In what ways was the Cold War a global phenomenon?

What began during the Second World War as tension between the Allied powers developed into a decades-long conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union on a global scale. The term "Cold War" describes the contrasting worldviews and, more specifically, the undeclared state of war between the two global superpowers following the end of WWII in 1945 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991[1]. At its core, the Cold War symbolized the clashing modernisms that dominated political rhetoric throughout the twentieth century - communism and capitalism - which were each accepted by the USSR and the US, respectively, to be the mechanism to achieve forward-looking progress. Although their nuclear capabilities made direct armed conflict improbable, George Orwell argues that while "unable to conquer one another, they are likely to continue ruling the world between them"[2]. This essay will examine the ways in which the Cold War transcended the scope of traditional bilateral warfare to become a global phenomenon.

Contrasting political ideologies and governance systems do not signify a global conflict; however, the ambition to have their beliefs constitute the basis of the post-WWII world order, resulted in the international scope of this conflict. Odd Arne Westad proposed that "Washington and Moscow needed to change the world to prove the universal applicability of their ideologies,"[3] thus implying that neither could truly achieve modernity and progress without first reinforcing that modernist thought, communism, and capitalism, respectively, on a broader scale. This intent for global expansion is exemplified by the interventionist policies both regimes

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[1] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

[2] George Orwell, "You and the Atomic Bomb," Tribune, October 19, 1945, 4.

[3] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4

implemented throughout the Cold War - the Brezhnev Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. Formally known as the European Recovery Program, the Marshall Plan was an economic recovery initiative launched by US President Harry Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall in 1947. The United States allocated over $13 billion to help war-torn European countries[4]. This aimed to stabilize the region for trade and humanitarian reasons while also preventing communist expansionism and promoting capitalism in Western Europe, thereby enlarging the American sphere of influence globally. On the other hand, the Brezhnev Doctrine was a foreign policy established by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in 1968 to protect socialism and justify foreign intervention[5]. In his speech at the Fifth Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, he proclaimed that when "forces hostile to socialism seek to halt the development of any socialist country and restore the capitalist order…this is a threat to all socialist countries"[6]. This quote illustrates the extent to which the Soviet regime intertwined its own security with the permanence of socialism on an international scale, where they perceived instability in a foreign nation to represent a destabilising force for the USSR. The assumption that the Cold War was a bilateral conflict can only be made if each superpower's modernist aspirations had been contained within its own borders - which was not the case[7]. In their attempt to reshape the international system, the United States and the Soviet Union allowed for this ideological clash to permeate global political affairs throughout the late twentieth century.

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[4] Alexander D. Weissman, "Pivotal Politics—The Marshall Plan: A Turning Point in Foreign Aid and the Struggle for Democracy," *The History Teacher*, 1, 47 (November 2013): 111–29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43264189, 112.
[5] Stephen G. Glazer, "The Brezhnev Doctorine," *The International Lawyer*, 1, 5 (January 1971): 169–79, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40704652, 169.
[6] Tass International Service in English, November 12, 1968. as cited in Stephen G. Glazer, "The Brezhnev Doctorine," *The International Lawyer*, 1, 5 (January 1971): 169–79, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40704652, 172.
[7] Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

The doctrine of mutually assured destruction prevented direct conflict between the nuclear superpowers, leading to the global expansion of the Cold War through proxy wars. In the context of the Cold War, proxies were typically fought in Third-World theatres, with the United States and the Soviet Union financially and/or militarily supporting the parties that served their interests[8]. Of the most striking examples of Cold War interventionism is the case of Vietnam. In the wake of the successful French decolonization of Indochina in 1954 by the Viet Minh, a communist nationalist movement, the United States feared the regional implications of a communist Vietnam[9]. The leader of the Viet Minh, Ho Chi Min, had already been declared a "mortal enemy of native independence" by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson[10] following Chinese and Soviet recognition of North Vietnamese legitimacy. This justified sending financial aid and troops to support the democratic South Vietnamese opposition government in their civil war for national control to prevent a cascade of communist influence, and by extension, Soviet influence, in Asia. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, though it did not deploy its soldiers, provided financial aid and arms to North Vietnam and the Viet Cong - a South Vietnamese communist insurgent group engaged in guerilla warfare. The conflict expanded further, beyond Vietnam and into the neighboring Cambodia and Laos with heavy bombing campaigns, namely Operation Barrell Roll and Operation Steel Tiger, targeting the Ho Chi Minh trail, a supply route that allowed North Vietnam to support the Viet Cong, with heavy bombardment that killed

[8] Ibid. 97

[9] George C. Herring, "The Cold War and Vietnam," *OAH Magazine of History*, Vietnam, 18, no. 5 (October 2004): 18–21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163717, 19.

[10] Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute and Livingston T. Merchant, 6 FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, East Asia and The Pacific (1950), https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d472, 731.

millions[11]. George Herring asserts, "had it not been for the Cold War, the US and Soviet Union would not have intervened in what would likely have remained a localized anticolonial struggle in French Indochina"[12].

