’s different, but equally difficult search for a new role in the world. Finally, of course, 2009 would of necessity have to include what many would probably regard as the two most crucial events of all: Barack Obama’s first year in office as US President, and the entirely new phenomenon of leaders around the world being forced to come to terms with the near meltdown of the international financial system the year before. Indeed, these two events alone would suggest that 2009 was a year like no other – one that pundits and writers might look back upon in twenty years time and claim was of critical and transitional importance in the long history of the twenty first century.

But possibly the most important event of 2009 was not one that did happen, but rather one that occurred twenty years previously when communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, and the Berlin Wall fell. In other words, the end of the Cold War. Of course, for most young students today this event must feel as distant as British rule in India and as remote as the First World War. Certainly, for those born into a very different kind of world after 1989, the Cold War with its peculiar ideological logics and odd strategic imperative has to seem very bizarre indeed. However, as I will argue in this lengthy survey of the last two decades spanning the period between 1989 and 2009, it is almost impossible to make sense of the world we now inhabit today without looking at the Cold War and the way in which it ended. Indeed, the central thesis of this essay is that the world we have known since 1989 and the unfolding events of 2009 themselves – in Afghanistan and the Middle East, as much as in Russia, the United States and Europe – are directly and indirectly the by-product of a conflict that concluded peacefully and quite unexpectedly twenty years ago.

This survey thus provides a broad overview of the two decades following the end of Cold War in 1989. It is divided into three main sections. Section one begins with the unanticipated end of the cold war itself. Section two goes on to discuss some – though by no means all - of the main trends of the 1990s with a special focus on the United States, Europe, Russia and East Asia. The remainder of the chapter then looks at the so-called ‘war on terror’ (including the reasons for the war in Iraq) followed by a discussion of the longer term geopolitical implications of the world economic crisis.

Three broad theses will be advanced in this chapter. The first is that even if we speak of the world after 1989 as being ‘post-cold war’, we should never underestimate the extent to which this world was shaped – and continues to be influenced – by the way the cold war ended and the many problems and opportunities it left behind. Indeed, as we shall see, threats such as religiously-inspired terrorism – which showed no signs of withering away in 2009 – owed a great deal to the manner in which the cold war terminated two decades ago.

The second relates to US primacy and notes that even though one of the more obvious structural features of the post-cold war international system has been a renewed US hegemony – some have even talked of a new American empire - this new position of strength has not easily translated into a coherent foreign policy. This was true for Clinton in the 1990s. It was truer still for George W. Bush after 2000. And it remained true for Obama when he finally took over in 2009. Indeed, as nearly all writers noted when Obama formally became President in January, he probably faced more challenges than any other President over the past fifty years.

The third thesis is that new challenges to the status quo – and there are several, from terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons and growing instability in the Middle East – still look unlikely to destroy the underlying pillars supporting globalization. However, one thing might: the economic crisis that tore through the world’s financial system in 2008 leaving several major problems behind in its wake. The longer term consequences of the first major crisis of capitalism since the 1930s remain to
be seen. But even the most optimistic of analysts in 2009 had to concede that the world had turned an important geopolitical corner as a result, and that the world over the next ten years was likely to be a good deal more disturbed than it had been for the last ten. Interesting and potentially very dangerous times lay ahead.

The end of the Cold War

When major wars end they invariably pose enormous problems for those whose task it is to make the peace. This was true following the First World War in 1919. It was more obviously the case in 1945 when the Second World War concluded. And it was true once again when the last of the great ‘wars’ of the twentieth century – the cold war – finally wound down in 1989. But what was the cold war and how did its end impact on the international system?

The cold war was the by-product of the Second World War that left the international order divided between two great superpowers, both with formidable capabilities – the United States much more so than the USSR – and both representing rival social systems, one socialist, the other capitalist. This rivalry began in Europe when the USSR refused to withdraw from those countries it had originally liberated from Nazism. However, it soon assumed a global character as it shifted to Asia and the wider ‘Third World’. Here the real costs of the competition were felt most acutely in terms of lives lost (nearly twenty five million), development strategies thwarted and democratic aspirations compromised. Elsewhere the results were quite different. Indeed, amongst the great capitalist powers themselves, the cold war created a degree of unity and cohesion that the world had not witnessed for at least two generations. For this reason many came to view the bipolar system after 1947 as not merely the expression of a given international reality, but something that might be viewed as desirable too. Certainly realists like Kenneth Waltz came to regard the new international system, in which there were two coherent blocs under the tutelage of a single great power, and two superpowers balancing the imperial aspirations of the other, as more likely to produce stability and order than any of the possible theoretical alternatives.

