



Nature of the Cold War

There are a number of views on the reasons for the Cold War, and its duration. These can be seen as a clash of ideologies between a communist USSR and the capitalist, democratic USA, or as a balance-of-power struggle between the world's two biggest countries. The superpowers formed alliances to try to improve their power vis-à-vis their opponent but often found the relations with their allies and client states very troublesome, often bringing them close to conflict with one another rather than stabilizing the situation. Diplomacy was rarely simply due to the number of allies—often these allies embroiled the superpowers in unwinnable wars such as Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Ideological differences

When examining the nature of the Cold War, two main schools of thought tend to emerge regarding the reasons for the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. On the one hand, there are those who believe very firmly that it was national self-interest that perpetuated the conflict until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The other group of scholars, sometimes referred to as ideologists, see the Cold War as the inevitable result of two inherently incompatible ideologies.

It can be argued that the USSR and the USA were truly in ideological opposition in terms of economic and political systems. At the base of this difference was the role that these governments felt that they played in the lives of their citizenry. The United States believed very firmly in the rights of the individual; this meant that individuals have the right to choose their government and that individuals should oversee the economic life of a country. In contrast, the Soviet Union believed that the individuals in its society were subordinate to the goals of the state. In order to benefit the most people possible, it was up to the state to determine the form of government and to govern the economic life of the country. On the one hand, then, there was democracy and capitalism; on the other, communism.

Marxism–Leninism openly advocates overthrowing capitalist regimes, thereby making the Soviet Union the aggressor in the Cold War. This argument was used repeatedly by the USA throughout the Cold War to explain its policy of containment and its intervention in a number of civil conflicts. On the other hand, capitalism is seen as inherently expansionist, as new markets need to be created. The Soviets exploited this aspect of Western society to show the USA in an aggressive light, with the government in the role of lackey to capitalists and members of the **bourgeoisie**.

Returning to the idea of self-interest is equally important. That idea can be expressed in expansionist terms or defensive terms. For the former, one can point to the necessity of the USA to find more markets for its goods and how it thus sought to expand its influence

The **bourgeoisie** were the upper middle class and those, according to Marx, who opposed the proletarians in achieving a classless society.

far beyond its borders, and to the American concept of **Manifest Destiny**. For the latter, one can look again at historical Russian policies and see a desire for security as a reason for Soviet expansion, especially in Eastern Europe and central Asia. Also supporting self-interest was the desire of both superpowers to secure a foothold in the Middle East due to oil. This is further linked to military supremacy, as petroleum was increasingly necessary for an army to be effective. Even in the face of nuclear weapons, conventional armies were of paramount importance.

In the United States, both schools of thought can find their roots in George Kennan's Long Telegram. While Kennan ultimately came down on the side of the ideologists, he also felt that Soviet policies were driven by historic Russian aspirations and fears. When the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism are viewed, the ideologists seem to prevail. According to them, the Soviet Union began its collapse when Gorbachev introduced reforms that deviated significantly from communist ideology. By allowing satellite states to pursue their own paths, the USSR also found itself opening up through policies of perestroika, glasnost and democracy. However, those who support self-interest can also argue that communism no longer served Russian self-interest.

Manifest Destiny An idea developed in the 19th century which stated that it was the fate of the USA to expand from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. Attached to the idea is the notion that the USA has a moral obligation to incorporate other peoples into its institutions and government because they are the most desirable. In the 19th century there was a missionary quality to the idea; that God determined that it was the US destiny to spread.

