

Cold War: Notes for UPSC World History

In this article, you can get a brief on the cold war. This is an important term in international affairs and affects world politics to this day, although the cold war first 'broke out' in the aftermath of the Second World War. Questions can be asked from this topic in the IAS exam, particularly the UPSC mains exam.

Background of the Cold War

The term "Cold War" denotes the absence of large-scale military operations fighting between the two opponents despite major regional wars, termed proxy wars, supported by both the sides. The USSR and the USA were left as two superpowers with political and economic differences as a result of the Cold War that split the temporary wartime alliance against Nazi Germany.

The seeds of future hostility were sown towards the closing years of World War 2. After the crossing of the Rhine on March 1945, the fall of Nazi Germany was inevitable. As such the Allies began drawing up the map of post-war Europe. The problem was each faction had their own idea about post-war Europe..

Each side held dissimilar ideas regarding the establishment and maintenance of post-war security. Foreign policy experts believed that while the Western Allies, who would go on to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), favored a democratic system of governments with a fair elections as a measure to resolve any issues that might arise in the future, the Soviet Union was insistent on installing communist governments in countries under its influence. Even the Allies were divided on the issue of how best to deal with a now-belligerent Soviet Union. The Americans were more than happy to let the Soviet Union do as it pleased as their goal mainly to achieve American economic supremacy that would undo the legacy of old colonial entities like the British Empire, while the French and the British favored complete independence of Eastern European countries, especially Poland, over whose independence both nations had declared war over Nazi Germany in the first place. Additional and independent and strong Central Europe would act as a buffer between the Soviets and Western Europe.

In April 1945, President Roosevelt died and was succeeded by Harry S. Truman. This caused a remarkable change in US-Soviet relations. Truman distrusted Stalin and opposed many of the changes that Stalin brought to the geopolitical landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, especially with regards to the "Polish Question". The Soviets had installed the communist government based out of Lublin, who were rivals to the Polish government-in-exile in London, whose relations with the Soviets had been severed following the discovery of the Katyn Massacre in 1943.

The 1945 Allied conference in San Francisco established the multi-national United Nations (UN) for the maintenance of world peace, but the enforcement capacity of its security wing the United Nations Security Council was effectively paralyzed by the ability of individual members to exercise veto power. Accordingly, the UN was essentially converted into an inactive forum for exchanging polemical rhetoric, and the Soviets regarded it almost exclusively as a propaganda tribune. Thus the stage was set for the longest period of geopolitical tensions of the 20th century, whose effects last to this day.

Causes of the Cold War

- During World War 2 the United Kingdom, France and the United States aligned another in order to defeat Nazi Germany. The USSR would join this alliance following Operation Barbarossa - the invasion of Russia by Nazi Germany. There were promises that the alliance would continue well after the war.
- After the war, however, tensions started rising up. The USA was the strongest power that emerged after the war. It was a superpower in economic and military strengths.
- The USSR was the second most powerful country and it had played a key role in Germany's defeat in the war. This increased its prestige in the world.
- After the war, in eastern Europe, many countries had communist governments. These nations saw the USSR with favorable eyes. Those that did not, were replaced by governments that looked at the USSR in a similar way
- The USA, as also the western European countries saw communism as a threat to its way of life and towards freedom also.
- The world was polarised into two blocs - the communist powers led by the USSR and the powers opposed to communism led by the USA. The former group comprised mostly eastern European nations while the latter by the western European countries.
- The USA began to view every development in the world as either supportive of or against the rise of communism. It even went to the extent of supporting colonial powers in their subjugation of the people if it meant curbing communism. This was their reasoning behind supporting the colonial domination of France in Indo-China.
- The arms race by the two powers also was a factor in rising tensions between them. It even extended beyond the far reaches of the Earth itself, when both the superpowers developed technology that would put their respective nations on higher technological footing than its rivals.

