

Fact

Although the new communist government of a reunited Vietnam backed Moscow, signing a Friendship Treaty in 1978, and later joined Comecon, the new Vietnamese regime was critical of détente and at times took an independent line. Also, the USSR was concerned that Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia gave the US and China excuses to step up their interference in the region.

In January 1973, a ceasefire was agreed. Later that year, Congress refused to give Nixon permission to send US troops to Cambodia to prevent North Vietnamese incursions. It then passed an act to prevent a president from deploying US troops before any declaration of war, ordered an end to the bombing of Cambodia, and ruled that US troops should not be sent to Vietnam again. Once the ceasefire had been signed, the US began to withdraw its remaining troops.

However, the war soon flared up again between communist and South Vietnamese forces. In March 1975, the North launched another major attack. This time, without US air support or troops, the South was unable to withstand the attack. Those critical of détente used this as evidence of the USSR's growing global influence.

The Viet Cong and the Northern army pushed southwards. On 29 April 1975 the communists marched into Saigon, and the war was over. After almost 30 years of warfare, the communists at last controlled the whole of Vietnam. By then, over two million Vietnamese had been killed.

Less than two weeks before, the Khmer Rouge had taken power in Cambodia and, on 9 May, the Pathet Lao finally took over in Laos. Later, in 1978, communist Vietnam sent its army into Cambodia to remove the Pol Pot regime, which had carried out mass killings; it also intervened in Laos. This in turn led to China – which, along with the US, gave support to Pol Pot as he was anti-Soviet – invading Vietnam in January 1979. This was an attempt to limit the power of Vietnam which had signed a treaty with the Soviet Union in 1978.

What effect did the Vietnam War have on US foreign policy in the Cold War after 1975?

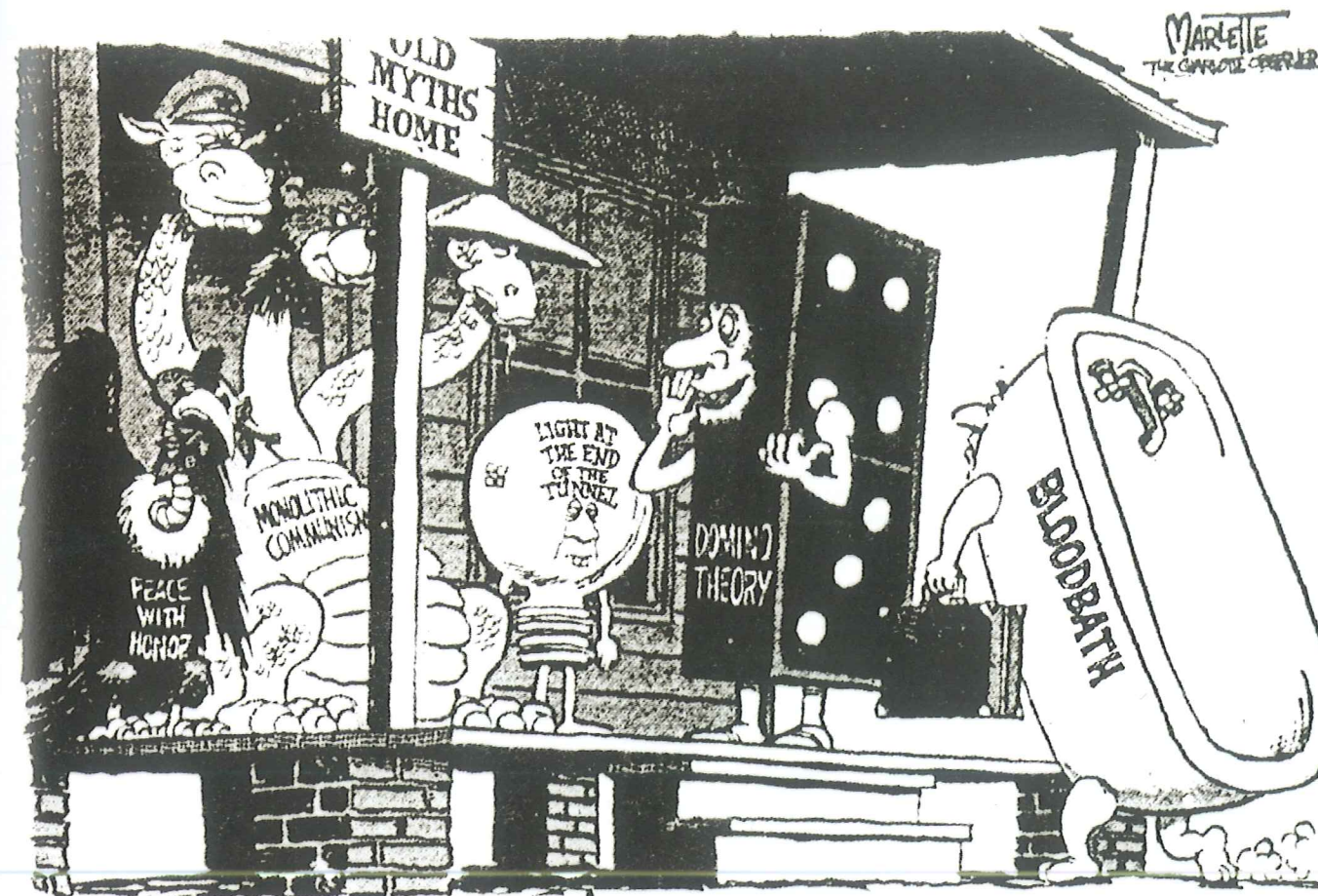
The failure of the US to win the war in Vietnam, and the fact that a Developing World nation had forced them to withdraw, was a deep shock for US politicians and public alike. Apart from the billions of dollars it had cost, over 55,000 US soldiers had been killed, and many more seriously wounded or maimed. Yet, despite all this, South Vietnam had been 'lost' to communism, as had the neighbouring states of Laos and Cambodia. More disturbing as far as containment was concerned was the fact that these communist successes seemed to be as much the result of local popular support as of 'outside pressure', which containment had seen as the only significant factor behind the spread of communism.

