From the perspective of half a century, the early Cold War is distant history. As long as the seemingly interminable conflict lasted, contemporaries were mainly preoccupied with its origins. Its unexpected termination changed the perspective, bringing to the fore the Cold War’s legacy. Trying to understand a legacy of history means focusing not so much on what was important at the time as on what counts as important in retrospect. This includes institutions that have survived, events that resulted in developments with lasting consequences, as well as ideas that continue to inspire. Outstanding legacies of the first half of the Cold War are international structures established at its beginning, the long-term consequences of the Korean War of 1950–53, and the nuclear weapons that had started accumulating by the end of the period as a result of policies pursued during the preceding twenty-five years.

Enduring International Institutions

The world that has emerged from the Cold War is markedly different from that which followed World War II. Yet the incipient East–West confrontation left behind an array of international institutions of mainly American origin, lending support to the observation that “the world the United States and its allies created after World War II remained intact,” regardless of the Cold War interlude, after which it was “simply consolidated and expanded.”1 In fact, the relevant institutions did not remain intact, but proved resilient as well as adaptable all the same.

Foremost among the new American creations, the United Nations (UN) has since been criticized as ineffective or worse, ironically, more in the United States than in any other country. Its core Security Council of five veto-wielding permanent members was poorly designed, reflecting the distribution of power in 1945, including not only the victorious United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, but also Nationalist China and France as their clients. It has become anachronistic, yet not dispensable. After the UN went into decline during the Cold War, the Council reaffirmed its authority in the absence of a competitor, making the main issue its reform rather than abolition. The problem could have been avoided if Washington’s original proposal to establish a mechanism that would allow for enlargement of the select group by bringing in newly rising powers, citing particularly Brazil, had not failed on British opposition.
The Early Cold War and its Legacies

The UN has been described as a replica of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, “fundamentally a traditional alliance” of the great powers of the day that would enable them to orchestrate the world while balancing each other. To the American architects of the project, however, alliances were an Old World abomination, and balance of power a prescription for war rather than for peace. President Franklin D. Roosevelt conceived of the position of the original “four policemen” on the Security Council not as one of privilege but of responsibility. So, too, did his successor Harry S. Truman, praised by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for having understood that “the responsibility of the great states is to serve and not dominate the peoples of the world.” In any case, for the world’s majority of developing nations, which soon became the majority of UN members, the organization became the main forum for asserting their growing international influence.

The UN project sought to apply the principles of Roosevelt’s New Deal to promote the rule of international law as the “common law of mankind.” Despite appearances to the contrary, the Cold War did not bring about a decline of international law but its maturation. Before the conflict escalated, the UN General Assembly had managed in 1948 to pass unanimously the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, thanks to abstention by the Soviet Union and its allies, joined by the duo of Saudi Arabia and South Africa. Although not legally binding, the declaration led to the adoption of covenants that, ratified by 1976 by the requisite number of countries, assumed the force of law, inducing a growing, if grudging, respect for human rights.

After the experience of two world wars, the UN understandably focused on security in the military sense. It promised “collective security,” which presupposed collective will to face down aggressors if necessary with the force of arms, but delivered only “selective security” on occasions when the permanent members of the Security Council did not see their important interests being at stake. Peacekeeping, not originally envisaged in the UN Charter, was invented as a modest substitute and, typically entrusted to personnel from developing nations, subsequently expanded to become the biggest item in the UN budget.

Some of the UN’s specialized agencies, initially included in it as something of an afterthought, became more important than its core because of their agenda concerning the increasingly relevant non-military aspects of security. The World Health Organization, for example, assumed the role of global provider of health security, the Food and Agriculture Organization of food security. The controversial agencies for economic development indirectly linked with the UN system – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – were likewise able to start operating thanks to Soviet boycott, and gradually established themselves as developing nations gained influence in the management of these institutions. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) languished during the Cold War, but provided the foundation for the establishment of the World Trade Organization afterward.