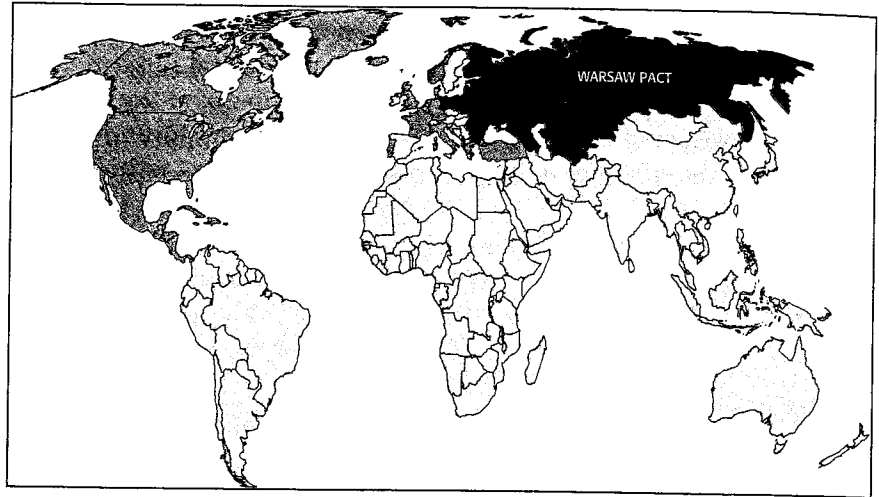
Superpowers and spheres of influence

As the superpowers divided it up, the world's power structure was largely bipolar: communism vs the West. In the early stages of the Cold War, it seemed necessary for countries to be under the protection of one of the two superpowers. By the end of the 1950s, this was not necessarily the prevailing belief; decolonization had made newly emerging nations suspect the USA and its allies of trying to dominate them, and the communist model was not necessarily any better. After Yugoslavia's expulsion from the communist camp in 1948, the Czechoslovak coup and the crushing of the Hungarian Uprising, the Soviets were viewed just as warily. Thus, the Non-Aligned Movement arose in response. Nonetheless, the dominant political and military paradigm was between the two superpowers.

Comecon

Soviet actions, particularly in Europe, can be seen as reactions to US policies there. In 1949, the Soviets formed the Comecon or Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, arguably in response to the ERP (see page 455). Having refused to allow its satellites to participate in the Marshall Plan, the USSR instead offered this programme of trade to its allies. It was eventually extended beyond the borders of Europe and included Mongolia, Vietnam and Cuba as full members. There were also countries that were considered to be co-operating non-communist countries, such as Finland, and observers from communist countries as varied as China, Ethiopia and Afghanistan. Rather than dictating policies, the idea behind the Comecon was to co-ordinate economic development to benefit all member states. Prices were kept relatively stable as communist countries were not subject to currency fluctuations in the same way that market

economies were, and this allowed for longer-term central planning. Since the state held the monopoly on foreign trade, it quickly became an instrument of political policy. For example, as oil and natural gas became increasingly scarce, the Soviet Union would provide these resources to other Comecon countries at below-market prices. Additionally, to bolster the Cuban economy after the 1959 revolution, other Comecon countries purchased sugar at above-market prices.



The Cold War alliances: NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

NATO and the Warsaw Pact

In 1955, West Germany joined NATO, furthering Soviet fears of US dominance of the European continent. In response, the USSR complained that allowing West Germany to enter NATO would lead to German rearmament, and that this would make reunification impossible. But more decisively and significantly, it led to formation of the Warsaw Pact. The signatories to the Warsaw treaty agreed to assist any co-signatory that was the victim of aggression. Although not specifically stated as such, it was clearly an anti-NATO pact, just as NATO had been an anti-Soviet agreement.

Both countries also sought to expand their spheres of influence outside of Europe. The USA had a historic relationship of dominance in the Western hemisphere that it sought to preserve. Dating back to the 1820s and the **Monroe Doctrine**, the USA had stated that it would protect nascent independent states from European domination by supporting their governments. By the onset of the Cold War, US predominance was clearly established but their benevolence was questionable at best. Not surprisingly, political leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean were emerging who desired the removal of US interests in their countries, which often predisposed them to socialist or communist ideologies.

In Asia, the victory of the Chinese Communists against the Nationalists bolstered socialists in the region, as did Soviet support in installing Kim Il-sung in North Korea. In Vietnam, the Communist Ho Chi Minh had won considerable support for forming the backbone of the resistance movement against the Japanese, and the French were incapable of ousting him. This made the USA determined to keep in place regimes that strayed far from the democratic ideals it espoused: South Korea, the Republic of China (Taiwan) and South Vietnam were all led by authoritarian rulers who could be as brutal as their communist counterparts, yet the USA supported them and kept them in its sphere.



