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# International Relations

SHORT INTRODUCTIONS

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# Introducing International Relations

This book has been written at a time when the world's political and economic contours are still in considerable flux following the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Empire in the early 1990s. Many have argued that the Cold War, which dominated the conduct of world politics for over four decades, also dominated the way in which people saw the world. Not only was there a dominant, overriding issue – the possibility of nuclear warfare between the superpowers and their allies – there seemed to be a dominant mode of analysing this state of affairs as well, and that was through a 'realist' lens. Times have changed. Nuclear warfare remains a threat, but it no longer seems likely to engulf the entire world. Alongside traditional concerns with war, there are now a great many other issues competing for equal attention. And although realist theories remain important, alternative approaches have become more prominent and most people are increasingly aware that there are many different ways of seeing the world. I start with some common conceptualizations of periods in world history, for these have a significant, if often imperceptible, influence on how one sees the world of International Relations (IR).

## Eras in world politics

Although a new millennium has begun and the Cold War is fast receding into history, the events of 1945–89 are still seen as defining the present period, for this is still the 'post-Cold-War era'. This says some-

thing about the effect that the Cold War had not only on the perception of geopolitical relations but also on how people conceptualize and periodize the wider political world and its historical development in terms of large-scale structures, events and processes. Here it is interesting to note that, at the time, the Cold War era itself was generally referred to as the 'post-war' period while the years from 1918 to 1939 are known as the 'inter-war' period. Large-scale wars, whether hot or cold, therefore acted as defining moments in world politics throughout much of the twentieth century. Considering that that century is widely regarded as the bloodiest yet in terms of lives lost in warfare, this is probably appropriate.

Another way of conceptualizing the present period is by reference to the process of globalization. Although this phenomenon has been in evidence for decades, if not centuries, it has captured the public imagination in a way unmatched in any previous period. This may be partly explained by the fact that the end of the Cold War left a considerable vacuum to be filled. And the idea of globalization, which can be interpreted in many different ways according to various orientations to world politics, is an obvious candidate for filling much of that vacuum. The economic aspects of globalization, in particular, were given a huge boost by the collapse of socialism and the apparent triumph of capitalism, while it was widely assumed that liberal democracy was now the only legitimate form of government. The idea of globalization was also boosted by the rapid development in the 1990s of electronic communications, including the internet which, like many of the economic aspects of globalization, seemed to render borders meaningless.

A further important defining condition – one that has extended for several hundred years and which may be seen as providing the foundations for contemporary globalization – is modernity. For students of IR the beginnings of modernity are frequently traced to the seventeenth century when the sovereign state began to take shape. Modernity is also linked inextricably to technological and scientific development, the rise of industrialization and the (attempted) mastery of nature. In more general social and political terms, however, the beginnings of modernity can be traced back to the Renaissance and the rise of humanist thought, for this represented an early moment in the emancipation of thinking from the strictures of the medieval church. But it is most closely associated with the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment which found practical expression in various revolutions against established authorities in Europe and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this context, modernity entails the rejection of traditional authority. Since it is progressive in character and embraces a positive vision of human emancipation from the grip of the past, it also