The cold war should thus be regarded less as a war in the conventional sense – significantly the USSR and the United States never directly engaged in armed hostilities – and more a managed rivalry. This in the main is how policy-makers came to view the relationship; indeed, many came to accept in private (even if it could not be said in public) that their rival had legitimate security concerns that the other should recognize. This in turn helps explain why the cold war remained ‘cold’. It also helps explain why the superpowers acted with such caution for the greater part of the cold war era. In fact, given the very real fear of outright nuclear war, the shared aim of the two superpowers was not so much to destroy the other – though a few on both sides occasionally talked in such terms – but more to maintain the peace by containing the ambitions of the other.

All systems operate by rules and the cold war was no different. One can thus imagine the enormous shock waves produced by the collapse of this system in 1989. Hardly anybody had predicted such a development. Even fewer believed it could ever happen peacefully. Nor had most policy-makers planned for it. Indeed, one of the more remarkable achievements of policy-makers in the crucial years between 1989 and 1991 was the speed with which they managed to catch up with developments they had neither anticipated nor much looked forward to. At the end of the day however, one policy-maker more than any other played the most crucial role in ensuring the peaceful transition from one relatively stable order to another: Mikhail Gorbachev. No doubt others will insist that others like Reagan, Bush, Mitterrand and Kohl performed their parts on this particularly important stage too. But without Gorbachev first opening the way to change, and then refusing to close the door of change down through force – like his predecessors – he helped transform the world.

"The United States during the 1990s – and obviously before September 2001 – remained a superpower without a mission"

The United States: hegemon in a world without balance?

If the cold war period was marked by a clear and sharp divide between opposing socio-economic systems, the post-cold war order could readily be characterized as one where states were compelled to play by a single set of rules within an increasingly integrated world economy. The term most frequently used to describe this new order was globalization, a notion that had barely been used before 1989, but now came be to employed more regularly to define an apparently new system of international relations where, according to one reading, markets would come to matter more than states (a much exaggerated thesis) and boundaries and frontiers rendered increasingly porous – almost meaningless – by the sheer volume of cross-border activity.

Globalization however was not the only obvious by-product of communism’s collapse and the opening up previously closed planned economies. In terms of the distribution of power, the most significant consequence was what appeared to some as being the triumph of the United States over its main rival and the emergence of
what came to be defined as a new ‘unipolar’ world system. This was not something that at first seemed likely. However, as events began to unfold – most notably following America’s stunning military victory over Iraq and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 – it soon became obvious that the new world order that was unfolding was one in which the United States held an especially privileged position. Certainly, as the 1990s unfolded all of the most obvious indicators of power – hard and soft – all seemed to point to only one conclusion: that there was now only one serious global player left standing internationally. Indeed, by the turn of the century the popular view now was that the US had been transformed from a mere superpower (its designation until 1989) into what the French foreign minister Hubert Ve drine in 1998 termed a ‘hyper power’.

This new global conjuncture raised a series of important questions. The most central was how long could this position of primacy actually endure? There was no easy answer. Most realists, unsurprisingly, took it as read that other great powers would in time emerge to balance the United States. Others believed that because it enjoyed special advantage in nearly every sphere, the new US hegemony would last well into the twenty-first century. This in turn fed into a second debate concerning the exercise of US power under conditions of unipolarity. American liberals tended to advise restraint and the embedding of US power into international institutions as the most effective and acceptable way of exercising global hegemony. Others, of a more nationalist persuasion, argued against such constraint. The USA, they insisted, had the power. It had always used it wisely in the past. And there was no reason to suspect it would not use it wisely again in the future.

For a period however the inclination of most US foreign policy makers (especially during the Clinton years) was towards restraint. In fact, in spite of its great power advantage, there was no clear indication during the 1990s that the United States was especially enthusiastic to project its power with any serious purpose; indeed, according to some commentators, it was difficult to know what its purpose was any longer other to spread democracy and promote globalization. The United States may have possessed vast capabilities, and various American writers may have waxed lyrical about this new ‘Rome on the Potomac’. But there appeared to be no real desire in a post-cold war environment of expending American blood and treasure in foreign adventures. The United States after the cold war was thus a most curious hegemon. On the one hand, its power seemed to be unrivalled; on the other, it seemed to have very little idea about how to use this power or whether it really had to.