Consequently, Nixon and his chief adviser, Kissinger, decided to pursue the new policy of détente towards the communist world. In particular, Kissinger argued that the US was focusing too much on communist activity in one region, at the expense of the total global balance of power. He also saw that the world had shifted from a bi-polar international situation to a multi-polar one. Of special significance was the rift between the Soviet Union and China, which gave new opportunities for developing US foreign policy. This approach was continued by Nixon's successors, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, until the end of the 1970s.

The defeat in Vietnam contributed to a US reluctance to commit its own troops to other conflicts in the Developing World. The USSR took advantage of this during the remainder of the 1970s, to increase its influence in those parts of the world where it was weak, especially in the Middle East and Africa.

Historical debate

A much-debated issue remains whether the USA's forced withdrawal from Vietnam indicated a complete defeat of its policies and strategy for the region. Some historians argue against this, believing that more significant areas – Malaysia and the 'Asian Tiger' economies – were safeguarded. Through a combination of repressive regimes and booming economies, these states were able to resist the spread of communism. Such outcomes could be seen as in line with the earlier US policies of containment and the Defensive Perimeter.



This cartoon, entitled 'The Myths of Vietnam', appeared in a US newspaper in 1975

Was the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan the main reason for the start of the Second Cold War?

Afghanistan, December 1979

Détente finally reached the brink of collapse due to increased Soviet activity in Afghanistan's internal politics, and then the decision to send in Red Army divisions to support the new pro-Soviet Afghan government. The USSR considered this action to be in line with the Brezhnev Doctrine (see page 118), as Afghanistan had been unofficially accepted by the West as of special concern to the Soviet Union's security, given their common borders, and of no strategic importance to the US.

The first government formed by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan had, in fact, been recognised by the West after it had come to power through an internal coup in April 1978. The PDPA, led by Nur Mohammad Taraki, was pro-Soviet and received economic assistance from the Soviet Union.