Regionalization and Militarization

Even before the East–West conflict escalated, the adequacy of the world organization had already been questioned in Latin America. After the Roosevelt administration repudiated the Monroe Doctrine by adhering to the 1945 Act of Chapultepec, which committed the United States to upholding hemispheric security collectively rather than enforcing it unilaterally, Latin American governments insisted on including in the UN Charter the right to regional self-defense, exempt from the veto power of the Security Council. Supported by Soviet leader Iosif V. Stalin for his own reasons to help him legitimize Moscow’s bilateral treaties with its Eastern European dependencies, the exemption not only allowed for the subsequent formation of regional military alliances but also facilitated the later growth of their regional substitutes.
The American internationalists’ concept of economic security reflected their belief that economic interdependence fostered both national and international security. The belief underlay the strategy of containment, inaugurated in 1947 with the Marshall Plan for the economic recovery of Western Europe as its key component, as originally conceived by the far-sighted U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan. While the policy soon became controversial, not least with Kennan himself, and was in any case limited by the life-span of the Soviet Union, the Marshall Plan has continued to live on as one of the Cold War’s least controversial legacies. Having fulfilled its original purpose, it not only provided the administrative structure for the Western nations’ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, but has also been repeatedly invoked in crises for its “institutional architecture in which governments, international organizations, and markets interact so as to create the best possible environment” for the economic and political recovery of ravaged regions.5

The Marshall Plan’s reputation has been in contrast with that of America’s “national security state,” which emerged at the same time. Its iconic National Security Council, National Security Agency, Department of Defense, and Central Intelligence Agency have been frequent targets because of their practices, from inflating expenditures for alleged defense needs to indulging in abuses in the name of security. But the dreaded “garrison state” never came about and the permanence of the institutions, regardless of changes of administration and a changing security environment has proved their functionality in a political system sufficiently capable of correcting its excesses and blunders.6

In the fall of 1947, the insulation of the Soviet-controlled part of Europe from the Marshall Plan resulted in the division of the Continent that would last for over forty years. The immediate effect was the conclusion in Rio de Janeiro of a treaty to defend Latin American countries against the advance of communism by military means, followed the year after by the establishment of the Organization of American States (OAS). While the defense was never needed and the treaty would unravel even before the Cold War ended, the OAS has managed to survive because its “genius, or individuality” has been “mainly in the field of economic and social development.” 7 Even so, the subsequent rise of Latin America’s own regional structures independently of the United States put the organization’s future in doubt, suggesting the need for different institutional arrangements for interaction between the north and the south of the hemisphere.

The Rio treaty provided the model for the establishment in 1949 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), history’s longest-lasting, as well as atypical, military alliance. A European rather than American initiative, it was originally meant for reassurance rather than for defense, with the intent not to plan for military action but to avoid having to plan for such. Even after the United States sponsored the alliance, it initially envisaged its own contribution to be mainly political and economic, anticipating an “indefinite period free of any military emergency.”8 Washington’s contingency plans, kept hidden from its allies, though not so hidden from proficient Soviet spies, envisaged a retreat from Europe before trying to liberate it from overseas, as in World War II. The Soviet Union did not find it necessary to respond to the creation of NATO by creating an alliance of its own in addition to the already existing network of bilateral treaties with its Eastern European dependencies.

The launching of NATO accelerated but did not start the militarization of the Cold War, which had started the year before because of Stalin’s attempt to compel a settlement in Germany on his terms by imposing the Berlin blockade at the risk of a military confrontation with the Western occupation powers. Challenging them to force the blockade, the possible confrontation was avoided, thanks to the improbable success of the airlift they organized to keep supplying the population of the city. Although the blockade was subsequently lifted, Stalin’s apparent readiness
to take the risk gave the Cold War a military dimension it never lost. The Soviet Union, in conformity with its Marxist ideology, continued to regard the conflict as an essentially political one, but the United States, as the main guarantor of Western security, came to conceive of it primarily in military terms. Consequently, as philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “the American nation has become strangely enamored with military might.”

Among the casualties of the militarization was the Council of Europe, which had been promoted by Britain as a political complement of NATO in the hope of bringing together additional Western European states and, eventually, all of Europe. “Passed over in contemptuous silence” by the Soviet Union, “as a contemporary British observer noted, “because of its remoteness from military affairs,” the Council remained out of the limelight during the Cold War, but afterward it did bring in all European states, with the sole exception of Belarus, with remarkable effect. Having adopted the European Convention of Human Rights in the Cold War’s darkest years, it proceeded to establish in 1959 the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, where citizens of any member state can now find redress by suing their sovereign governments, the largest caseload coming from Russia.