The end of the cold war and the disappearance of the Soviet threat may have rendered the USA more powerful. But it also made it a very reluctant warrior. In a very important sense the United States during the 1990s - and obviously before September 2001 - remained a superpower without a mission.

Europe: a work in progress

If for the United States the biggest post-cold war problem was how to develop a coherent global policy in a world where there was no single major threat to its interests, then for Europeans the main issue was how to manage the new enlarged space that had been created as a result of the events in 1989. Indeed, while more triumphant Americans would continue to proclaim that it was they who had actually won the cold war in Europe, it was Europeans who were the real beneficiaries of what had taken place in the late 1980s. There were sound reasons for thinking thus.

First, a continent that had once been divided was now whole again. Germany had also been peacefully united. The states of Eastern Europe had achieved one of the most important of international rights: the right of self-determination. Finally, the threat of serious war with potentially devastating consequences for Europe had been eliminated. Naturally, the transition from one order to another was not going to happen without certain costs being borne, most notably by those who would now have to face up to life under competitive capitalism. Nor was the collapse of communism in some countries an entirely bloodless affair, as events in former Yugoslavia (1990–9) revealed only too tragically. That said, Europe – an enlarged Europe – still had much to look forward to.

But what kind of Europe would it be? To this there was more than one kind of answer, with some, especially the French, believing it should now develop its own specific European security arrangements (an optimism that soon foundered on the killing fields of Bosnia), and others that it should remain closely tied to the United States – a view most forcefully expressed by the new elites of Central Europe themselves. Europeans could not agree either about what kind of Europe they preferred. There were genuine federalists who sought an ever deeper Union that would fulfill the European dream while being able to balance the powerhouses of the United States and Japan. There were others who feared such a development and, marching under the traditional banner of sovereignty, managed to play the Eurosceptic card with some success among ordinary Europeans, who seemed more critical of the European project than the elites in Brussels themselves. Finally, Europeans divided over economics, with a clear line being drawn between dirigistes, who favoured greater state involvement in the management of a specifically European social model, and free marketers – led by the British – who argued that under conditions of global competition such a protected system was simply not sustainable and that thoroughgoing economic reform was essential.

While many in ‘old’ Europe debated Europe’s future, policy-makers themselves were confronted with the more concrete issue of how to bring the ‘East’ back into the ‘West’, a process that went under the general head-
ing of enlargement. In terms of policy outcome, the strategy scored some notable successes. Indeed, by 2009 the European Union had grown to become 27 members (and NATO to 26). In the process, the two bodies also changed their club-like character, much to the conster-
nation of some older members who found the new en-
trants to be as much trouble as asset. In fact, according
to critics, enlargement had proceeded so rapidly that the
essential core meaning of both organizations had been
lost. The EU in particular, it was now argued by some,
had been so keen to enlarge that it had lost the will to
integrate. Still, it was difficult not to be impressed by the
capacity of institutions that had helped shape part
of Europe during the cold war being employed now in
quite new roles to help manage the relatively successful
(though never easy) transition from one kind of Euro-
pean order to another. For those realists who had earlier
disparaged the part institutions might play in prevent-
ing anarchy in Europe, the important roles played by
the EU and NATO seemed to prove that institutions
were essential.

Institutions alone, though, did not provide a ready
answer to what Europe ought or ought not to be do-
ing in a world system. Here again there was more than
one European view. Hence several analysts continued
to feel that Europe was bound to remain a largely ‘civil-
ian power’, spreading its
own values and acting as
example, but should not
become a serious mili-
tary actor. Others took
a more robust view. Eu-
rope’s growing weight
in the world-economy,
young, its inability to act as a united organization in
former Yugoslavia, not to mention the great capabili-
ties gap that was rapidly opening up between itself and
the United States, all compelled Europe to think more
seriously about hard power. The result was the birth of
the European Security and Defence Policy in 1998, fol-
lowed by a series of other moves that culminated with
the publication of the European Security Strategy (ESS)
in 2003 (EC 2003). Viewing security in broadly globalist
terms, where open borders and disturbing events in far
away places –especially poor ones – were bound to spew
up their consequences on Europe’s shores, Europe, it ar-
gued, was compelled by the logic of interdependence
to engage far more seriously with international affairs.