What does the map reveal about Cold War alliances? If countries are not shaded, does that mean they are neutral or non-aligned? Explain.

Monroe Doctrine (1823) A statement issued by US president Monroe after most of South America declared itself independent from Spain and Portugal, to the effect that European powers could no longer intervene in affairs in the Western hemisphere (Americas). If any European country tried to intervene, the USA would see it as an act of aggression and take military action to defend the hemisphere. In 1904 it was expanded through the Roosevelt Corollary, which stated that the USA had the right to intervene in the economic affairs of smaller powers in the Americas if they could not repay their debts. President Theodore Roosevelt said that this was to bring stability and peace to the region.

But perhaps the most important area where both struggled to establish themselves was in the Middle East. The USA had oil interests in the region, but also had been instrumental in the establishment of the state of Israel and felt it was their duty to help preserve this state that had been created under the aegis of the UN and in response to the Holocaust. At the same time, the Soviets were seeking to expand their influence in the region, notably in Iran and Afghanistan, where they had historic ties, and in Egypt, where they were hoping to exploit anti-imperialist fervor among the elite. This competition for influence in the region was perhaps the most dangerous, and had the least to do with ideology.

Alliances and diplomacy

The idea that Cold War allies and subordinates were completely dominated by their superpower counterparts is simplistic and ignores how smaller states used the Cold War to preserve their own regimes. This could be seen very clearly on the Korean peninsula, where the Americans uncomfortably supported an increasingly authoritarian South Korean president Syngman Rhee while the Soviets fostered a similar relationship with Kim Il-sung. Just as Khrushchev was denouncing Stalin's cult of personality, Kim was consolidating his own, and isolating his people as much as possible from both the capitalist and the communist world. Khrushchev proposed reforms for North Korea, which Kim rejected, arguing that any deviation from the Stalinist form of government that he pursued would destabilize his regime and give a Cold War victory to the Americans.

Rhee made similar threats to the Americans. Any suggestion of the USA that encouraged Rhee to make further inroads towards democracy was thwarted by Rhee, who argued that authoritarianism was necessary to stem the flow of communism from the north to the south. Thus, the USA signed a bilateral treaty with South Korea and American troops remained in Korea, protecting it from the north.

The USA and the USSR alike had problems with their respective Chinese allies too. After fleeing the mainland to Taiwan, the Nationalists managed to retain several islands including Quemoy and Matsu. When Mao began to shell the islands in 1954, Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) appealed to the USA, arguing that the loss of these islands could lead to political destabilization in Taiwan and perhaps its collapse. To support Chiang (Jiang), the United States negotiated a mutual defence treaty with Taiwan in the hopes of deterring the Chinese Communists from further action. When Mao ignored this and continued to assault the islands, even occupying one, the USA responded that, if necessary, it would resort to using nuclear weapons to prevent Communist occupation of Quemoy or Matsu. Although Mao backed down at this point, he learnt a lesson about manipulation of the superpowers similar to that of Kim and his rival.

Several years later, the situation resumed. In 1958, Mao once again began shelling the islands and the United States threatened nuclear force against Communist action. The Soviets were alarmed by this development, especially as Mao had not consulted them. However, Khrushchev felt compelled to react in kind, threatening the use of

nuclear weapons if any action were taken against the Chinese Communists. The situation was defused but it showed that the superpowers weren't always the driving factor in alliances.

One last example of this can be seen with France. France had been a member of NATO, had benefited from ERP and was an initial signatory to the Treaty of Rome. It also felt its loss of Great Power status even more than the UK, particularly due to its struggles in Indochina and Algeria. Thus, under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, the French began to develop their own independent military defense plan. By 1959 France had withdrawn its navy from NATO's Mediterranean fleet and forbidden nuclear weapons on French soil and by 1966 was outside of NATO, opting to collaborate with NATO operations at times (such as the Cuban Missile Crisis) or not. Once France became a nuclear power in 1960, the USA had very little recourse against the country and attempted collaboration without formal alliance.