Similarly, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was fundamentally motivated by a belief that their notion of modernity, Marxist-Leninist communism, was threatened. After the 1978 leftist Saur Revolution against the Mohammed Daoud Khan regime, Afghanistan saw infighting between various political leaders and parties - including the execution and ousting of the revolutionary leader Nur Muhammad Taraki by his political rival[13]. Amidst this instability, the Soviet Union feared US involvement and the spread of Islamist extremism, with the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko informing the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that "[they] cannot afford to lose Afghanistan"[14]. This necessitated direct involvement to establish a strong and reliable communist government faction, leading to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Concurrently, the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia aided the Mujahideen, an Afghan Islamist insurgent group, in their fight against Soviet forces; with the CIA covertly supplying weapons in addition to financial aid[15]. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia aligned with the Mujahideen's religious and political values, while American support for the group aimed solely to weaken the Soviet Union during the Cold War, without

[11] Sandra Scanlon, "Conclusion: Defining the Vietnam War," essay, in In The ProWar Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism, Culture, Politics, and The Cold War (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 328–42, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk1jb.13, 331.

[12] George C. Herring, "The Cold War and Vietnam," OAH Magazine of History, Vietnam, 18, no. 5 (October 2004): 18–21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163717, 20.

[13] David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin, "CHAPTER ELEVEN The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979," essay, in Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn (RAND Corporation, 2014), 129–38, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287m9t.18, 131.

[14] Anna Vassilieva, "Document 8 - Memorandum on Afghanistan, Andropov, Gromyko, Ustinov, Ponomarev, October 29, 1979," essay, in The Dead End: The Road to Afghanistan (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2014), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB396/.

[15] RAFAEL REUVENY and ASEEM PRAKASH, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union," Review of International Studies 25, no. 4 (October 1999): 693–708, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210599006932, 701.

necessarily endorsing their Islamist agenda. Since direct armed conflict between the US and

USSR would have caused complete catastrophe due to their nuclear warfare capabilities, the

Cold War was instead expanded onto a global scale through proxy wars fought on many fronts

around the world. Often this occurred with minimal consideration of the impact of employed

tactics on local populations and political dynamics, leading to high civilian death tolls and

radical polarization of government factions.

Lastly, leaders in the Third World often framed domestic agendas in response to the

modernist theories of the United States and the Soviet Union. Richard Wright attributes the

emergence of "emotional nationalism", a new racially conscious and religiously mindful system,

at the Bandung conference in 1955 to have been "evoked by the attitudes and practices of the

West"[16]. The conference, which convened twenty-nine nations and colonies from Asia and

Africa, was the first diplomatic endeavor by the decolonizing world to establish a mutually

beneficial multi-lateral framework[17].This growing transnational solidarity facilitated an

alternative and third path of development to be forged and led to the rise of the non-aligned

movement (NAM) in 1961 - a group of states that refused to formally align with the United

States or the Soviet Union. An analysis of the NAM movement's achievements by Archie

Singham found that its ability to remain active was the most defining success, where other

regional organizations like the Central Treaty Organization in the Middle East, which eventually

dissolved in 1979[18], followed closely by allowing non-aligned countries to "retain sovereignty

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[16] 1. Richard Wright, The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 53.

[17] 1. Jason Parker, "Cold War II: The Eisenhower Administration, the Bandung Conference, and the Reperiodization of the Postwar Era," Diplomatic History 30, no. 5 (November 2006): 867–92, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2006.00582.x, 870.

[18] EFRAIM KARSH, "Cold War, Post-Cold War: Does It Make a Difference for the Middle East?," Review of International Studies 23, no. 3 (July 1997): 271–91, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210597002714, 279.

and authenticity in a predominantly bipolar world"[19]. While fundamentally rejecting involvement in Cold War politics, third-world countries feeling compelled to declare a non-alliance status demonstrates this ideological strife's global reach. Therefore, whether by deciding to forgo the dichotomy entirely or by subscribing to the frameworks put forth by the two superpowers, even countries that were not involved in the proxy wars were influenced by the Cold War.

In conclusion, although the Cold War is often perceived as a bilateral conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, it had significant, far-reaching implications globally. The two superpowers' intentions to expand their spheres of influence to demonstrate and safeguard their regimes and models of development led to an inevitable expansion of the conflict on many global fronts. This was exemplified by the many proxies that both powers were involved in throughout the late twentieth century, where, in cases such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, their intervention was motivated by securing a strategic victory in the Cold War. Beyond the international proxy wars, the global reach of the Cold War phenomenon is evident as some newly decolonised states pursued independence and prosperity while intentionally rejecting alignment with the US and USSR. While it is clear that the Cold War had a comprehensive scope of influence, it is debatable how significant of a role it played in foreign affairs - many of which were heavily connected to their own preexisting geopolitical, ethno-religious, or historical grievances. Therefore, while many events from the late twentieth century can be analyzed through a Cold War lens, it's important to recognize that the other nations involved have vast histories and diverse motivations behind their actions, which cannot always be simplified as responses to superpower actions.

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[19] Archie Singham and Shirley Hune, "The Non-Aligned Movement and World Hegemony," The Black Scholar 18, no. 2 (March 1987): 48–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1987.11412752, 48.

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