Defining a new international role for the EU however
did not by itself create the instruments or the capabili-
ties for fulfilling this role. Europeans may have wished
for a stronger Europe – though by no means all Euro-
peans thought in this way. However, there was marked
reluctance by most states to hand over serious security
powers to Brussels. Even the final passage of the Lis-
bon Treaty in late 2009 which advocated (amongst other
things) the creation of new posts that would give the EU
more voice on the world stage only passed after much
controversy; even then, it was still not clear whether the
new foreign policy positions would make for a stronger
European role in world affairs. Europe may have trav-
elled a long way since the end of the cold war in 1989. As
its many supporters pointed out, how could one judge
a project to have been a failure or in crisis when by the
end of the first decade of the 21st century it had more
members than ever, its own functioning currency, and
a greater presence abroad than ever before. However,
there were still many obstacles to be overcome before
Europe could finally (if ever) realize its full global po-
tential. It remained, as it had been since the end of the
cold war, a ‘work in progress’.

Russia: from Yeltsin to Putin and
Medvedev

One of the many problems facing the new Europe af-
ter the cold war was how to define its relationship with
post-communist Russia, a country confronting several
degrees of stress after 1991 as it began to travel the road
that would one day move it (hopefully) from what it had
once been – a superpower with a planned economy and
a formal Marxist ideology – to what it might one day be-
come – democratic, liberal, and market-oriented. As
even the most sanguine of Europeans accepted, none
of this was ever going to be easy for a state that had had
the same system for nearly three quarters of a century.

And so it proved during the 1990s, an especially pain-
ful decade during which Russia moved from being what
it had once been before – superpower that could effec-
tively challenge the United States – to a declining power
with diminishing economic and ideological assets. Nor
was there much by way of economic compensation. On
the contrary, as a result of its speedy adoption of West-
ern-style privatization, Russia experienced something
close to a 1930s-style depression, with industrial produc-
tion plummeting, living standards falling, and whole
regions once devoted to cold war military production
experiencing free fall. President Boris Yeltsin’s foreign
policy meanwhile did little to reassure many Russians.
Indeed, his decision to get close to Russia’s old capitalist
enemies gave the distinct impression that he was selling
out to the West. This may have made him a hero outside
Russia. However, to many ordinary Russians it seemed
as if he (like his predecessor Gorbachev) was conceding
everything and getting very little in return. Nationalists
and old communists, of whom there were still a signifi-
cant number, were especially scathing. Yeltsin and his
team, they argued, had not only given away Russia’s as-
sets at knock-down prices to a new class of oligarchs,
but he was also trying to turn Russia into a Western de-
pendency. In short, he was not standing up for Russia’s national interest.

Whether his successor Vladimir Putin had a clear vision for Russia when he took over the presidency matters less than the fact that having assumed office he began to stake out very different positions. These included a greater nationalism at home, a much clearer recognition that the interests of Russia and those of the West would not always be one and the same, and what turned into a consistent drive to ensure that the Russian economy – and Russia’s huge natural resources – served the purposes of the state and not just the so-called oligarchs. Nor did Putin (or his successor Medvedev) win many friends in the West with his brutal policies towards Chechnya and self-evident disdain towards human rights. Taken together none of this actually led to what some at the time persisted in calling – very loosely – a ‘new’ cold war. What it did mean, though, was that the West could no longer regard Russia as for ever being what it had earlier hoped it would become: a ‘strategic partner’ engaged in a simple transition towards ‘normal’ liberal democracy. Certainly, the West could no longer assume that Russia would for ever be in a state of almost irreversible decline. With almost unlimited supplies of oil and gas at its command, and with a leadership that looked determined to defend Russia’s interests, Russia on the surface at least no longer looked like the ‘sick man’ of Europe.

Still the West had much less to fear now than it had during the cold war proper. Russia, after all, was not the USSR. Economic reform had made it dependent on western markets. And ideologically, the new Russia hardly represented a serious global rival. To this degree there was much less for the West to be concerned about. In fact, according to many Russians, it was not the West that should fear Russia, but rather Russia which should be concerned about the subversive machinations of the West in general and the United States in particular as both tried to extend their economic and strategic ties with Russia’s once loyal allies in what Moscow continued to view as its own backyard. Having lost the three Baltic republics to the West, Russia was clearly determined to ensure that it would not lose Ukraine or Georgia. On this there could be no compromise. If Russia was to retain any claim to still being a major power in world politics it could not permit what it saw as western meddling in its sphere of influence. The scene was thus set for further conflict. In Ukraine this took the form of meddling in its sphere of influence. The scene was thus set for further conflict. In Ukraine this took the form of meddling in its sphere of influence.

