Decolonization of Asia and Africa, 1945–1960

Between 1945 and 1960, three dozen new states in Asia and Africa achieved autonomy or outright independence from their European colonial rulers.

Harold MacMillan, British Prime Minister, helped begin decolonization

There was no one process of decolonization. In some areas, it was peaceful, and orderly. In many others, independence was achieved only after a protracted revolution. A few newly independent countries acquired stable governments almost immediately; others were ruled by dictators or military juntas for decades, or endured long civil wars. Some European governments welcomed a new relationship with their former colonies; others contested decolonization militarily. **The process of decolonization coincided with the new Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, and with the early development of the new United Nations**. Decolonization was often affected by superpower competition, and had a definite impact on the evolution of that competition. It also significantly changed the pattern of international relations in a more general sense.

The creation of so many new countries, some of which occupied strategic locations, others of which possessed significant natural resources, and most of which were desperately poor, altered the composition of the United Nations and political complexity of every region of the globe. In the mid to late 19th century, the European powers colonized much of Africa and Southeast Asia. During the decades of imperialism, the industrializing powers of Europe viewed the African and Asian continents as reservoirs of raw materials, labor, and territory for future settlement. In most cases, however, significant development and European settlement in these colonies was sporadic. However, the colonies were exploited, sometimes brutally, for natural and labor resources, and sometimes even for military conscripts. In addition, the introduction of colonial rule drew arbitrary natural boundaries where none had existed before, dividing ethnic and linguistic groups and natural features, and laying the foundation for the creation of numerous states lacking geographic, linguistic, ethnic, or political affinity.

During World War II Japan, itself a significant imperial power, drove the European powers out of Asia. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, local nationalist movements in the former Asian colonies campaigned for independence rather than a return to European colonial rule. In many cases, as in Indonesia and French Indochina, these nationalists had been guerrillas fighting the Japanese after European surrenders, or were former members of colonial military establishments. These independence movements often appealed to the United States Government for support.

While the United States generally supported the concept of national self-determination, it also had strong ties to its European allies, who had imperial claims on their former colonies. **The Cold War only served to complicate the U.S. position, as U.S. support for decolonization was offset by American concern over communist expansion and Soviet strategic ambitions in Europe.** Several of the NATO allies

asserted that their colonial possessions provided them with economic and military strength that would otherwise be lost to the alliance. Nearly all of the United States' European allies believed that after their recovery from World War II their colonies would finally provide the combination of raw materials and protected markets for finished goods that would cement the colonies to Europe. Whether or not this was the case, the alternative of allowing the colonies to slip away, perhaps into the United States' economic sphere or that of another power, was unappealing to every European government interested in postwar stability. Although the U.S. Government did not force the issue, it encouraged the European imperial powers to negotiate an early withdrawal from their overseas colonies. The United States granted independence to the Philippines in 1946.

However, as the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union came to dominate U.S. foreign policy concerns in the late 1940s and 1950s, the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations grew increasingly concerned that as the European powers lost their colonies or granted them independence, Soviet-supported communist parties might achieve power in the new states. This might serve to shift the international balance of power in favor of the Soviet Union and remove access to economic resources from U.S. allies. **Events such as the Indonesian struggle for independence from the Netherlands (1945–50), the Vietnamese war against France (1945–54), and the nationalist and professed socialist takeovers of Egypt (1952) and Iran (1951) served to reinforce such fears, even if new governments did not directly link themselves to the Soviet Union.** Thus, the United States used aid packages, technical assistance and sometimes even military intervention to encourage newly independent nations in the Third World to adopt governments that aligned with the West. The Soviet Union deployed similar tactics in an effort to encourage new nations to join the communist bloc, and attempted to convince newly decolonized countries that communism was an intrinsically non-imperialist economic and political ideology. Many of the new nations resisted the pressure to be drawn into the Cold War, joined in the "nonaligned movement," which formed after the Bandung conference of 1955, and focused on internal development.

