

# Effects of the Cold War

The Cold War had many effects on society, both today and in the past. In Russia, military spending was cut dramatically and quickly. The effects of this were very large, seeing as the military-industrial sector had previously employed one of every five Soviet adults<sup>[1]</sup> and its dismantling left hundreds of millions throughout the former Soviet Union unemployed.<sup>[1]</sup>

After Russia embarked on capitalist economic reforms in the 1990s, it suffered a financial crisis and a recession more severe than the United States and Germany had experienced during the Great Depression.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian living standards have worsened overall in the post-Cold War years, although the economy has resumed growth since 1995.<sup>[2]</sup>

The legacy of the Cold War continues to influence world affairs.<sup>[3][4]</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the post-Cold War world is widely considered as unipolar, with the United States the sole remaining superpower.<sup>[5][6][7]</sup> The Cold War defined the political role of the United States in the post-World War II world: by 1989 the United States held military alliances with 50 countries, and had 1.5 million troops posted abroad in 117 countries.<sup>[8]</sup> The Cold War also institutionalized a global commitment to huge, permanent peacetime military-industrial complexes and large-scale military funding of science.<sup>[8]</sup>

Military expenditures by the US during the Cold War years were estimated to have been \$8 trillion, while nearly 100,000 Americans lost their lives in the Korean War and Vietnam War.<sup>[9]</sup> Although the loss of life among Soviet soldiers is difficult to estimate, as a share of their gross national product the financial cost for the Soviet Union was far higher than that of the United States.<sup>[10]</sup>

In addition to the loss of life by uniformed soldiers, millions died in the superpowers' proxy wars around the globe, most notably in Southeast Asia.<sup>[11]</sup> Most of the proxy wars and subsidies for local conflicts ended along with the Cold War; the incidence of interstate wars, ethnic wars, revolutionary wars, as well as refugee and displaced persons crises has declined sharply in the post-Cold War years.<sup>[12]</sup>

The legacy of Cold War conflict, however, is not always easily erased, as many of the economic and social tensions that were exploited to fuel Cold War competition in parts of the Third World remain acute.<sup>[3]</sup> The breakdown of state control in a number of areas formerly ruled by Communist governments has produced new civil and ethnic conflicts, particularly in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>[3]</sup> In Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War has ushered in an era of economic growth and a large increase in the number of liberal democracies, while in other parts of the world, such as Afghanistan, independence was accompanied by state failure.<sup>[3]</sup>

Many nuclear legacies can be identified from the Cold War, such as the availability of new technologies for nuclear power and energy, and the use of radiation for improving medical treatment and health. Environmental remediation, industrial production, research science, and technology development have all benefited from the carefully managed application of radiation and other nuclear processes.

On the other hand, despite the end of the Cold War, military development and spending has continued, particularly in the deployment of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and defensive systems.

Because there was no formalized treaty ending the Cold War, the former superpowers have continued to various degrees to maintain and even improve or modify existing nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Moreover, other nations not previously acknowledged as nuclear-weapons states have developed and tested nuclear-explosive devices.

The risk of nuclear and radiological terrorism by possible sub-national organizations or individuals is now a concern.

The international nonproliferation regime inherited from the Cold War still provides disincentives and safeguards against national or sub-national access to nuclear materials and facilities. Formal and informal measures and processes have effectively slowed national incentives and the tempo of international nuclear-weapons proliferation.

Numerous and beneficial uses of nuclear energy have evolved such as the use of nuclear energy to create electricity. Commercial nuclear-reactor operation and construction have persisted, with some notable increase in worldwide energy production. The management of nuclear waste remains somewhat unresolved, depending very much on government policies. However, the quantity of waste produced from nuclear power plants is relatively small, and nuclear waste has been proven to be recyclable. Several countries, including France, Japan, and Finland, currently reprocess nuclear waste.<sup>[13]</sup>

As nuclear weapons are becoming surplus to national military interests, they are slowly being dismantled, and in some cases their fissile material is being recycled to fuel civilian nuclear-reactors.



Part of a series on the **History of the Cold War**

## Origins of the Cold War

World War II

(Hiroshima and Nagasaki)

War conferences

Eastern Bloc

Western Bloc

Iron Curtain

**Cold War (1947-1953)**

**Cold War (1953-1962)**

**Cold War (1962-1979)**

**Cold War (1979-1985)**

**Cold War (1985-1991)**

**Frozen conflicts**

**Timeline · Conflicts**

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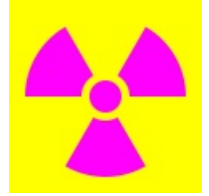
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## Radiation legacies

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Because of the military and non-military exploitation of nuclear fission, the Cold War brought forth some significant involuntary exposures to high-level radiation. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused large-scale destruction through intense blast and fire, as well as acute and lingering radiation. Moreover, as a result of decades of nuclear-weapons production, experimentation, and testing, exposure to radiation above normal background levels occurred to scientists, technicians, military personnel, civilians, and animals. Several significant radiation-related accidents occurred at military and civilian nuclear reactors and facilities, causing direct fatalities, as well as involuntary occupational and public exposures.



Because numerous diagnostic and epidemiological studies have since been conducted, the medical effects of radiation exposure are now better understood than they were during the Cold War. Comparatively large and involuntary doses and effects from radiation, chemical, and biological agents have been documented. Some exposures were from deliberate human medical experiments and some from residues of highly toxic materials at contaminated sites.