East Asia: primed for rivalry?

If history continued to play a crucial role in shaping modern Western images of post-Soviet Russia – and Russian images of the West – then the past also played an equally important part in defining the international relations of East Asia; and a most bloody past it had been since the Second World War punctuated by several devastating wars, a host of revolutionary insurrections, authoritarian rule (nearly everywhere), and revolutionary extremism (most tragically in Cambodia). The contrast with the post-war European experience could not have been more pronounced. In fact, scholars of International Relations have been much taken with the comparison, pointing out that whereas Europe managed to form a new liberal security community during the cold war which served it well after 1989, East Asia did not. In part this was the result of the formation of the EU and the creation of NATO (organizations of which there were no equivalent in Asia). But it was also because Germany managed to effect a serious reconciliation with its immediate neighbours while Japan (for largely internal reasons) did not.

Nor did the end of the cold war do much to bring about a speedy resolution of these various issues. In fact, whereas the end of the cold war in Europe transformed the continent dramatically, this was much less true in East Asia where powerful communist parties continued to rule – in China, North Korea, and Vietnam – and at least two outstanding territorial disputes (one less important one between Japan and Russia, and a potentially far more dangerous one between China and Taiwan) continued to threaten the security of the region.

For all these reasons, it was taken as given during the early 1990s that far from being primed for peace, East Asia was still ripe for new rivalries. This was not a view shared by every commentator however. In fact, as events began to unfold, this uncompromisingly tough-minded ‘realist’ perspective came under sustained criticism. This did not deny the possibility of future disturbances: how could one argue otherwise given Korean division, North
Korea’s nuclear programme, and China’s claim to Taiwan? But it did suggest that the region was not quite the powder keg painted by certain scare-mongers in the wake of the end of the cold war. There were several reasons why.

The first and most important reason was the great economic success experienced by the region itself. The sources of this have been much debated, with some suggesting that the underlying reasons were cultural (Asian values), others that it was directly economic (cheap labour plus plentiful capital), and a few that it was the byproduct of the application of a non-liberal model of development employing the strong state to drive through rapid economic development from above. Some have also argued that the United States played a crucial role by opening its market to East Asian goods while providing the region with critical security on the cheap. Whatever the cause or combination of causes, the simple fact remains that East Asia by 2009 had become the third powerhouse in the global economy, accounting for nearly 25 per cent of world GDP.

Second, though many states in East Asia might have had powerful memories of past conflicts, these were beginning to be overridden in the 1990s by a growth in regional trade and investment. Indeed, though East Asia carried much historical baggage (some of this deliberately exploited by political elites in search of legitimacy), economic pressures and material self-interest appeared to be driving countries in the region together rather than apart. The process of East Asian economic integration may have been slow to develop (ASEAN was only formed in 1967). Nor was integration accompanied by the formation of anything like the European Union. However, once regionalism began to take off during the 1990s it showed no signs of slowing down.

A third reason for optimism lay with Japan. Here, in spite of an apparent inability to unambiguously apologize for past misdeeds and atrocities – a failure that cost it dear in terms of soft power influence in the region – its policies could hardly be characterized as disturbing. On the contrary, having adopted its famous peace constitution in the 1950s and renounced the possibility of ever acquiring nuclear weapons (Japan was one of the strongest upholders of the original Non-Proliferation Treaty), Japan demonstrated no interest at all in upsetting its suspicious neighbours by acting in anything other than a benign manner. Furthermore, by spreading its not inconsiderable largesse in the form of aid and large-scale investment, it went some of the way in fostering better international relations in the region. Even its old rival China was a significant beneficiary, and by 2009 several thousand Japanese companies were operating on the Chinese mainland.