The main features of the settlement in Europe that would later end the Cold War where it had started had already emerged by 1950, although they were not visible to contemporaries. The Continent had been divided and Germany split in two, but the manner of the division prefigured how they would be reunited and the conflict resolved. The Marshall Plan laid the foundations of Western Europe’s unprecedented prosperity under a reformed capitalist system, just as the Sovietization of Eastern Europe under communist rule imposed there a political and economic system bound to fail. At the same time, NATO brought West Europeans together in a lasting security arrangement with the United States just as the unity of international communism, in which Stalin had invested Soviet security, started cracking in Eastern Europe following his split with Yugoslavia. If the Cold War nevertheless continued, this was as a result of its extension to Asia after the unsuccessful attempt by North Korea’s communist regime to forcibly reunify the peninsula by invading its southern part in July 1950.

The Consequences of the Korean War

The Korean War, still not formally concluded after its end in armistice in 1953, was replete with far-reaching consequences. Having provoked American and then Chinese intervention, it delayed rapprochement between the two countries for twenty years. In Europe, its outbreak accelerated movement toward Western European integration, which, in its final effects, would make the Continent the most peaceful part of the world. The extension of the superpower competition beyond Europe prompted the rise and decline of the nonaligned movement in what was then called the Third World and would eventually emerge as the most dynamic part of the world.

“It was the Korean war and not World War II,” reminisced American diplomat Charles Bohlen, “that made us a world military-political power.” The resulting worldwide network of U.S. military bases, however, was conducive to “imperial overstretch” of what Norwegian historian Geir Ludestad termed America’s European “empire by invitation,” bearing the seeds of its own later relative decline. Stimulated by the war, U.S. defense spending increased by a margin not seen since World War II and, although never to be seen again, would eventually climb to reach nearly the level of all other nations combined, regardless of the dividend that was expected to accrue from the peaceful termination of the Cold War.

Misperceived as a prelude to a Soviet attack in Europe, the shock of the aggression in East Asia instilled NATO with the military substance it had been lacking before. Since, however, it
was never tested in battle as long as the Cold War lasted, the efficacy of the alliance in fighting its main adversary remains a matter of conjecture. In the absence of the test, its indisputable achievements have been political. NATO accommodated the diverse security interests of its unequal members, respected by the United States to a degree not common for a great power. It co-opted former enemies to reconcile them, induced nations with different military traditions to implement civilian control of their militaries, and acculturated their high-ranking officers in habits of multilateral day-to-day cooperation.

NATO’s first enlargement, in 1954, which brought in Greece and Turkey – the second largest contributor of troops fighting alongside the United States on the Korean front – was far more consequential than could be foreseen. It not only helped mitigate the two nations’ traditional enmity but also set Turkey on course toward democracy. Moreover, it opened the door to Turkish immigration to Western Europe, starting to change Europe’s demography and cultural interaction, reorienting its security interests toward the Mediterranean, and ensuring Turkey’s indispensable future role as a bridge between the West and the Moslem world.

The project of European Defense Community, initiated in response to the outbreak of the Korean War so as to bolster NATO by bringing a rearmed West Germany into the Western defense system under French tutelage, has been retrospectively touted as the forerunner of today’s common European Security and Defense Policy. Voted down by the French National Assembly after the war scare had passed, however, it was little more than an expedient, superseded by the substitute solution whereby West Germany entered NATO as a full-fledged member in 1955. Its entry was a milestone in the transformation of Europe’s former serial aggressor into the bulwark of its stability.

The imminent expansion of the Western alliance prompted the proclamation of the Warsaw Pact as a belated imitation of NATO, intended by Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev to prod the West to negotiate away both alliances in the hope of reversing the correlation of forces in favor of the Soviet Union. The failure of the scheme left the proclaimed alliance in search of a purpose. Although Khrushchev’s successors later built it up and equipped it with military attributes, the Warsaw Pact never found a purpose other than being used by the Soviet Union against its own members. A military expression of Europe’s political and ideological division, the alliance disintegrated as soon as that division had ended.