While the nuclear facilities and residual products of the Cold War are mostly contained within secure boundaries, that is not necessarily the case for nuclear-propelled submarines that have been sunk at sea.

## Security legacies

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Because of potential risk to national and international security, nuclear-weapons states have inherited substantial responsibilities in protecting and stabilizing their nuclear forces.

Not only must nuclear weapons and their delivery systems be secured and protected, other nuclear facilities and devices, such as reactors and propulsion systems, must be safeguarded. An appropriate continuing level of security is necessary through all life-cycle phases, from production to decommissioning. In addition, the entire military nuclear infrastructure requires protection, and that requires a commensurate allocation of funding.

Having once had widespread overseas nuclear bases and facilities, both the United States and the former Soviet Union have inherited particular responsibilities and costs. Moreover, all nuclear-weapons states had developed not only production and servicing facilities, but also sometimes extensive military staging and storage.

Although the Cold War has ended, domestic basing and overseas deployment of nuclear weapons has not ended. Moreover, the nuclear-weapon states remain in various reduced but palpable conditions of defensive alert.

Risks of deliberate, accidental, or unauthorized nuclear devastation remain. Moreover, terrorists and hackers continue to interfere with nuclear stability and confidence.

World inventories of weapons-grade fissile materials are substantial, much greater than now needed for military purposes. Until these materials can be demilitarized, they need to be security safeguarded. Many production facilities are yet to be shut down.

In the meantime, sensitive materials have to be safely and securely stored, pending their conversion to non-military use. In particular, the successor states of the former Soviet Union were generally not in a position to finance and maintain secure safeguards when the Cold War came to such an unprepared and relatively sudden end.

National security and defense for nuclear-weapons states must be frequently reevaluated. The international arms-control treaty and verification regime inherited from the Cold War is only slowly being updated to reflect the realities of a broken international security environment.

## Military legacies

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Internal national-security military postures still dominate behavior among sovereign nations. The former superpowers have not formally consummated their stand-down from Cold War military equipose.

Strategic and tactical nuclear and conventional forces remain at levels comparatively high for a peacetime environment. Localized conflicts and tensions have replaced the former bilateral nuclear confrontation.

As a lingering result, large inventories of nuclear weapons and facilities remain. Some are being recycled, dismantled, or recovered as valuable substances. As well, some chemical and biological weapons that were developed during the Cold War are still in existence, although many are being demilitarized.

Military policies and strategies are slowly being modified to reflect the increasing interval without major confrontation.

Because of large extant inventories of weapons, fissile materials, and rapid-response delivery systems, a mutual danger coexists for accidental, misjudged, or miscalculated incidents or warfare.

Other Cold War weapons states, are slowly reducing their arsenals. In the meantime, they have not abandoned their dependency on nuclear deterrence, while a few more nations have attempted or succeeded in carrying out nuclear-explosive tests and thus creating their own nuclear deterrence.

During the Cold War, an international fabric of arms-control constraint had evolved, much of it carried over as a beneficial heritage with institutional mechanisms for multilateral or international function and verification.

## Institutional legacies

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Aside from tangible measures of national defense, such as standing military and security forces and hardware, are various institutional structures of government and functionality that have less to do directly with military or security factors, but more to do with underlying public attitudes and risks. These institutional structures and perceptions have had their own challenges and adjustments after the Cold War.

Strong impressions were made and continue to affect national psyche as a result of close brushes with all-out nuclear warfare. In some cases this had resulted in aversion to warfare, in other cases to callousness regarding nuclear threats. Peaceful applications of nuclear energy received a stigma still difficult to exorcize.

Heightened fear of nuclear risk can result in resistance to military draw down. What at one time was fastidious attention regarding nuclear security, secrecy, and safety could deteriorate to lax attitudes.

Public impressions and insecurities gained during the Cold War could carry over to the peacetime environment.<sup>[4]</sup> Continuing support for the weapons establishment depends on public support despite diminished threats to national security. Agencies and departments created during a time of crisis no longer need to fill the same role.

In fact, these same institutional structures can be modified to carry out knowledgeable new missions associated with the cleanup and storage of highly dangerous and toxic materials. Some materials can be converted to non-military uses. Others need to be secured and safely stored almost indefinitely.

Also, misunderstandings that were prominent during the Cold War now need clarification so that closure can be reached, especially about the ability to demilitarize and peacefully use nuclear materials.

Underhanded practices in the name of national security are no longer countenanced. The existence of many third-world insurgencies and interventions is now being uncovered as the former cloak of secrecy unveils or their perpetrators confess.

## Economic legacies

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Among the more specific consequences of the Cold War was a huge fiscal mortgage placed on many domestic economies. Financial obligations included those necessary to avoid further dislocations while the change took place from a wartime footing to a peacetime environment. National military establishments and alliances had to be reconfigured. Highly dependent institutional frameworks were to be restructured, and new obligations were acquired by nations that were once bystanders to the East-West confrontation.

In the wake of the Cold War, freed or newly founded nations inherited expenses, commitments, and resources for which they were not prepared. The successor states also found themselves with contemporary national-security burdens and substantial environmental contamination legacies, all to be financed while new or revised civilian economies had to be instituted. Since the superpowers carried much of the confrontational burden, both Russia and the United States ended up with substantial economic liabilities.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Footnotes

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