On the other hand, some countries were seen as too important to US and Soviet policies, and thus the superpowers took aggressive actions to keep them in their spheres of influence. In the 1970s, the United States took numerous actions in Latin America to preserve its hegemony there, most notably in Chile and Nicaragua. In 1973, the CIA assisted the Chilean military in enacting a coup d'état that overthrew Salvador Allende's government—a democratically elected socialist government that tried to redistribute wealth and remove the dominance of foreign interests in the Chilean economy. In Nicaragua in the 1980s, the USA supported a conservative group called the Contras in their attempts to overthrow the revolutionary Sandinistas that had seized power in 1979. Although the 1984 elections were determined to be free and fair by the UN, and the rule of the Sandinistas was confirmed, the USA challenged their right to rule Nicaragua and even tried to use covert means to oust them but ultimately had to accept their rule as legitimate.

In a similar manner, the Brezhnev Doctrine (see page 183) articulated the Soviet determination to keep certain countries within their sphere of influence—especially those in Eastern Europe. Although it predated this doctrine, the crushing of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 was an example of this, as was the dispatch of Warsaw Pact tanks to Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the intervention in Afghanistan that began in 1979. Countries were given a certain latitude to act but only insofar as they did not threaten Soviet security interests.

Ultimately, the Soviet Union found it too costly to uphold the Brezhnev Doctrine and support its allies. The crumbling economy in the USSR was responsible for the shift in attitudes towards its satellite states and allies. However, US policies still provide support for loyal allies—to this day Egypt and Israel are among the largest recipients of foreign aid from the USA.

Discussion point:



Is ideology important to history?

Discuss the role of ideology in 20th-century conflicts.

Activity:

Comparing and contrasting

The constitutions of the USA and the USSR

In groups of four to six, examine the US and Soviet constitutions. Outline the main points, paying attention to their similarities and differences.

Then discuss how consistent their Cold War policies were with their constitutions.



Exam questions

- 1 How important was mutual suspicion and fear in the origin of the Cold War?
- 2 "Ideology played a small part in the origin of the Cold War." To what extent do you agree with this assertion?
- 3 Assess the importance of **two** of the following Soviet policies in the origin and development of the Cold War: Sovietization of Eastern and Central Europe; Comecon; Warsaw Pact.
- 4 Compare and contrast the parts played by Korea and Vietnam in the Cold War.
- 5 In what ways and to what extent did containment affect the development of the Cold War up to 1970?
- 6 Analyse the part played by **either** Kennedy **or** Reagan in the Cold War.
- 7 "The non-aligned movement had little impact on Cold War policies and development." To what extent do you agree with this assertion?
- 8 Discuss the impact of the United Nations on the Cold War.
- 9 Evaluate the impact of the arms race on East–West relations.
- 10 Explain the role and importance of
 - a internal problems, and
 - b external pressures,
 in causing the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Further reading and resources

Billington, James H, Director, The Soviet Archives Exhibit, Library of Congress. <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/soviet.exhibit/repress.html>.

A virtual exhibit that was created by the US Library of Congress and is divided into two "floors" or divisions. The first floor is specific to the internal workings of the USSR and the second floor relates directly to Soviet–US relations. As the website states, it "shows how Soviet–American relations were conducted between governments, between the publics of the two countries, and between the Communist parties of the USSR and the USA." In particular, it provides primary Soviet sources regarding the course of the Cold War.

Wilson Center. Cold War International History Project. <http://wilsoncenter.org>.

Provides a variety of primary sources that give differing historical viewpoints and sources on a number of Cold War topics, including the Korean War, the crisis in Poland (1981), Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the end of the Cold War.

Dobbs, Michael. 2008. *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*. New York, USA. Knopf.

Published in 2008, in English, this text on the Cuban Missile Crisis focuses on the military conduct and actions of the USA, the USSR and Cuba, providing a new view on the conflict.