The hardening of the division after the Soviet suppression of the 1956 uprising in Hungary boosted the movement for European integration in the West, leading the year after to the establishment of the Common Market as the nucleus of the European Community (EC). The movement followed the prophecy of its spiritual father, French businessman, economist, and diplomat, Jean Monnet, that “there will be no peace in Europe if the states rebuild themselves on the basis of national sovereignty” and unless they “form a federation or a European entity that would make them into a common economic unit.”

The EC built on the success of the Schuman Plan for the European Coal and Steel Community, started as a complement to the Marshall Plan. The project implemented the ingenious idea of enmeshing the economies of Western European states so as to make it impossible for them to mobilize the resources necessary for waging war against each other. Intended to change “the destinies of those regions which have long been devoted to the manufacture of munitions of war,” it set into motion developments that would change the destiny of all of Europe once it had been reunited, ending its history of internecine wars. In this sense, Europe began to diverge from those parts of the world whose historical experiences had been different.

If Europe’s formative experience was that of World War II, followed by the impact of the Cold War division, for most countries in the Third World the formative experience was that
of decolonization, coincidental with the rise of the Cold War rivalry and aggravated by it. Attempts to imitate NATO outside Europe, such as was the British-sponsored CENTO in the Middle East or American-made SEATO in southern Asia, failed because of their association with former colonial powers, as well as the lack of common interests and common values. Washington was drawn into Asia on the perception that “European integration is connected with our policy in Asia, for Soviet success in the East would make the Allied position in Europe untenable.”13 The original American intention was to create a Pacific NATO, but under the impact of Korean War the United States constructed a “hub-and-spokes” system of bilateral rather than multilateral alliances.

The construction started in 1951 with the conclusion of a defense treaty with the Philippines and the ANZUS pact with Australia and New Zealand, followed by different kinds of treaties with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Chinese Nationalist government in Taiwan. Although the original reason for rallying for defense against another communist aggression supported by the Soviet Union and China subsequently lost its rationale, the system continued to defy predictions of its demise. Despite ups and downs, its flexible security arrangements, unencumbered by rigid command structures, satisfied the different needs of America’s partners while adapting to changing circumstances. In the long term, the United States’ demographic and economic shift from Europe and the Atlantic to Asia-Pacific favored the preservation of the system, regardless of the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of China.

The Rise and Decline of Nonalignment

The persisting military rivalry between the superpowers and their respective alliances after the Korean War gave rise to the nonaligned movement (NAM) as an anti-alliance of the Third World’s newly independent nations. At their 1955 conference in Bandung in Indonesia, they pledged to abstain from “any arrangements of collective defense to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers,”14 and six years later organized themselves as NAM. In fact, the movement tilted toward the Soviet Union, whose economic model developing nations initially found more congenial than the Western capitalist one. Emblematic of these nations’ common debut on the international scene, the organization still nominally exists, claiming no fewer than 120 member states and struggling to remain relevant after the rivalry it originally proposed to overcome has ceased and the notion of Third World has become meaningless. In 2005, the Declaration of a New Asian African Strategic Partnership, adopted by heads of states from the two continents on the fiftieth anniversary of Bandung, invoked its legacy in a largely symbolic attempt at forging common policy.

The NAM never coalesced to develop a coherent policy before starting to disintegrate because of divisions among its members. The “Panchsheel” principles of peaceful coexistence, proclaimed in 1954 by India and China as the ideological foundation of nonalignment, did not prevent the two countries from going to war in 1962 over their common border, leaving a lasting legacy of mutual enmity and the border still unsettled. Two years later, the NAM peaked at its second summit in Cairo, but in 1965 received a fatal blow because of the ouster of nonalignment’s leading protagonist, Indonesia’s President Sukarno, by the country’s generals. Later in the decade, further ascendancy of nationalist military regimes in the Third World underlined its disunity. The incidence of military conflicts there increased as the superpowers’ control over their local clients diminished. The 1965 Indian–Pakistani and 1967 Arab–Israeli wars left unresolved two major conflicts that have outlasted the Cold War.

