

## **The Cold War and Decolonisation: Interwoven Histories**

The Cold War and decolonisation are two of the most defining phenomena of the twentieth century. Both were global in scope and deeply intertwined, shaping the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the post-World War II era. This essay explores the symbiotic relationship between the Cold War and decolonisation, analysing how their interaction influenced the trajectories of newly independent nations and global power dynamics.

### **The Origins of the Cold War and Decolonisation**

The Cold War emerged in the aftermath of World War II as a geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, rooted in ideological differences between capitalism and communism.<sup>1</sup> This rivalry manifested in political, economic, and military confrontations across the globe. Simultaneously, the decolonisation movement gained momentum as former colonies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean sought independence from European empires weakened by war.<sup>2</sup>

Decolonisation was driven by a combination of factors, including grassroots anti-colonial movements, the ideological contradictions of Western democracies, and the economic exhaustion of imperial powers.<sup>3</sup> Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Kwame Nkrumah, and Ho Chi Minh became international symbols of resistance against imperialism, leveraging the shifting global order to push for sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dukes and Dukes, *The Cold War and Decolonisation*, p. 434.

<sup>2</sup> Fry, *Decolonization: Britain, France, and the Cold War*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Hack, *Unfinished Decolonisation and Globalisation*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Kent, *Decolonisation and Empire*, p. 267.

# **The Cold War and Decolonisation: A Complex Relationship**

The overlap between the Cold War and decolonisation created a complex and often contradictory dynamic. While both superpowers publicly endorsed self-determination, their policies were often shaped by strategic interests.

## **1. Superpower Competition and Proxy Wars**

Newly independent nations became arenas for Cold War influence, with many decolonisation conflicts transforming into proxy wars. The Vietnam War, which began as a struggle against French colonialism, evolved into a Cold War battleground, as the U.S. supported South Vietnam while the communist North received backing from the Soviet Union and China.<sup>5</sup>

In Africa, the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002) epitomised Cold War proxy conflict. The United States and apartheid South Africa supported anti-communist factions, while the Soviet Union and Cuba aided the MPLA government.<sup>6</sup> Such interventions often prolonged violence and hindered stable governance in post-colonial states.<sup>7</sup> The Congo Crisis also reflects this pattern. The Katangan secession drew in both Western and Soviet interests, illustrating how Cold War tensions could intensify post-colonial fragmentation.<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Ideological Influence on Decolonisation**

Newly sovereign states were not merely battlegrounds but also ideological experiments. The Cold War presented a dichotomy of political and economic models. While the West advocated liberal democracy and capitalism, the Soviet Union championed socialism and central planning.<sup>9</sup> Leaders such as Nasser in Egypt and

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<sup>5</sup> Chu, *Cold War and Decolonisation*, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> Kent, *America, the UN and Decolonisation*, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> Branch, *Violence, Decolonisation and the Cold War in Kenya*, p. 645.

<sup>8</sup> Kent, *The Neo-Colonialism of Decolonisation*, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Six, *Secularism, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in South and Southeast Asia*, p. 22.

Sukarno in Indonesia attempted to navigate these competing paradigms to serve national interests.<sup>10</sup>

The establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 was an effort to resist Cold War polarisation. Figures like Nehru, Nkrumah, and Tito sought a third path for developing nations.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, neutrality proved difficult, as both superpowers vied to win influence through aid, trade, and diplomacy.<sup>12</sup>

Southeast Asia was especially illustrative of this struggle. In Indonesia, competing ideologies and Cold War pressures led to political turmoil and the eventual rise of authoritarianism under Suharto.<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Economic Dependency and Neo-Colonialism**

Independence did not automatically equate to economic autonomy. Many post-colonial states remained economically dependent on their former rulers and new Cold War patrons.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. leveraged initiatives like the Marshall Plan to strengthen capitalist alliances, while the Soviet Union provided support to sympathetic regimes<sup>15</sup>.

This dynamic led to what some scholars term “neo-colonialism”—a continuation of economic domination without formal political control.<sup>16</sup> Aid was often tied to ideological compliance, limiting the policy space of recipient governments and reinforcing global inequalities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Aspinall and Berger, *The Break-Up of Indonesia?*, p. 1004.

<sup>11</sup> Chu, *Cold War and Decolonisation*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts, *Politics, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in Dar es Salaam*, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Aspinall and Berger, *The Break-Up of Indonesia?*, p. 1010.

<sup>14</sup> Hopkins, *Globalisation and Decolonisation*, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Fry, *Decolonization: Britain, France, and the Cold War*, p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Kent, *America, the UN and Decolonisation*, p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> Popescu, *The Battle of Conferences*, p. 170.

Cold War aid programs, such as Soviet scholarships for African students, also aimed at shaping elite attitudes and fostering long-term influence.<sup>18</sup>

## Challenges and Consequences for Post-Colonial States

The intersection of decolonisation and the Cold War brought both opportunity and adversity for new states:

- **Political Instability:** Cold War competition exacerbated internal divisions, leading to coups, insurgencies, and authoritarian regimes.<sup>19</sup>
- **Economic Underdevelopment:** Structural dependencies limited diversification and sustained underdevelopment in many parts of Africa and Asia.<sup>20</sup>
- **Sovereignty Undermined:** Geopolitical imperatives often overrode local autonomy, with superpowers treating allies as pawns in a larger strategic game.<sup>21</sup>

These challenges often prolonged the trauma of colonisation and left enduring legacies in post-colonial societies.

## The End of the Cold War and Its Impact on Decolonisation

The late 1980s and early 1990s brought the Cold War to a close. The Soviet Union collapsed, and the ideological rivalry that had shaped much of the post-war order waned. This shift had profound effects on post-colonial states:

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<sup>18</sup> Weaver, *African Student Elites in the USSR*, p. 236.

<sup>19</sup> Kraus, *'The Danger Is Two-Fold'*, p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> Maekawa, *The British Response to Soviet Anti-Colonialism*, p. 190.

<sup>21</sup> Kent, *The Neo-Colonialism of Decolonisation*, p. 128.

- **Globalisation:** The Cold War's end coincided with the acceleration of globalisation, offering new opportunities for trade and investment but also exposing countries to global market volatility.<sup>22</sup>
- **Multipolarity:** The decline of bipolar dominance enabled regional powers and institutions to play more significant roles in global affairs.<sup>23</sup>
- **Enduring Struggles:** Despite the end of ideological conflict, many states continued to grapple with the structural legacies of Cold War-era interventions.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The Cold War and decolonisation were not separate historical processes but deeply interwoven phenomena. While the dismantling of empire marked a triumph for self-determination, the Cold War complicated efforts toward genuine sovereignty and equitable development. Understanding their intersection helps explain the persistence of many global inequalities and challenges in the post-colonial world.

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<sup>22</sup> Hopkins, *Globalisation and Decolonisation*, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Benvenuti, *Australia's Policy Towards Britain's End of Empire*, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Barkawi, *Decolonising War*, p. 200.

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