

This is "Post-Cold War International Relations", section 9.4 from the book A Primer on Politics (v. 0.0). For details on it (including licensing), [click here](#).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#). You can browse or download additional books there. You may also download a PDF copy of [this book](#) (831 KB) or [just this chapter](#) (116 KB), suitable for printing or most e-readers, or a [.zip file](#) containing this book's HTML files (for use in a web browser offline).

Has this book helped you? Consider passing it on:



Help Creative Commons

Creative Commons supports free culture from music to education. Their licenses helped make this book available to you.



Help a Public School

DonorsChoose.org helps people like you help teachers fund their classroom projects, from art supplies to books to calculators.

[← Previous Section](#)

[↑ Table of Contents](#)

[Next Section →](#)

9.4 Post-Cold War International Relations

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section you will learn:

1. The role and function of intergovernmental organizations.
2. The role and function of actors outside of the formal state, such as non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations.

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s changed the foreign policy equation radically. Gone, or at least greatly reduced, was the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. It has been replaced by a somewhat multipolar world, in which the United States is the dominant military power, but finds itself among competing power centers in Europe, China, India and Russia, with radical change occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, potential conflicts with Iran, and the threat of global terrorism a reality since the tragedies of 9-11.

So while this is a world still defined by anarchy, it is not a world that appears to sit on the edge of some version of World War III. The issues that define foreign policy may have more to do with resource allocation and environmental protection than with negotiating a nuclear standoff. So the end of the Cold War coincided with and perhaps accelerated the rise of other organizations who are now players in the field of international relations. While some of these institutions grew out of the end of World War II, their role in the world perhaps been magnified since the 1990s.

International Institutions

Even as the Cold War dragged on, the nations of the world created international forums for attempting to address disputes between nations. World War I, the war to end all wars, as it was known at the time, prompted the victors to create an international body known as the League of Nations. At its peak, it included 58 nations, and created a number of forums for addressing political and economic issues. It lasted from 1920 to 1942, and suffered immediately from the failure of the United States to join. The U.S. became rather isolationist following World War I, the end of which created only an uneven peace and seemed to foster as many problems as it solved. Nonetheless, the league represented the high point of intrawar idealism, built on a belief that nations could talk instead of shoot, and that diplomacy would solve more problems than would bombs. Despite its best intentions, it was largely powerless, and the member nations failed to act when Italy invaded Italy unprovoked in 1935. The league effectively collapsed with the start of World War II.

Following the end of the war, however, the nations gathered to try it again, creating the **United Nations** in 1947. The U.N., headquartered in New York City, declared its support in its charter for a broad range of human rights, and attempted to provide a multilateral forum for talking things out. Although every member nation gets one vote, a certain number of decisions must be funneled through the 15-member Security Council, which consists of five permanent members, including the U.S., France, China, Russia and the United Kingdom. The other 10 members are elected by the General Assembly to two-year terms, with each region of the globe represented on the council.

The five permanent members each has veto power, and can block action by the council. And since the members are often taking what can only be described as a realist perspective on their approach to foreign policy, Russia may seek to block concerted action in war-torn Syria, where it has interests, just as the U.S. will block U.N. resolutions to condemn Israel's handling of the Palestinian question. Which is, in case you've missed it, whether there will ever be a fully sovereign Palestinian state. The Security Council's permanent membership is overwhelmingly white and western. One suggestion has been to add Brazil, India, Germany and Japan (sometimes called the G-4) as permanent members, plus perhaps one African and one Arab state. The existing permanent members haven't exactly jumped on that bandwagon, as doing so would reduce their power on the council. The U.S. supports adding Japan and perhaps India; the Chinese oppose adding Japan. Great Britain and France have supported adding the entire G-4.

The U.N., through its member nations and its various branches, has had some success. Member nations have contributed combat troops for peacekeeping missions, which attempt to separate belligerent groups in one country or region so as to forestall all-out war. It has in fact, since its inception, negotiated 172 peace settlements that have prevented all-out war in various parts of the world. U.N.-led efforts, via the World Health Organization, to stamp out various diseases have met with some success, as few nations will object to efforts to end deadly diseases such as smallpox. U.N. cultural efforts have probably also helped preserve important historical sites all over the world, and have at least underscored the importance of preserving some of our shared past. So while the U.N. hasn't managed to end war, it has not been an abject failure.