This leads us then to China itself. Much has been written about ‘rising China’, especially by certain pessimists who argue – in classical fashion – that when new powerful states emerge on to the international stage they are bound to disturb the peace. China may look benign now they agree; that however, is not how things will look in a few years time – once it has risen. Again, though, there may be more cause for guarded optimism, in large part because China itself has adopted policies (both economic and military) whose purpose clearly is to reassure its neighbours that it can rise peacefully and thus effectively prove the pessimists wrong. It has also translated these reassuring words into concrete policies by supporting regional integration, exporting its not inconsiderable capital to other countries in East Asia, and working as a responsible rather than a spoiler inside regional multilateral institutions. Certainly, such policies are beginning to bear fruit, with once sceptical neighbours – even possibly Japan – increasingly now viewing China as a benign instrument of development rather than threat.

In the end though, all strategic roads in China (and for East Asia as a whole) lead to the one state whose presence in the region remains critical: the United States of America. Though theoretically opposed to a unipolar world in which there is only one significant global player, the new Chinese leadership has pursued a most cautious policy towards the USA. No doubt some Americans will continue to be wary of a state run by the Communist Party whose human rights record can hardly be described as exemplary. However, so long as China continues to act in a cooperative fashion, of band-wagoning rather than balancing, there is every chance that relations will continue to prosper – as Obama certainly hoped they would when he went out of his way during his first year in office to reassure China of America’s benign intentions.

But there is no guaranteeing the long-term outcome. With growth rates running at something like 10 per cent per annum, with its apparently insatiable demand for overseas raw materials, and enormous dollar reserves at its disposal, China has already changed the terms of the debate about the future of international politics. For some time to come, it may well remain what one observer has called a ‘colossus with a feet of clay’, overly dependent on foreign investment and still militarily light years behind the United States. But even such a colossus presents a set of challenges that simply did not exist in the much simpler days of the cold war. Indeed, one of the great policy questions facing the West in the second decade of the twenty-first century is how to devise policies that will accommodate China but without betraying its own core values. Of thing we can be certain though: China as a rising capitalist power now playing
by the rules of the market may turn out to be more of a
demand than China the communist power
in those far-off days when it denounced the imperialists across the ocean and called upon Asians to drive the
Yankees out of the region.

The war on terror: from 9/11 to Iraq

If the end of the cold war marked one of the great
turning-points of the late twentieth century, September 11 was a reminder that the international order that had come into being as a result was not one that found ready acceptance everywhere. Bin Laden was no doubt motivated by far more than a distaste for globalization and American primacy. As his many would-be analysts have pointed out, his vision was one that pointed back to a golden age of Islam rather than forward to something
modern. That said, his chosen method of attacking the
United States using four planes, his use of video to com-
minute with followers, his employment of the global fi-
nancial system to fund operations, and his primary goal of
driving the United States out of the Middle East (whose
control by the West was essential to the continued work-
ing of the modern international economy) could hardly be
described as mediaeval. US policy-makers certainly did
not regard him as some odd throw back to earlier times.
Indeed, the fact that he threatened to use the most mod-
ern and dangerous weapons – namely weapons of mass
destruction – to achieve his objectives, made him a very
modern threat, one though that could not be dealt with by
the kind of traditional means developed during the cold
war. As the Bush Administration constantly reiterated,
this new danger meant that old methods, such as contain-
ment and deterrence, were no longer relevant. If this was
the beginning of a ‘new’ cold war, as some seemed to ar-
gue at the time, then it was one unlikely to be fought us-
ing policies and methods learned between 1947 and 1989.

The very peculiar character of this new non-state threat
led by a man whose various pronouncements owed more
to holy texts than anything else, made it difficult for some
in the West to understand the true character of radical Is-
lamic terrorism. A few in fact believed that the threat was
more existential than serious, more functionally useful
for the United States in its quest for global pre-eminence
than actually genuine. Furthermore, as the controversial
war on terror unfolded – first in Afghanistan and then
in other parts of the world – few critics of a more radical
persuasion began to wonder where the real danger actu-
ally lay. Indeed, as the United States began to flex its not
inconsiderable military muscle and widened the war on
terror to include Iraq, North Korea, and Iran, some be-
gan to turn their critical attention away from the origin-
ial threat posed by radical Islamism towards the United
States itself. In this way the original target of 9/11 was
transformed from the early status of victim into the impe-
rial source of most of the world’s unfolding problems.