The newly independent nations that emerged in the 1950s and the 1960s became an important factor in changing the balance of power within the United Nations. **In 1946, there were 35 member states in the United Nations; as the newly independent nations of the "third world" joined the organization, by 1970 membership had swelled to 127.** These new member states had a few characteristics in common; they were non-white, with developing economies, facing internal problems that were the result of their colonial past, which sometimes put them at odds with European countries and made them suspicious of European-style governmental structures, political ideas, and economic institutions. These countries also became vocal advocates of continuing decolonization, with the result that the UN Assembly was often ahead of the Security Council on issues of self-governance and decolonization. The new nations pushed the UN toward accepting resolutions for independence for colonial states and creating a special committee on colonialism, demonstrating that even though some nations continued to struggle for independence, in the eyes of the international community, the colonial era was ending.

https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/asia-and-africa
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NSC-68, 1950

National Security Council Paper NSC-68 (entitled "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security" and frequently referred to as NSC-68) was a Top-Secret report completed by the U.S. Department of State's Policy Planning Staff on April 7, 1950. The 58-page memorandum is among the most influential documents composed by the U.S. Government during the Cold War, and was not declassified until 1975. Its authors argued that one of the most pressing threats confronting the United States was the "hostile design" of the Soviet Union. The authors concluded that the Soviet threat would soon be greatly augmented by the addition of more weapons, including nuclear weapons, to the Soviet arsenal. **They argued that the best course of action was to respond in kind with a massive build-up of the U.S. military and its weaponry.**

President Truman meeting with the NSC Staff

Reeling from the recent victory of Communist forces in the Chinese Civil War and the successful detonation of an atomic weapon by the Soviet Union, Secretary of State Dean Acheson asked the Policy Planning Staff, led by **Paul Nitze,** to undertake a comprehensive review of U.S. national security strategy. Building upon the conclusions of an earlier National Security Council paper (NSC-20/4), the authors of NSC-68 based their conclusions on the theory that the decline of the Western European powers and Japan following World War II had left the United States and the Soviet Union as the two dominant powers. **Nitze's group argued that the Soviet Union was "animated by a new fanatic faith" antithetical to that of the United States, and was driven "to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world."** Furthermore, they concluded that "violent and non-violent" conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union had become "endemic."

NSC-68 outlined a variety of possible courses of action, including a return to isolationism; war; continued diplomatic efforts to negotiate with the Soviets; or "the rapid building up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world." This last approach would allow the United States to attain sufficient strength to deter Soviet aggression. In the event that an armed conflict with the Communist bloc did arise, the United States could then successfully defend its territory and overseas interests.

The authors of NSC-68 rejected a renewal of U.S. isolationism, fearing that this would lead to the Soviet domination of Eurasia, and leave the United States marooned on the Western Hemisphere, cut off from the allies and resources it needed to fend off further Soviet encroachments. The report also ruled out a preventive strike against the Soviet Union, because its authors reckoned that such action would not destroy the Soviet military's offensive capacities, and would instead invite retaliatory strikes that would devastate Western Europe. Moreover, U.S. experts did not believe that American public

opinion would support measures that might lead to a protracted war. NSC-68 did not rule out the prospect of negotiating with the Soviet Union when it suited the objectives of the United States and its allies; however, the report's authors argued that such an approach would only succeed if the United States could create "political and economic conditions in the free world" sufficient to deter the Soviet Union from pursuing a military solution to the Cold War rivalry.

NSC-68 concluded that **the only plausible way to deter the Soviet Union was for President Harry Truman to support a massive build-up of both conventional and nuclear arms.** More specifically, such a program should seek to protect the United States and its allies from Soviet land and air attacks, maintain lines of communications, and enhance the technical superiority of the United States through "an accelerated exploitation of [its] scientific potential." In order to fund the substantial increase in military spending this conclusion demanded, the report suggested that the Government increase taxes and reduce other expenditures.

Initially, a number of U.S. officials strongly opposed NSC-68's recommendations. Critics such as Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and senior diplomats such as Soviet experts and former ambassadors to the Soviet Union George Kennan and Charles Bohlen, argued that the United States already had a substantial military advantage over the Soviet Union. Kennan, in particular, disagreed with Nitze's assertion that the Soviet Union was bent on achieving domination through force of arms, and argued that the United States could contain the Soviet Union through political and economic measures, rather than purely military ones. **However, the invasion of South Korea by Soviet and Chinese-backed North Korean forces in June 1950, and continuing charges by Congressional critics that the Administration was soft on Communism, quickly settled matters in favor of the report's recommendations. NSC 68's recommendations thereby became policy, and the United States Government began a massive military build-up.** While NSC-68 did not make any specific recommendations regarding the proposed increase in defense expenditures, the Truman Administration almost tripled defense spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product between 1950 and 1953 (from 5 to 14.2 percent).

https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/NSC68

The Connection between the Non-Aligned States (The Third World) and the Cold War.

