

Opposite Ideology, Parallel Policy: the USA and the USSR in the Third World during the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

The Cold War was a period marked by stark contrasts and division between the USA and USSR. However, on the topic of the Third World, both superpowers broadly agreed. This paper explores the parallels in the policies of the Soviet Union and the United States toward non-aligned nations through analysis of journal articles, books, and primary sources. In particular, the Vietnam War (1955–1975) and the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) are used as primary examples to highlight the mirroring that occurred between the two superpowers. While there certainly were differences in the policies of the Soviets and of the Americans, both believed that their system was inherently incompatible with the other's, and worked to expand their spheres of influence by negotiating to gain favor, engaging in proxy wars, and taking direct military action to further their respective goal of securing an ideological victory.

INTRODUCTION

During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union were vying for ideological influence in a dual hegemony, each with their respective bloc. There was a third group of nations during this period, however, aligned neither with the Americans nor the Soviets: the Non-Aligned Movement. The Non-Aligned Movement was a group of nations that actively took no direct part in the Cold War. These countries became a third side to the Cold War and were primarily concerned with siding with neither the Americans or the Soviets. The group was composed of a wide array of countries from liberal democracies to communist states, and even conservative monarchies.¹ The establishment of the NAM was significant because of how it created a third option for nations that did not wish to join the USA or USSR's coalition. The stubborn defiance of the non-aligned nations led to the postures the superpowers adopted towards them and the animosity they harbored for their perceived authority being ignored. The Third World was one of the few places where the USA and USSR agreed, both wanting to entice, pressure, or force the

¹ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War, 1961–1973," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016): p. 98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925642?searchText=unaligned+movement&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dunaligned%2Bmovement%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Ae9ca50b6dd9cf74453aa0e6c3a4cab29&seq=1.

Third World to adopt their way of life. The importance of this demonstrates even with their deep divisions, the hegemony both had similar views on the rest of the world and it existing as a way to increase their power and influence. In this paper, I compare the postures of the USA and USSR towards the Third World during the Cold War and find that they were largely similar, with both often engaging in proxy wars through military aid and direct military action; they differed however with respect to the values they were fighting for. The importance of understanding this topic is it illustrates the commonalities in tactics used by superpowers despite their other political orientations. This reflects how both nations were at a stage in their development where they had the means and resolve to focus heavily on expanding their international influence.

MUTUAL FEAR AND THE RESPECTIVE PLANS FOR THE NON-ALIGNED WORLD

One important reason for the similarity in postures comes down to the threat these nations felt to their entire way of life, both economically and politically. In the United States, the Red Scare created a panicked atmosphere as the American populace tried to root out communism from the country.² Everyday Americans worried “that the ‘evil forces’ of communism might gain strength through conquest in Europe and Asia,” and this became an “obsession throughout the United States,” permeating all parts of society.³ President Truman said, “At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life,” during his Address before a Joint Session of Congress where he emphasized the importance of protecting the world against communism.⁴ In the same speech, Truman demonstrated the urgency of action: “The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world – and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation.”⁵ The American plan, as explained by President Roosevelt, was to transform former colonies into new democratic states that shared key American values.⁶ The Soviets similarly wanted to end colonization, except they planned to instate “regimes in which communist parties would hold significant or dominant political power.”⁷ In short the Soviets wanted to “dominate both ideologically and geopolitically.”⁸ While these approaches were heavyhanded, that is not to say that these nations did not try to entice the Third World to join their side first. The United States hailed the message

² James A. Warren, *Cold War : the American Crusade against World Communism, 1945-1991* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1996), p. 83.

³ Warren, *Cold War : the American*, p. 81.

⁴ Harry S. Truman, "President Harry S. Truman's Address before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947" (address transcript, Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947).

⁵ Truman, "President Harry."

⁶ Herbert J. Ellison, "Soviet-American Intervention," *Harvard International Review* 8, no. 3 (1986): p. 3, accessed February 25, 2026,

https://www.jstor.org/stable/42759850?searchText=american+intervention+in+vietnam&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Damerican%2Bintervention%2Bin%2Bvietnam%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A217ee0d94fb2caf54e7ac8c5379f5653&seq=1

⁷ Ellison, "Soviet-American Intervention," p. 3.

⁸ Douglas Pike, "The USSR and Vietnam: Into the Swamp," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 12 (1979): p. 1160, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2643962>.

of freedom while the Soviets claimed to offer guarantees of stability.⁹ These promises show a clear difference in the appeals made to non-aligned countries, however as this paper will show, the actions taken by these powers were very similar. This is significant as it shows once nations achieve a certain level of power they begin to show the willingness and ability to enforce their ideology abroad regardless of what that ideology is.