However, many traditionalist and fundamentalist groups, as well as the powerful feudal landowners, decided to resist the radical social and economic reforms of the new government. These had included land reform, equal rights for women, and secular education for both boys and girls. In September 1979, one faction within the PDPA, led by Hafizullah Amin and with the support of some traditionalists, seized power in another coup.

This sparked off a civil war, in which fundamentalist Muslims set up the Mujahideen and declared a *jihad*, or holy war, against Amin's government. Initially, Amin (who had been a student in the US) was supported by the USSR, but relations later deteriorated. In particular, the USSR became increasingly concerned by Amin's anti-Soviet and pro-Western statements, and especially by his contacts with CIA agents and the US government.

In closed meetings, Amin attacked Soviet policy, and the activities of Soviet advisers, while the Soviet ambassador was in practice expelled from Kabul. This growing political re-orientation to the West – and the danger of the domestic reforms of the earlier Afghan revolution of 1978 – led to growing Soviet concerns.

Carter's reaction (on advice from Brzezinski) to the Soviet military intervention, which he described as 'the greatest threat to world peace since the Second World War', took the Soviet Union by surprise. The USSR claimed it had only intervened after Pakistan – with US support – and Iran had become involved in the civil war.

Fact

April 1978 Taraki and PDPA take power following a coup

September 1979 Amin comes to power after an internal PDPA coup

December 1979 Kamal comes to power after another internal PDPA coup, and requests Soviet intervention

SOURCE B

In this extremely difficult situation, which has threatened the gains of the April [1978] revolution and the interests of maintaining our security, it has become necessary to render additional military assistance to Afghanistan, especially since such requests had been made by the previous administration in the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan]. In accordance with the provisions of the Soviet–Afghan treaty of 1978, a decision has been made to send the necessary contingent of the Soviet Army to Afghanistan.

Extract from Report on Events in Afghanistan on 27–28 December 1979, to the Soviet Central Committee, 31 December 1979. CWIHP Bulletin, No. 8–9. 1996–97.



A map showing Afghanistan and the Soviet Asian republics; three of these Soviet republics had common borders with Afghanistan

The Soviet Union attempted to present its intervention as similar to supporting communist governments in Eastern Europe. Moscow feared having a fundamentalist Islamic state so close to its own Islamic central Asian republics – especially if it was allied to either the US or China. It also feared that a victory for the fundamentalist Islamic 'counter-revolutionaries' would result in a bloodbath in Afghanistan.

Fact

Not only did the USSR become involved in a disastrous 'Vietnam-style' military conflict in Afghanistan (at least 15,000 Soviet troops were killed), but its intervention in an Islamic state alienated its allies in the Middle East.

Brezhnev also believed that failure to respond would lead other communist states to think that the Soviet Union was no longer willing to resist US power. The USSR believed it was important to retain as many friendly states as possible, given its inferiority to the US. The Soviet Union had 11 significant allies outside Europe, while the US had more than 50.

In reality, the Soviet decision to back a coup against Amin and to support the pro-Soviet Babrak Kamal as the new leader of the PDPA did it much more harm than good. This new Afghan government then asked the USSR to intervene militarily. It was these interventions in 1979 – not the coming to power of a pro-Soviet regime in 1978 – which provoked the strong US–Western reaction that finally brought détente to an end.

SOURCE C

Outside aggression against the revolutionary Afghanistan perpetuated by counter-revolutionary bands, which were organised and are armed by American special services joined with the Peking militarists, made Soviet assistance necessary in defending the Afghan people's gains. In fact Washington, with the assistance of Peking, provoked the 'Afghan crisis' in order to finally gain a free hand in the policy of anti-détente.

Chernenko's comments on the reasons for Soviet intervention. Quoted in Mendelson, S. 1998. *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*. Chichester, UK. Princeton University Press. p. 76.

SOURCE D

By 1985, a very complex web of foreign support for the Mujahedin was in place in which the United States worked and co-operated closely with conservative Arab governments and voluntary organizations to jointly fund and operate key initiatives.

Westad, O. A. 2007. *The Global Cold War*. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press. p. 355.