The disintegration of the NAM paralleled the unraveling of the Sino-Soviet alliance, originating in the unequal treaty of 1950 between the two communist countries that had been
a historical anomaly to start with. For China, it amounted to a reversed “tributary” relationship of a state that used to be considered the “Middle Kingdom” with a neighboring “barbarian” power. The treaty enabled Stalin, as the supreme leader of international communism, to shift onto China the main risk of supporting the North Korean aggression. The Chinese supreme leader, Mao Zedong, accepted the risk on common ideological grounds, with detrimental consequences for his country’s interests.

The outbreak of the war delayed indefinitely the planned seizure of Taiwan by the Chinese communists and, after Mao’s unsuccessful attempts to achieve its surrender by means of demonstrative artillery bombardment of Nationalist-held offshore islands in 1954–58, left open the threat, however diminishing, of Taiwan’s forcible unification with the mainland. The Chinese intervention in the war, which saved the North Korean regime from extinction, also resulted in the emergence of nuclear-armed North Korea as another threat. Making matters worse, in 1961 Mao contracted for China to maintain North Korea’s unpredictable regime by concluding with it a mutual defense treaty, unusual not only in providing for automatic military assistance against any third party, but also in requiring mutual consent to any changes.

After Mao had asserted China’s independence following Stalin’s death and the conclusion of the Korean War, his erratic policies climaxed in the 1960s as he competed with the Soviet Union in both his domestic and his foreign policies. His “Great Leap Forward” resulted in history’s worst human-made famine; his commitment to support revolutionary movements in the Third World in a common struggle against both Soviet “revisionists” and Western “imperialists” drove China into international isolation, leaving it by the end of the decade with remote Albania as its only ally. Most damaging, the advent in 1967 of Mao’s self-destructive Cultural Revolution, which traumatized China’s society and its ruling party, left a collective memory that endangered the accomplishments of his successors after they reversed his course and set the country on the trajectory of regaining its historic place as a pre-eminent world power.

By contrast, the Indonesian military regime, otherwise complicit in atrocities and mired in corruption, in 1967 performed a constructive role after having terminated its predecessor’s confrontational campaign against neighboring Malaysia, waged by Sukarno to destabilize the country he loathed as a remnant of British imperialism. Indonesia brokered the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), bringing together, besides the two former adversaries, countries as different as Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, which had also been quarrelling with one another. As a new kind of regional organization, ASEAN has been regarded as a breakthrough in creating a nascent “security community.”

One of the officials present at its creation, Singapore’s foreign minister S. Rajaratnam, has testified that ASEAN was born “out of fear rather than idealistic convictions about regionalism.” The fear was that of communist subversion of the unstable states because of repercussions of the Vietnam War, which made the grouping tilt to the West and rely, as Rajaratnam quipped, on “Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand” in order to become resilient by developing market economies. In the spirit of nonalignment, the ASEAN members preferred to avoid military arrangements with other countries as well as with each other, but were ready to reach outside by inviting additional countries as “dialogue partners.”

Opinions differ about whether ASEAN’s allegedly distinctive “Asian way,” with its reliance on consensus among the elites, preference for shelving rather than resolving problems, and aversion to institutionalization, has been conducive to results or to setting their limitations. As long as the Cold War lasted, ASEAN was largely ignored, but once the conflict subsided and the world’s center of gravity started shifting to Asia-Pacific, it became a desirable partner. It not only incorporated its former Vietnamese enemy and all other countries of Southeast Asia, but also became the pivot of a growing network of overlapping structures of multilateral cooperation.
linking countries throughout the wider region and considered by most of them complementary to the U.S.-sponsored hub-and-spokes system in ensuring the peaceful rise of China.

The Nuclear Revolution

Concurrent with the Sino-Indian War, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis was the climactic moment of the Cold War, being the time when the world may have come closest to nuclear war, but otherwise it passed with few enduring consequences. One of these has been the survival of communist Cuba as a Cold War relic, with Fidel Castro, its leader until 2008, being remembered for having urged Khrushchev at the height of the crisis to employ Soviet nuclear weapons against the United States, offering to sacrifice his own people. Another consequence is Mexico’s initiative, in response to Cuba’s attempted introduction of the Soviet missiles into the neighborhood, which resulted five years later in the establishment of the Latin American nuclear-free zone, the prototype of more such zones to come.

