

# Balance of power

International relations

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[The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica](#)

**Balance of power**, in international relations, the posture and policy of a nation or group of nations protecting itself against another nation or group of nations by matching its power against the power of the other side. States can pursue a policy of balance of power in two ways: by increasing their own power, as when engaging in an armaments race or in the competitive acquisition of territory; or by adding to their own power that of other states, as when embarking upon a policy of alliances.

The term balance of power came into use to denote the power relationships in the European state system from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to [World War I](#). Within the European balance of power, Great [Britain](#) played the role of the “balancer,” or “holder of the balance.” It was not permanently identified with the policies of any European nation, and it would throw its weight at one time on one side, at another time on another side, guided largely by one consideration—the maintenance of the balance itself. Naval supremacy and its virtual immunity from foreign invasion enabled Great Britain to perform this function, which made the European balance of power both flexible and stable.

The balance of power from the early 20th century onward underwent drastic changes that for all practical purposes destroyed the European power structure as it had existed since the end of the Middle Ages. Prior to the 20th century, the political world was composed of a number of separate and independent balance-of-power systems, such as the European, the American, the Chinese, and the Indian. But [World War I](#) and its attendant political alignments triggered a process that eventually culminated in the integration of most of the world’s nations into a single balance-of-power system. This integration began with the World War I [alliance](#) of Britain, France, Russia, and the United States against Germany and Austria-Hungary. The integration continued in [World War II](#), during which the fascist nations of Germany, Japan, and Italy were opposed by a global alliance of the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, and China. World War II ended with the major weights in the balance of power having shifted from the traditional players in western and central [Europe](#) to just two non-European ones: the [United States](#) and the [Soviet Union](#). The result was a bipolar balance of power across the northern half of the globe that pitted the free-market democracies of the West against the communist one-party states of eastern Europe. More specifically, the nations of western Europe sided with the United States in the [NATO](#) military alliance, while the Soviet Union’s satellite-allies in central and eastern Europe became unified under Soviet leadership in the [Warsaw Pact](#).

Because the balance of power was now bipolar and because of the great disparity of power between the two superpowers and all other nations, the European countries lost that freedom of movement that previously had made for a flexible system. Instead of a series of shifting and basically unpredictable alliances with and against each other, the nations of Europe now clustered around the two superpowers and tended to transform themselves into two stable blocs.

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There were other decisive differences between the postwar balance of power and its predecessor. The fear of mutual destruction in a global nuclear holocaust injected into the foreign policies of the United States and the Soviet Union a marked element of restraint. A direct military confrontation between the two superpowers and their allies on European soil was an almost-certain gateway to nuclear [war](#) and was therefore to be avoided at almost any cost. So instead, direct confrontation was largely replaced by (1) a massive [arms race](#) whose lethal products were never used and (2) political meddling or limited military interventions by the superpowers in various [Third World](#) nations.

In the late 20th century, some Third World nations resisted the advances of the superpowers and maintained a nonaligned stance in international politics. The breakaway of China from Soviet influence and its cultivation of a nonaligned but covertly anti-Soviet stance lent a further complexity to the bipolar balance of power. The most important shift in the balance of power began in 1989–90, however, when the Soviet Union lost control over its eastern European satellites and allowed non-communist governments to come to power in those countries. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 made the concept of a European balance of power temporarily irrelevant, since the government of newly sovereign Russia initially embraced the political and economic forms favoured by the United States and western Europe. Both Russia and the United States retained their nuclear arsenals, however, so the balance of nuclear threat between them remained potentially in force.