Even before Soviet intervention in 1979, the US had responded by supplying and training Islamic Mujahideen fighters to combat the new Afghan government and, after 1979, Soviet troops. It also led Carter's administration to issue the 'Carter Doctrine'. This policy stated that the US would intervene in the Persian Gulf if its interests there were threatened. Under Reagan, this US military aid was greatly increased, with much larger amounts of weapons being sent to the Mujahideen via Pakistan, a long-standing ally of both the USA and more recently China. From 1985, during Reagan's second term, this covert US operation to arm the Mujahideen was stepped up – in particular, crucial Stinger anti-aircraft missiles were provided via Pakistan.

One of the countries supporting these US moves was Saudi Arabia. From these Mujahideen bands, even more extremist groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda – led by Osama bin Laden – soon emerged. Overall, the Afghan crisis helped bring about a return to a level of Cold War hostility and lack of communication between the USSR and the USA that had not been seen since 1953. In fact, Soviet officials came to believe that the New Right advisers of the US government had used allies such as Pakistan to help provoke the 'Afghan Crisis' in order to end the policy of détente.



Mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan

Discussion point

Working in pairs, use the information in the chapters of this book that you've already read, and any other materials you've used, to produce a couple of paragraphs to support **and** to oppose the Soviet decision to send troops into Afghanistan in December 1979.

**Theory of knowledge****Politics and ethics**

The US often gave political support and weapons to repressive governments and terrorist organisations during the Cold War, provided they were hostile to the Soviet Union. Does this mean that the claims of American administrations that they were 'defending the free world' and upholding 'democratic values' during the Cold War were entirely bogus?

Unit summary

You should now have a good understanding of the various reasons for the US withdrawal from Vietnam, and of the significance of Nixon's foreign-policy initiatives towards Communist China as a way of putting pressure on the USSR. You should also be able to assess the role played by Kissinger during and immediately after détente. Finally, you should have a good grasp of how political developments and Soviet actions in Afghanistan in the late 1970s contributed to the development of the Second Cold War – and what the main US actions and reactions were.

End of unit activities

- 1 Carry out further research on Soviet interventions in Afghanistan, and then produce two brief arguments – one to show how these actions were defensive, and one to show how they were expansionist.
- 2 Find out more about the reasons for the start of the Second Cold War. Then list them, putting them in the order you think most important. Write a paragraph to explain your choice of the most important reason.
- 3 Produce a timeline to show the main developments in the Second Cold War from 1979 to 1985.

End of chapter activities**Paper 1 exam practice****Question**

With reference to their origin and purpose, assess the value and limitations of Sources A and B below for historians studying attempts to achieve nuclear arms control up to the end of the 1970s.

[6 marks]

Skill

Utility/reliability of sources

SOURCE A

The effort to achieve strategic arms limitation marked the first, and the most daring, attempt to follow a collaborative approach in meeting military security requirements. Early successes held great promises, but also showed the limits of readiness of both superpowers to take this path. ... SALT generated problems of its own and provided a focal point for objection by those who did not want to see either regulated military parity or political détente. ... However, the widely held American view that SALT tried to do too much was a misjudgement: the real flaw was the failure of SALT to do enough. There was remarkable initial success on parity and on stability of the strategic arms relationship but there was insufficient political will (and perhaps political authority) to ban, or sharply limit MIRVs. This failure led in the 1970s to the failure to maintain military parity between the USA and the USSR.

Garthoff, R. L. 1994. *Détente and Confrontation: American–Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*. Washington DC, USA. Brookings Institution. pp. 96–98. Garthoff is a former American diplomat and was a member of the SALT I delegation.

SOURCE B

The domestic political difficulties of the Nixon administration contributed to the failure to conclude a new SALT treaty to replace the 1972 interim agreement, which was due to expire in 1977. The main obstacle to progress on arms control, however, was the evident unwillingness of both superpowers to abandon the arms race with each other. Behind the public advocacy of détente and disarmament, lay the reality that the freeze on missile numbers in SALT I had never been intended to prevent either side from continuing to develop and modernise existing weapons.

Smith, J. 1998. *The Cold War 1945–1991*. Oxford, UK. Oxford University Press. p. 106. Smith is a lecturer in American diplomatic history at the University of Exeter in Britain.