The brush with disaster underlined the perils of the nuclear revolution, which had started at the end of World War II and before the start of the Cold War, but predetermined its course once the use of atomic bombs to defeat Japan left no doubt about their extraordinary destructiveness. Whether the war remained cold as a result, or the standoff that it created prolonged it at the risk of the weapons being used again, has been much debated and will never be certain. What is certain is that the demonstration, at the cost of sacrificing several hundred thousand people in Japan, created the “nuclear taboo” against the weapons’ use, which has held ever since. In the early years of the East–West confrontation, however, both the United States and the Soviet Union were ready to tolerate their being used, and the resulting arms race left behind useless stockpiles of the weapons as the Cold War’s most deplorable legacy.

At the critical stages of the race, which was fueled not so much by action and reaction as by “anticipatory reaction,” the United States was first to act, whereas its weaker adversary reacted. After the Soviet Union broke the American atomic monopoly by testing its first bomb in 1949, Washington’s decision the year after to up the ante by building the vastly more powerful hydrogen bomb preceded the outbreak of the Korean War. The qualitative jump, followed by a quantitative jump to “overkill” once the United States decided in 1952 to deploy thousands of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe before the Soviet Union responded in kind, resulted in “vertical” proliferation, as each superpower started building up its stockpiles. In the same year, Great Britain set a precedent for “horizontal” proliferation – the acquisition of the weapons by additional countries. According to the official historian of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, Margaret Gowing, Britain decided to acquire nuclear weapons not in “response to an immediate military threat but rather [as] something fundamentalist and almost instinctive, … feeling that atomic weapons were a manifestation of the scientific and technological superiority on which Britain’s strength … must depend.” The same kind of feeling has since driven the nuclear programs of developing nations, promoted by their nuclear scientists for professional reasons.

Mutual lack of trust made disarmament negotiations an exercise in futility, but resulted in 1955 in the creation within the UN of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), assigned to deal with peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Though toothless at first, the agency would evolve into the global watchdog guarding against the diversion of nuclear energy for military purposes, while Euratom, established two years later as part of the EC, developed an exemplary system of safeguards and controls. The arms race between the superpowers nevertheless continued, each preparing to employ what Kennan aptly called “a sterile and
hopeless weapon, … which cannot in any way serve the purposes of a constructive and hopeful foreign policy,” and drawing up contingency plans of growing absurdity.20

The plans, which remained in effect despite the Cuban experience, give the flavor of the era. The American plans, for example, called for the dispatch of at least 2,500 nuclear warheads at a moment’s notice. The 1964 Warsaw Pact plan envisaged the detonation of several hundreds of warheads over the European battlefield, whereupon the Soviet-led armies would supposedly march through the wasteland to victory. “It was like in the fairytale,” recalled a Polish participant in the alliance’s exercises. “At the time of the battle, clouds burst, and the downpour made the enemy troops soaking wet while our own became pleasantly refreshed.”21

The twin challenge of the nuclear revolution and Cold War influenced the theory of international relations, creating security studies as its special field, with nuclear weapons as the main point of reference, and the sub-field of strategic studies intended to apply theory to policy but increasingly divorcing it from reality. American defense intellectuals, beholden to the realist school of thought, converged with Soviet military planners in imagining “realistic” scenarios that would allow war to be fought without crossing the nuclear threshold. The theory of deterrence that “proposed to defend the state by a strategy which threatens to destroy it,” presumed “an adversary with a compelling urge to take the action being deterred” and “enemy intentions … as a given rather than a subject for analysis.” It presupposed, as Australian scholar Hedley Bull commented, the “‘rational action’ of a kind of ‘strategic man,’ a man who on further acquaintance reveals himself as a university professor of unusual intellectual subtlety.”22

In the aftermath of Cuba, the unworkable concept of disarmament was superseded by that of arms control. Rather than reverse the arms race, however, the new concept legitimized its continuation for the rest of the Cold War. Of the two landmark treaties of the period that have remained both valid and relevant after its end, the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty is so named because a fleeting opportunity to make it comprehensive was lost at that time. The comprehensive treaty was later signed, but is yet to be ratified to become operative. To the extent that it has been observed, the observance is suggestive of its diminishing value after testing became technologically dispensable.