Summary of The World Since 1945 (pages 87-99)

Decolonization happened rapidly after 1945 & presented challenges to the imperial powers most notably in the spread of social (as in anti-capitalist) revolution.

Imperial powers often responded with force, although the British withdrew peacefully from India whilst attempting to influence the terms of independence, they want to war in Malaya and the French resisted the end of empire by fighting too in Indo-China and Algeria. The Americans withdrew from the Philippines (acquired by Treaty from Spain in 1898) in 1946 but Washington worked with the new regime to head off a revolutionary guerrilla movement.

In sum, **despite losing their colonies the West were able to influence the former colonies in ways which offset the effects of decolonization** because however much Third World leaders attacked the West they need the markets and investments which former colonial powers provided.

Though some revolutionary regimes did come to power (China is the obvious example) most former colonies, being undeveloped, **remained economically dependent on the West**.

Most revolutionary movements in the Third World identified with the Soviet Bloc (the People's Republic of China assumed a more independent stance) which threatened Western interests. So, Washington, London and other capitals developed counter-revolutionary strategies to destabilize unfriendly left-wing regimes.

In 1945 Western Europe and the US still claimed most of the Third World in one form or another (e.g. through domination of the foreign trade of Latin America despite the independence of this region from Spain and Portugal since the 19th century). The Third World (a term invented in the west) was integrated into the world economy but on **unequal terms** - usually resulted in under developed infrastructure and domestic industries and thus poverty (i.e. the breeding grounds for social discontent and revolution).

The end of WW2 meant the continued usefulness of the Third World for the West because:

- Resources were needed for **European reconstruction**
- **Substitutes were needed for raw materials** and commodities that had come from Eastern Europe in the past but which be monopolized by the USSR after 1945
- The extent to which European states could maintain good relationships with colonies or former colonies would **protect all the money already invested in them** and lead to profit making opportunities in the future.
- For the UK and France colonialism and neo-colonialism meant a way of **maintaining their status as great powers** in the face of American rivalry.

Western states had to protect their investments and did so through foreign-aid strategies designed to protect infrastructure (ports, roads, schools, hospitals, hydroelectric projects) in order to allow private enterprises to thrive.

- For example, the **British Overseas Food Corporation** was created in WW2 to raise agricultural production for export in West African colonies.

- The French government described its aid programme for the French Union as designed to 'increase agricultural and industrial production in the perspective of a European community'.

- The **Colombo Plan** was also launched in 1951 for the Asia-Pacific region (mainly by the white governments of the British Commonwealth such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada).

- The US also launched the **Point Four** programme in 1949 under Truman to develop agricultural output and distribute technical know-how on improving economies in general – Iran was the first government to do so on 9th October 1950.

It should be noted that most Western aid was **'tied'** – money was granted on condition it be spent on good and services in the donor country. This served to perpetuate the under-developed status of the Third World.

The USSR was not an early post-war player in the colonial world since they were not in a position to be able to give much aid (e.g. communists in Vietnam proclaimed an independent government in 1945 and became involved in a war with France but the USSR only got involved several years later).

In the immediate post war period the Soviets prioritized **Eastern Europe**. These satellite states were independent nations but dependent on the USSR. Until Cuba signed a treaty with the USSR in 1960 the only non-European satellites were the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea).

The first Soviet programmes of economic assistance for non-communist countries began in the mid 1950s. However, in 1948 Eastern bloc weapons reached **Israel** during its war of independence. But the first substantial package of military aid was to **Egypt in 1955** via USSR sales through Czechoslovakia as a front. Statistics suggest from the mid 1950s to 1978 Moscow provided $46.8 billion worth of aid to the underdeveloped countries ($29 billion of this was military aid) whilst (in the slightly longer period) of 1945 to 1978 the USA offered $94 billion of aid (about $80 billion in military aid). Although not strictly comparable (due to different definitions of what constitutes aid and the time periods in question) these figures do give some idea of the relative scale of the USSR's efforts compared to the USA's.