THE AMERICAN PURSUIT OF INFLUENCE IN VIETNAM

While America endeavored to recruit nations to the capitalist cause by convincing them of American virtues, they commonly resorted to direct or indirect military intervention which was often more effective in turning a government. The idea behind these actions was the necessity of containing communism as part of the Domino Theory. Especially after the results of the Korean War, American policymakers became more invested in containing communism to Eastern Europe and Central Asia.¹⁰ The result of this was the dramatic increase in military spending from 1945-1980 during which the direct private investment into developing countries increased from 4 to 40 billion dollars and US military and economic aid totaled to about 200 billion dollars during the same period.¹¹ The heavy American investment was in hopes of strengthening states against communist influence, showing the extreme financial commitment the US had to hampering the spread of communism.¹² The Truman Doctrine was also a key policy to fight communism and promised aid, military in particular, to pro-Western governments threatened by communism "from within or without."¹³ Another policy example is The Marshall Plan, which further shows the financial commitment the US government had to combatting communism. Since the end of WWII in 1945, the US was in possession of, "two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, three-fourths of its invested capital, half of its shipping vessels, and half of its manufacturing capacity."¹⁴ The immense

⁹ "The Third World and the U.S.-Soviet Competition: A Soviet View," *Foreign Affairs* 59, no. 5 (1981): p. 1027, accessed February 22, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20040901?searchText=soviet+third+work&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dsoviet%2Bthird%2Bwork%26utm_source%3Dgoogle_grant%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A79c8e439ae1f55d5175685876e220a71&seq=3.

¹⁰ 1. Herbert J. Ellison, "Soviet-American Intervention," *Harvard International Review* 8, no. 3 (1986): p. 5, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42759850?searchText=american+intervention+in+vietnam&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DAmerican%2Bintervention%2Bin%2Bvietnam%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A217ee0d94fb2caf54e7ac8c5379f5653&seq=1.

¹¹ "The Third World and the U.S.-Soviet Competition: A Soviet View," *Foreign Affairs* 59, no. 5 (1981): p. 1023, accessed February 22, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20040901?searchText=soviet+third+work&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dsoviet%2Bthird%2Bwork%26utm_source%3Dgoogle_grant%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A79c8e439ae1f55d5175685876e220a71&seq=3.

¹² Ellison, "Soviet-American Intervention," p. 5.

¹³ James A. Warren, *Cold War : the American Crusade against World Communism, 1945-1991* (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1996), p. 40.

¹⁴ Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, reprint ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 67.

amount of economic leverage the US had enabled many of the aggressive indirect interventions that they engaged in. This applies to the Soviet Union as well and was a strategy used by both.

The Vietnam War showed that America was willing to not only give money to stop the spread of communism but also deploy its own soldiers to fight against it militarily, proving American resolve was deeper than fiscal measures. The war was, at its core, "one against communism."¹⁵ The Vietnam War showed how incompatible capitalist democracy and communist authoritarianism were. The Western-aligned South Vietnamese and Eastern-aligned North Vietnamese were unwilling to consider or negotiate for reunification.¹⁶ The ideological divide ran deep in many parts of the world. Much like the United States, the Soviet Union gave large sums of money to aid regimes they supported. In the Vietnam War, they did not directly participate like the US, but rather funded the Vietnamese communists and provided them with many of their weapons throughout the conflict. By the end of the war, the USSR was supplying 75% of their military hardware, demonstrating the economic power the USSR possessed and a similar policy to the United States in regard to financial support for groups with shared values.¹⁷

THE SOVIET PURSUIT OF INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

The Soviet Campaign in Afghanistan was an important parallel of its American counterpart in Vietnam. The Soviet Union's Brezhnev Doctrine was a central piece of their foreign policy. It, in short, said that the Soviet Union would respond to threats in order to protect communism and the revolution.¹⁸ This was in practice the Soviet equivalent to the American Domino Theory. Also similar to the United States attempting to instate pro-Western democracies in the Third World, the USSR made efforts to incubate communist countries in order to bring more countries under communist control.¹⁹ The significance of this is it demonstrates how the Soviets used their leverage to increase their global influence with little regard for the nations it was turning communist due to reaching a level of power where this pursuit of dominance appears in countries.

In Afghanistan, the Soviets decided to engage in indirect military action in the region, showing how they

¹⁵ "The Third," p. 1023.

¹⁶ Richard A. Falk, "International Law and the United States Role in the Viet Nam War," *The Yale Law Journal* 75, no. 7 (1966): p. 1130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/794923>.

¹⁷ Pike, "The USSR," p. 1165.

¹⁸ R. Judson Mitchell, "The Brezhnev Doctrine and Communist Ideology," *The Review of Politics* 34, no. 2 (1972): p. 190, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1406470?searchText=Brezhnev+Doctrine&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DBrezhnev%2BDoctrine%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A676d36a9f988ac431b15a6430dc1caad&seq=1.