Containing Proliferation

The more pertinent issue of containing the spread of nuclear weapons accounts for the abiding relevance of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The treaty was a product of six years of negotiations, which got underway after France became the fourth nuclear power, China was about to become the fifth, and no fewer than ten other states were expected to follow soon. The negotiations centered in the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee, the successor of which still meets regularly in Geneva under UN auspices. Originally created by the two superpowers, which found it desirable to include in it not only members of their own alliances but also countries broadly representative of the Third World, the committee evolved into a unique forum of multilateral diplomacy.

The committee’s agenda addressed issues that have remained topical ever since. The main decisions for or against going nuclear that determined the subsequent pattern of proliferation were made during the run-up to the treaty. India, driven by its ambitious nuclear scientists, secretly embarked upon its program to achieve the capability to produce nuclear weapons, subsequently reciprocated by Pakistan in a competition that made South Asia the most vulnerable to becoming a nuclear battlefield. At the same time, not only did Latin America become a nuclear-free zone, but also all of the states in Western Europe that had intended to
acquire nuclear arsenals abandoned the intention for political or economic reasons. So did Japan, as a matter of principle, under the influence of its pacifist public opinion.

From the perspective of the ongoing Cold War, the security guarantees that the NPT offered could be fairly described as “pretended” and “misbegotten.” In return for the superpowers’ empty promise to reverse their arms race and proceed toward “nuclear zero,” the developing nations accepted restrictions so as to prevent the diversion of their own nuclear programs for military purposes. With the end of the U.S.–Soviet rivalry, vertical proliferation ceased once the United States and Russia started to dismantle their oversized arsenals. In the meantime, except in South Asia, horizontal proliferation had not increased, as those states that had intended to go nuclear had either discontinued their programs – Brazil, Argentina, South Africa – or failed to come closer to implementing them – Libya, Iraq, North Korea.

While the future prospect of proliferation remained open, the outcome does not justify the conclusion that the NPT worked well enough during the Cold War but was bound to fail afterward because “during the Cold War states learned that there are legitimate reasons, as outlined in classical deterrence theory, for acquiring nuclear weapons.” The “rogue” states that have persisted in trying to acquire weapons did so for no legitimate reasons but in defiance of international norms. Established by the NPT and enforced by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the norms led to the establishment of “the largest multilateral security regime in existence,” which has made violations politically costly and technically more difficult. In this sense, the treaty succeeded in containing the spread of the nuclear revolution, which had run its course by 1968.

That year was the Cold War’s watershed year. The political and social upheaval that shook both the Western and the communist worlds heralded the ascendency of a new generation, for which the origins of the conflict were no longer a living memory. If the legacies of the first half of the East–West confrontation had been decisively shaped by the recent experience of World War II, those of the second half would point to the future, prefiguring in different ways the shape of the post-Cold War age of globalization.

The early period of the Cold War has defined the thrust of the historiography of the Cold War in general. The primary role of the superpowers in its origin, and their primacy during the next twenty years, have made the study of the Cold War largely a subject in U.S. foreign policy – a bias that is accentuated by the lack of primary sources other than American ones as long as the conflict lasted. America-centrism nevertheless remained a common feature of writings of the traditional, revisionist, and post-revisionist varieties even after archives “on the other side” had started to open up. But the new sources that became available have altered the previous picture in at least two important ways. They have shown that Western perceptions of the Soviet threat were greatly exaggerated, as initial Soviet military plans were defensive rather than offensive. And they have shown the Soviet–Chinese interaction that led to the Korean War to have been much more complex than was previously suspected. The complexity of the whole picture increased further during the second half of the Cold War, when the superpowers’ pre-eminence began to erode.

Notes

20 George F. Kennan, Russia, the Atom, and the West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 55.