Military Blocs

During the height of the Cold War, the world was divided into the major military blocs created by the warring superpowers they are as follows:

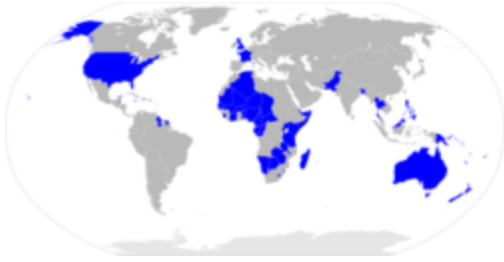
1. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) - led by USA
 - a. Canada

- b. Denmark
- c. Norway
- d. Portugal
- e. Iceland
- f. Britain
- g. France
- h. Belgium
- i. Luxembourg
- j. Holland
- k. Greece
- l. Turkey
- m. Spain
- n. Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)



2. SouthEast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) - led by USA

- a. Britain
- b. France
- c. Australia
- d. New Zealand
- e. Thailand
- f. The Philippines
- g. Pakistan



3. Baghdad Pact - led by USA (name changed to Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1958)

- a. Britain
- b. Turkey
- c. Iraq (withdrew after a revolution in Iraq in 1958)
- d. Pakistan
- e. Iran



4. Warsaw Pact - led by Soviet Union

- a. Poland
- b. Czechoslovakia
- c. Hungary
- d. Romania
- e. Bulgaria
- f. German Democratic Republic (East Germany)



Important Events during the Cold War

Some of the important developments in the cold war period are given below:

Korean War

In the first major conflict since the end of World War 2, a crisis occurred in the Korean peninsula when the Communist North Korea invaded democratic South Korea. This was the first test for the newly-formed United Nations to stop escalation between the two superpowers who were using their proxies to fight for them. A United Nations Army under the command of American General Douglas Mac Arthur pushed back North Koreans following the decisive battle of Inchon. However the push into North Korea and China threatened to escalate matters when the Soviet Union pledged to support its allies for what they saw as a fight "against capitalist tyranny". The war began on 25th June 1950 and ended on 27th July 1953 with the establishment of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Tensions between North and South Korea persists to this day despite decades after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Cuban Missile Crisis

The USSR deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba which were ready to be launched onto the cities of the USA. The USA responded with a naval blockade of Cuba and both superpowers are on the verge of war. The standoff ended after 13 days when the USSR withdrew the missiles.

Vietnam War

The US intervened in the Vietnam crisis in 1965 by sending troops to aid South Vietnam in its fight against communist North Vietnam. North Vietnam was supported by the USSR and China. The Vietnam war proved very costly for the US where they lost about 58000 men. The losses and anti war sentiment by its own people forced the US to withdraw its troops from Vietnam. In 1975, the Vietnam war ended with the fall of Saigon, the capital of the South Vietnamese government, with decisive victory for communists.

Prague Spring

This occurred in 1968. The communist government of Czechoslovakia tried to bring in reforms such as multiparty democracy and more freedom for the media. This alarmed the powers that be in Moscow. They feared this would cause a domino effect in Eastern Europe with every other nation asking for more concessions if the Czechoslovak government was allowed to continue its present course. The USSR sent in troops on the pretext of restoring order, leading to the collapse of the Prague spring was thwarted by the USSR which intervened with troops.

Afghan Invasion

Tensions between the US and the Soviet Union were abating in the seventies. But the situation in Afghanistan reversed this trend. The Afghanistan crisis further escalated when the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan to help the communist government there fight the Islamic insurgents called Mujahideen. The United States responded by supporting the Mujahideen elements in a war that lasted ten years there. The Taliban emerged directly as a result of this war. The US funded the Mujahideen through Pakistan's ISI. The Afghan war ended in 1989 when Soviet troops withdrew from there. This had long lasting consequences for South Asia itself. The

fighters from the Afghan-Soviet war were funneled into Kashmir, leading to a rise in insurgency in the state.

Mikhail Gorbachev

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev rose to become the leader of the USSR. He initiates capitalist reforms known as perestroika and glasnost. He also let the Berlin Wall to crumble in 1989. Finally, in 1991, the Soviet Union was disbanded and new countries Russia and others emerged as independent nations. Most of the eastern European countries have popular uprisings against communist governments.

Non-Aligned Movement

Another outcome of the cold war is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). When the cold war emerged, there were many newly independent countries in the continents of Asia and Africa. Most of them including India did not want to be aligned with either the USA or the USSR. This led to the development of the NAM which played a huge role in curbing the spread of the cold war to cover the entire globe. NAM was opposed to military blocs like NATO. The major leaders of the NAM countries who played a significant role in it were India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Indonesia's Sukarno, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yugoslavia's President Tito.