

Topic 8.3: Effects of the Cold War

Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Education Standards Met
Governance (GOV)	Unit 8: Learning Objective C — Compare the ways in which the United States and the Soviet Union sought to maintain influence over the course of the Cold War.	KC-6.2.IV.D The Cold War produced new military alliances, nuclear proliferation, and proxy wars across Latin America, Africa, and Asia.	AP World History: Modern standards— comparison, causation, sourcing, and argumentation.

Learning Objectives

- Compare how the United States and Soviet Union maintained global influence.
- Explain how alliances, proxy wars, and nuclear weapons shaped Cold War conflict.
- Identify similarities and differences in superpower strategies.
- Analyze primary sources to understand Cold War perspectives.
- Use specific historical evidence in written arguments.

Lesson Overview

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for global influence without directly fighting each other in a large-scale war. Instead, they used alliances, military buildup, economic aid, and proxy wars to expand and maintain their power. These strategies affected regions across the world, especially in newly independent countries. This lesson examines how both superpowers exercised influence and how their actions shaped global conflict, political systems, and international relationships.

Essential Vocabulary

- **proxy war** — a conflict where major powers support opposing sides without directly fighting
- **military alliance** — an agreement between countries to support each other in war
- **nuclear deterrence** — using the threat of nuclear weapons to prevent conflict
- **sphere of influence** — an area where a country has political or economic control
- **proliferation** — the spread of weapons, especially nuclear weapons

Background Reading

After World War II, the United States and Soviet Union emerged as superpowers with competing goals and ideologies. Both sought to expand their influence globally, but they used different strategies to do so. The United States promoted capitalist economies, democratic governments, and open trade systems, often providing economic aid through programs like the Marshall Plan. The Soviet Union, in contrast, supported communist governments and used political pressure, military presence, and economic coordination to maintain control over Eastern Europe and influence other regions.

One of the most important ways both superpowers maintained influence was through alliances. The United States formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, which committed member nations to mutual defense. In response, the Soviet Union created the Warsaw Pact in 1955, binding Eastern European countries into a military alliance under Soviet leadership. These alliances formalized the division of Europe and increased tensions between the two blocs.

Another key feature of the Cold War was the use of proxy wars. Instead of fighting each other directly, the United States and Soviet Union supported opposing sides in conflicts around the world. In Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, both superpowers provided military aid, funding, and political support to allies. These conflicts often caused widespread destruction and loss of life, especially in regions that had recently gained independence.

The development and spread of nuclear weapons also played a major role in maintaining influence. Both superpowers built large arsenals of nuclear weapons, leading to an arms race. The idea of nuclear deterrence prevented direct war between them, since both sides feared mutual destruction. However, the existence of these weapons increased global tension and influenced diplomatic decisions throughout the Cold War.

Primary Sources

Primary Source 1: North Atlantic Treaty (NATO), 1949

Document: North Atlantic Treaty

Link: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/nato.asp

The Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.

They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area. They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What goals does NATO claim to promote?
2. How does this document justify the formation of a military alliance?
3. What values are emphasized in the treaty?
4. How does this reflect U.S. strategy during the Cold War?
5. How might the Soviet Union interpret this alliance?

Primary Source 2: Warsaw Pact Treaty, 1955

Document: Warsaw Pact Treaty

Link: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/warsaw.asp

The Contracting Parties, reaffirming their desire for the establishment of a system of collective security in Europe based on the participation of all European states, irrespective of their social and political systems, and considering that the conclusion of a general European treaty of collective security would be the most effective means of safeguarding peace in Europe.

Have agreed to conclude the present Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What reasons does the Soviet bloc give for forming the Warsaw Pact?
2. How does this document respond to NATO?
3. What similarities exist between this and the NATO treaty?
4. What differences can you identify in tone or purpose?
5. How does this reflect Soviet strategy?

Primary Source 3: NSC-68 (U.S. Policy Document), 1950

Document: NSC-68

Link: <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/nsc-68>

The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself. They are issues which will not await our deliberations but will demand decisive action.

The Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What threat does the document identify?
2. How does it describe the Soviet Union?
3. What actions does this document encourage?
4. How does this reflect U.S. Cold War policy?
5. How might Soviet leaders respond to this characterization?

Key Tables / Charts / Diagrams

Superpower Strategies

United States	Soviet Union
NATO alliance	Warsaw Pact
Economic aid (Marshall Plan)	Economic coordination (COMECON)
Support anti-communist regimes	Support communist governments
Promote capitalism	Promote communism

Proxy War Examples

Region	Conflict
Asia	Vietnam
Middle East	Afghanistan
Latin America	Various interventions

Change / Continuity / Comparison Section

Change over time:

The Cold War marked a shift from direct great-power warfare to indirect conflict through alliances, proxy wars, and nuclear deterrence. Military technology advanced significantly, especially with nuclear weapons, increasing the stakes of global conflict.

Continuity over time:

Despite these changes, powerful nations continued to compete for influence over weaker regions. The desire to control resources, territory, and political systems remained consistent with earlier periods.

Comparison:

Both the United States and Soviet Union used alliances, economic support, and military power to maintain influence. However, the United States emphasized capitalism and democracy, while the Soviet Union promoted communism and centralized control. Both sides justified their actions as necessary for global stability.

Key Takeaways

- The Cold War shaped global politics through indirect conflict.
- Alliances like NATO and the Warsaw Pact divided the world.
- Proxy wars spread conflict to multiple regions.
- Nuclear weapons prevented direct war but increased tension.
- Both superpowers used similar methods but different ideologies.

SAQ Practice Section (optional exercise)

SAQ Set 1 (Primary Source 1)

- A. Identify one goal of NATO.
- B. Explain how NATO reflects U.S. Cold War strategy.
- C. Explain one effect of NATO on global politics.

SAQ Set 2 (Primary Source 2)

- A. Identify one purpose of the Warsaw Pact.
- B. Explain how it compares to NATO.
- C. Explain one effect of this alliance system.

SAQ Set 3 (Comparison)

- A. Identify one similarity in U.S. and Soviet strategies.
- B. Explain one difference.
- C. Explain one effect of these strategies on developing nations.