¹⁹ Herbert J. Ellison, "Soviet-American Intervention," *Harvard International Review* 8, no. 3 (1986): p. 4, accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42759850?searchText=american+intervention+in+vietnam&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Damerican%2Bintervention%2Bin%2Bvietnam%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A217ee0d94fb2caf54e7ac8c5379f5653&seq=1.

used their military in addition to money like the United States. Afghanistan was important to the USSR due to its implications for Soviet territorial security and global policy.²⁰ Inspired by ideas closely paralleling those of American Domino Theory and containment of communism, the Soviet Union viewed this invasion as necessary. Another aspect was the perceived “challenges to their strategic interests in the eastern Mediterranean and South Arabia” that the Soviets felt from the United States.²¹ The Soviets initially attempted to instate a communist puppet government, but it soon faced challenges. The problems stemmed from “Taraki's overzealous efforts to assert the central government's authority in remote areas that had traditionally been autonomous, to redistribute land, and to impose taxes on a society unused to paying them” which resulted in “alienated landlords, tribal leaders, and the peasantry.”²² Taraki's regime began facing rebellion and the Soviets responded by, in April 1979, sending General Alexis Yepishev, a high ranking officer of Soviet Army and Navy, on a military mission to Kabul to discern the reason why Taraki's regime was incapable of suppressing the rebellion. Soon there were 5000 Soviet civilian and military advisors in the Afghan government and “Soviet responsibility for the military campaign became more direct,” and the Soviets began taking control of military bases and operations.²³ Much like the United States did in Vietnam, the Soviet interest had evolved into direct military action in Afghanistan to save their preferred party in an intrastate conflict. At the same time, the Americans were providing funds to combat the Soviet Union's interests. The importance of this is it highlights the similarities in posture between the USA and USSR because in many ways the conflicts in Vietnam and Afghanistan were similar with the Americans and Soviets playing opposite roles. The importance of the mirrored roles demonstrates a striking similarity between American and Soviet attitudes towards less powerful nations. Based on how ideologically opposing these two nations were, this concept could possibly be generalized further to other powerful nations.

CONCLUSION

The differences in what was promised were summarized in the Kitchen Debate. The Kitchen Debate occurred in 1959 and was an impromptu interaction between American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. Both leaders took jabs at each other and touted the virtues of their beliefs. Khrushchev said, “In Russia, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. You are entitled to housing,” demonstrating the Soviet Union's incentive of supposed equality.²⁴ Nixon, talking about American innovation said, “American houses last for more than 20 years, but, even so, after twenty years, many Americans want a new house or

²⁰ Milton F. Goldman, "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan: Roots and Causes," *Polity* 16, no. 3 (1984): p. 384, accessed February 24, 2026, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3234556?searchText=ussr+afganistan&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dussr%2Bafganistan%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-de-fault%3A550955cfeae5462ac3f5f9f7a20b1d39&seq=1.

²¹ Goldman, "Soviet Military," p. 396.

²² Goldman, "Soviet Military," p. 386.

²³ Goldman, "Soviet Military," p. 387.

²⁴ *Kitchen Debate*, 1959, pdf. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1959-07-24.pdf>

a new kitchen. Their kitchen is obsolete by that time....The American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques.”²⁵ The Kitchen Debate epitomized the vastly different promises given to the Third World. Yet the actions taken by both the First and Second World were remarkably similar. This significantly underscores the difference between stated beliefs and practical actions. Showing the

The USA and USSR were ideologically opposite and their communications conflicted at nearly every level. In their appeals to non-aligned nations, they expressed differing messages. However, they both believed that the Third World should choose a side. And their actions to force this were exceptionally similar. Both installed governments that followed their values and engaged in economic pressure along with both direct and indirect military action. The conflicts in Vietnam and Afghanistan nearly mirrored each other in this way. Because of this, their postures towards the Third World should be considered largely similar despite their differing appeals and beliefs. The similarities between the USA and USSR's military postures is not only historically interesting, but also could have implications in modern foreign policy. The striking similarities between the Soviet Union and United States' postures towards smaller nations during the Cold War highlights the way in which larger powers engage with less powerful states. The fact that the US and USSR were so ideologically opposed shows that their postures were not an extension of beliefs but rather demonstrate a broader way in which a state with comparable power leverages its assets - military strength, influence, and finances - to alter other states. This is a pattern of nations that have reached a new level of power and wealth since the conclusion of the Second World War because without having to focus as much on the procurement of military and economic power they instead have more ability and desire to focus on alternate pursuits such as promoting their ideology or exercising soft power through global influence.

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²⁵ *Kitchen Debate*, 1959, pdf.

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