The various controversies surrounding the Bush Ad-
ministration’s responses to international terrorism should
not, however, obscure one simple fact: the impact that
9/11 was to have upon both the United States and US
foreign policy more generally. Most obviously, the new
threat environment provided the United States with a
fixed point of reference around which to organize its
international affairs; and organize it did, in the shape of
building close relations with those many states – Russia,
India, and China perhaps being the more important –
that were now prepared to join it in waging a global war
against terror. 9/11 also compelled the United States to act
in a far more assertive fashion abroad. Indeed, some of
Bush’s more conservative supporters believed that one of
the reasons for the attack on the USA in the first place
was that it had not been assertive enough in the 1990s. Fi-
ally, in what some saw as a near revolution in US foreign
policy, the Bush team seemed to abandon the defence of
the status quo in the Middle East. 9/11, they argued, had
changed the original formula whereby the United States
turned a blind eye to autocratic regimes that existed in the
region in exchange for cheap oil and stability. This was
no longer enough, especially when it involved the USA
doing deals with states like Saudi Arabia that produced
the dangerous ideologies that had inspired those who had
flown those planes on 9/11, or who directly or indirectly
had given (and were still giving) aid and comfort to ter-
orists around the world.

In this way the intellectual ground was prepared for
the war against Iraq in 2003. The war, though, still re-
mains something of a conundrum. After all, Iraq had
not been involved in 9/11, the regime itself was secular,
and it shared the same goal as the United States in at
least one respect: of seeking to contain the geopolitical
ambitions of Islamic Iran. For all these reasons, differ-
ent analysts have identified rather different factors to
explain the war, ranging from the ideological influence
exercised by the ‘neo-cons’ on President Bush, America’s
close relationship with Israel, and America’s desire to
control Iraq’s oil. No doubt all these things fed in to the
final decision. However, one is still left with more ques-
tions than easy answers, with possibly the most credible
answer being the less conspiratorial one that the United
States went to war partly because it thought it would
win fairly easily, partly because it got its intelligence
wrong, and partly because it thought –rather unwisely –
that building a new regime in Iraq would be just as easy
as getting rid of the old one.

Whatever the original calculations made by those who
planned this most controversial of all modern wars, it is
by now clear that this so-called ‘war of choice’ was a stra-
tegic blunder that neither delivered stable democracy to
Iraq nor inspired others in the region to undertake seri-
ous political reform. It has also had the doubly dangerous
consequence of disturbing the whole of the Middle East,
while making it possible for Iran to gain even greater
influence in the region. Finally, as result of its action in
Iraq, the United States and its allies have provided radical
Islamists around the world with a rallying point which they appear to have exploited with some skill. The bombings in London and Madrid were no doubt the result of many factors; however, few now believe they were entirely unconnected to what had been happening in the Middle East since 2003.

With or without Iraq, however, the West still confronted a challenge in the form of violent radical Islam, one that has not only fed off certain Western blunders and policies but draws strength from a set of cultural value and historical grievances that have made it very difficult to deal with effectively—without compromising what it meant to be part of the West. Herein, though, lay another problem: of how precisely to define this conflict. It was certainly not fashionable among some to characterize it as one between two different ‘civilizations’ (a term originally made popular by the American writer Samuel Huntington back in 1993). Nevertheless, there was something distinctly uncompromising about a conflict between those who on the one side supported democracy, pluralism, individualism, and a separation between state and church, and those on the other who preached intolerance and supported theocracy while calling for armed struggle and jihad against the unbeliever, the Zionists and their supporters in the West. Nor did there seem to any end in sight to this particular conflict. Motivated by a sense of the injustices done to Muslims around the world—most visibly the Palestinians—and spurred on by a vision of paradise in which there would always be a hallowed place for those who had died in the name of their faith, there would always be enough martyrs in the world to carry on the struggle against the enemy from Pakistan to the streets of Bradford, from Jakarta to the skies over Detroit.