The U.N. includes the International Court of Justice, which has been used to settle disputes between nations. It has 15 justices elected from the U.N. General Assembly, and while the Security Council has the ability to enforce its decisions, council members may also veto that action. Consequently, the court has acted with mixed success. In 1984, for example, the court ruled that U.S. efforts in Nicaragua in fact violated international law;

the U.S. ignored the decision. In other instances, the court has been able to help solve border disputes between nations. Special courts also have been established by the U.N. to try war criminals from conflicts in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

Other international organizations have had some impact globally, particularly in economic areas. The **World Bank** and the **International Monetary Fund** have attempted to spur economic developments and end poverty, with decidedly mixed results. Critics abound on both the left and the right. Conservative critics say they waste too much money; liberal and left critics say it simply helps cement the economic dominance of the western world. Sometimes they fund projects that make sense, such as wastewater treatment projects around the world, while at other times, they support efforts, like digging a canal to flood a seasonal river in Africa to produce fish in the desert, manage only to produce the most expensive fish in the world. Similarly, the **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, which is basically a forum for resolving trade disputes and for encouraging open trade, is neither all good nor all bad.

Not every **intergovernmental organization (IGO)** is global in scope. The world is peppered with regional organizations, ranging from the **European Union (EU)** to the Organization for African Unity.

Figure 9.2 [To Come]: Intergovernmental Regional Organizations



The EU is particularly noteworthy. It grew out of the end of World War II, beginning with a customs union to ease trade between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. From there it grew into trade agreements over coal and steel, to the European Common Market, and finally to the EU in 1993. It now has 27 member states in a political and economic union. While not quite the United States of Europe, it does have an elected parliament with the ability to make some common law for the entire group, and a common currency, the euro. Travel and trade over national borders is greatly eased, and crossing from one EU state to another is now little more complicated than crossing from one U.S. state to another.

No other intergovernmental organization is quite that extensive. For example, ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Countries, has 10 member states and focuses on promoting economic development and shared expertise and resources. The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** is a relic of the Cold War. Originally created to help forestall Soviet aggression in Europe, it remains a mutual defense pact between the U.S., Canada and much of Europe. An attack on one member is regarded as an attack on all, so that the U.S. response to 9.11 was in fact at NATO response.

To the extent that international institutions work at all, it is because nations adhere to what the institutions say. While a hard-line realist perspective would encourage ignoring the U.N. or the WTO, a liberal perspective would suggest that nations go along if only because it's in their interest for others to do the same. A nation can't very well expect another nation to observe the rule of law if it doesn't do so itself. International law therefore works because of reciprocity—each state expects the others to behave the same way, so it adheres to the law to encourage others to do the same.

Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations, or NGOs as they are often known, are essentially groups of citizens, often of multiple nationalities, who work together to try to achieve social change on a global scale. So in one way they are international interest groups, lobbying for change with the governments of the world. But they also often are groups who take action, working for better treatment for political prisoners (Amnesty International), better health care (Doctors Without Borders), or better access to clean water (Rotary International and WaterAid).

NGOs rely on moral suasion—compelling governments to do what is right and learning to see that as in their own self-interest. They also rely on fund-raising in wealthy countries so they can deliver services and help people in less-fortunate parts of the world. They can and do make a difference, from building schools in Ethiopia to providing clean drinking water in Angola and Bangladesh. Governments sometimes get unhappy with the representatives of NGOs and kick them out, but like a pesky wasp, they will try to come back when possible. In democratic states, NGOs take on the role of interest groups who then push for particular approaches to foreign policy.

Multinational Corporations

The largest companies on earth now span the globe. McDonald's has restaurants in 100 countries; Wal-Mart and its French counterpart, Carrefour, can be found around the world. Ford builds cars in the U.S., Canada and Europe; General Motors models are produced in both Detroit and Shanghai. Airbus is attempting to circumvent competition with Boeing by building a plant in the U.S., and Toyota, Nissan and Honda have built cars in both the U.S. and Japan for nearly 30 years.

So, realistically, these companies and the people who run them owe their allegiance to no country in particular. They are merchant princes now, whose interests are scattered around the globe and whose reach is consequently that broad. This makes it harder for sovereign states to clamp down on their activities. The era of global capital means they are fluid and mobile. They can leave if they have to. Of course leaving a market entirely poses problems for sales, and the reason firms locate in multiple markets is to develop sales in those markets. But as the goal of those firms, as with most if not all firms, is to make a profit, they become political players in trying to get sovereign states to keep markets open and trade flowing, regardless of what other costs that might entail.


Multinational corporations may move operations to nations with lower human rights or environmental standards; companies moved factories from the Philippines when that nation adopted more worker-friendly labor laws. On the other hand, rising standards of living and more wealth represented by those jobs tend to eventually put pressure on governments to improve human rights and environmental conditions, though that can take a long time.


KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The post-World War II and post-Cold War eras have seen the rise of extra-governmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations, as major players in international relations.

EXERCISE

1. Identify and research an NGO. What is this organization's objective? In what countries does it operate? What is its annual budget and where does it get its funding? Does it appear to be successful?

 [Previous Section](#)

 [Table of Contents](#)

[Next Section](#) 