**The world economic crisis**

In the midst of this ongoing ‘war’ against global terror two things happened that appeared to change world politics for ever: one was internal to the United States and involved the critical transition from one President who had been defined by 9/11 to a new leader who sought to change the terms of the debate about America’s role in the world; and the other was very directly linked to another great event in world politics—the near meltdown of the world’s financial system in 2008. These apparently unrelated events were, in fact, very closely connected. Thus as America began to grow weary of fighting an ethnically problematic and highly costly war against a hydra-headed enemy abroad it turned to one of the few serious American politicians who had been most vocal in his opposition to the way in which the ‘war’ had been conducted (Barack Obama had voted against the Iraq war and had for a long time called for the United States to abandon some of the more morally dubious means it had employed in combatting terrorism). Then, as it confronted what looked like an economic catastrophe in the fall of 2008, Americans in their majority transferred their support away from one party (the republicans) who had hitherto seen ‘government’ as the problem, to another (the democrats) which accepted that if the United States was to avoid another great depression it would have to adopt a set of radical policies that did not shy away ideologically from using the state to save the market from itself. Barack Obama may have been no radical. However, he did promise a new start to a nation facing a very real and measureable crisis. Indeed, when Americans voted for the first black President in late 2008—and did so in very large numbers—they did so less so out of confidence and more out of fear in the hope that he would restore America’s diminished standing abroad and bring back some sense of economic normality at home.

In large part Barack Obama succeeded in fulfilling his early and immediate promise. Thus within a year of his election in 2009 the prestige of the United States had never been higher (especially in Europe). On the home front meanwhile the financial system did at last begin to acquire some degree of stability (though only after the most unorthodox economic measures had been adopted). Still, there was no hiding the damage that had been done. Nor did there seem to be any quick ‘Obama fix’ to any one of the several problems still confronting the world’s most significant power. Indeed, in one area in particular—the Middle East—things seemed to get worse, in spite of Obama’s efforts in early 2009 to engage Iran, talk to the Palestinians and Israelis together, withdraw from Iraq, and build bridges to the Muslim public opinion. It very much looked as if it was easier in 2009 to talk about and promise change than actually bring it about. Indeed, one of the great problems he faced during his first year in office in 2009 was that many of the promises he made in the field of foreign policy all came close to foundering—without crashing completely—on the rocks of hard reality. Obama was undoubtedly talented and committed to doing international relations in a very different way to his predecessor. Yet, even a leader as capable and articulate as Obama could not bring about a new agreement covering global climate change (note here the failure at Copenhagen in December 2009), or compel the Russians to become more sensitive to western positions, or induce his allies in NATO to commit many more active troops to fighting on the ground in the escalating war in Afghanistan (what he termed a war of ‘necessity’ as distinct to the war of ‘choice’ in Iraq. Election promises were one thing: making the world a better or more secure place was something else altogether.

**“Once sceptical neighbours—even possibly Japan—increasingly now viewing China as a benign instrument of development rather than threat”**
Nor could Obama’s elevated rhetoric alter something that was fast becoming obvious to most observers in 2009: that the economic crisis itself had brought about a profound shift in the international order. Twenty years previously in 1989 communism had collapsed and American-style liberal capitalism had triumphed creating the conditions for a new world order. This had not made the 1990s perfectly peaceful. Nor had it eliminated danger. But it had provided the most stunning answer possible as to where the future might lay – namely with the West and the kind of economic system for so long associated with and championed by the United States. Now, with the unfolding of a crisis that was very much “made in America” by an American economic system that celebrated the hidden hand of the market over regulation and government direction, a corner had been turned, one that both weakened the global attractiveness of the American economic model as well as its capacity to act and solve global problems alone. This may have produced the necessary impetus leading to the election of a President of hope in the shape of Barack Obama. On the other hand, it could not but make the world a less stable place and America’s position within it less secure.

In conclusion, nearly twenty years after the end of a cold war that had produced such high expectations – some of them illusory – the world in 2009 seemed to be facing a more uncertain future. One should not exaggerate, of course. In Europe, peace reigned. Great power war was not about to destroy the structure of the international system. The actual numbers being killed in wars around the world was on the decline. Globalization meanwhile continued to benefit more people than it disadvantaged. Still, in spite of these many obvious and positive features, the future contained many uncertainties, especially perhaps for the United States, a hegemon by any measure but one that fast seemed to be losing its capacity either to lead others or to solve the many challenges confronting it. It may be too soon to talk – as some are already beginning to – of the end of the American era, or (more dramatically) of the collapse of what some of late have been calling a ‘new’ American empire. It is certainly premature to predict somebody else’s century replacing that of the United States. But only a few years after the collapse of its main ideological foe in the shape of the USSR, America no longer looked or sounded as self-confident as it once did when it appeared to be riding high during the glory days of the 1990s. Pundits have predicted the decline of the United States before – and been proved wrong. This time some believe they may be right. Perhaps another world order beckoned in 2009?

Guide to further reading


