

The USA's Cold War in Asia

Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam (1945–75)

Andrew Roadnight



Fear of Moscow's influence led the USA into two major wars and constant efforts to subvert the independence of former European colonies, especially in southeast Asia

Exam links

AQA 1K The making of a superpower: USA, 1865–1975

AQA 2R The Cold War, c.1945–1991

Edexcel paper 2 option 2H.1 The USA, c.1920–55: boom, bust and recovery

Edexcel paper 2 option 2H.2 The USA, 1955–92: conformity and challenge

OCR Y222/Y252 The Cold War in Asia 1945–1993

Despite the victory of Mao Zedong's Communists in China and the task of turning Japan into a modern state and capitalist bulwark in the Far East, the USA's major foreign policy concern in Asia was the emergence of strong nationalist forces in former, mainly European, colonies. With much of the resistance to the Second World War Japanese occupation having been led by Communists, the USA came to fear that nationalist movements would be influenced by Moscow.

America's Cold War strategy

It is generally accepted that the Cold War had broken out by 1947. In that year, George Kennan (see Box 1) argued that the West would achieve victory over the Soviet Union by the clever use of political, diplomatic

Box 1 Key biographies

Mao Zedong

Founder of the Chinese Communist Party and leader of the Communists in the Chinese civil war (1927–49). Mao became the first leader of the People's Republic of China in 1949. He was often known as Chairman Mao and died in 1976.

George Kennan

An American advisor, diplomat and historian, known best as an advocate of containment policy at the end of the Second World War. His theories were used to justify US Cold War policy but he rejected the more assertive and militaristic policies which were developed.

and economic power. He noted that the Soviet Union had to expand the area under its control in order to survive and that a failure to do so would lead to the collapse of its communist government.

Containment

In what became known as the 'containment theory', Kennan said that there were five key industrial centres in the world — the USA, the UK, Germany and Europe, Japan and the USSR — and that four of them were in the West and should be kept that way. He argued that elsewhere the West could afford to be flexible, because peripheral countries were expendable.

Rollback

In 1949, however, Kennan's prescription for victory appeared to have been overtaken by Mao Zedong's victory and the Soviet's acquisition of the A-bomb. To many in the West, these events indicated that a military build-up was essential and that 'limited' wars would be necessary to defeat communism. This new strategy was formally adopted by the USA in 1950, in National Security Council paper 68 (NSC 68), and was extended further into a policy known as 'rollback' during the Korean War.

The CIA

The failure of 'rollback' in Korea led to a reappraisal of Cold War strategy in Washington. Influenced by the high number of American casualties, and the cost of maintaining a large conventional force, President Dwight Eisenhower began to use the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as the USA's main weapon against communism.

Domino theory

The USA's fear that independence movements in former European colonies would be exploited by the Soviets led it to oppose many attempts to establish

new independent states. This sweeping change started after the Second World War and lasted throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It was particularly strong in southeast Asia, where the French, British and Dutch had colonial possessions. As local populations fought for independence, Washington feared that any success for the nationalists would trigger a sequence of anti-colonial revolutions which would be supported by Communists, known as the 'domino theory'.

The Korean War (1950–53)

On 25 June 1950, the North Korean army invaded South Korea in an apparent war of aggression against the US-supported government. The invasion seemed to prove right those who had argued in NSC 68 that military might was necessary to defeat communism.

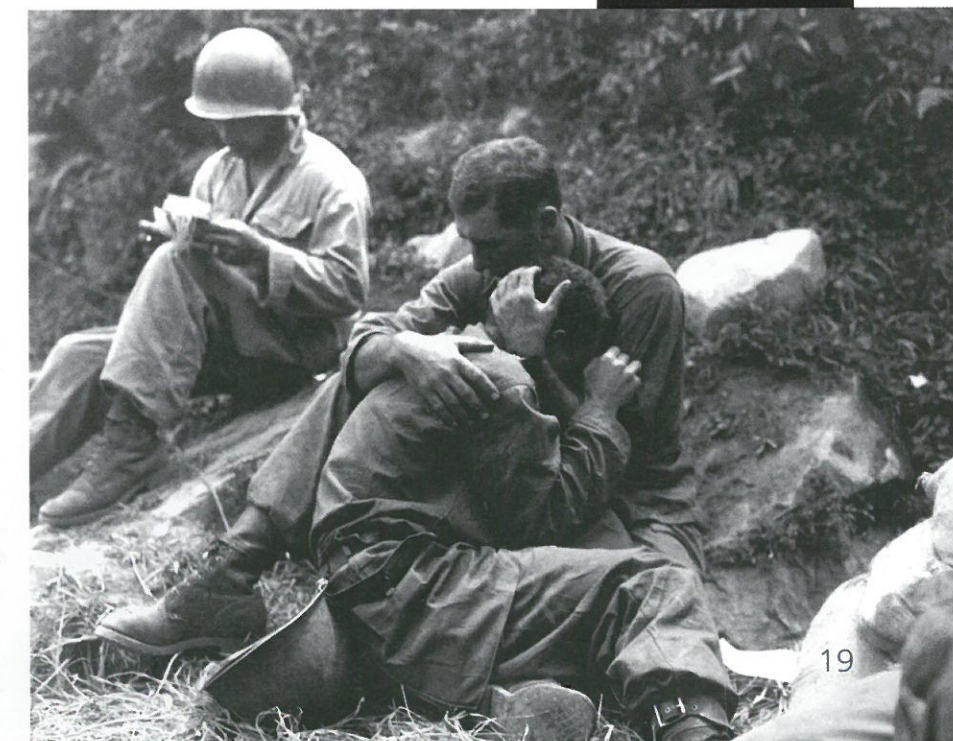
Korea, a Japanese colony since 1910, had been liberated by Soviet and American forces at the end of the Second World War. The two armies had met at the 38th parallel, which became the temporary border pending United Nations-ordered elections. The failure of both sides to agree on the terms for re-unification led to virtual civil war in the South. In August 1948, Washington supported the proclamation of a republic in the South and installed a former Japanese collaborator, Syngman Rhee, as president.

The creation of the Republic of Korea in the South was seen by the North Koreans as an American attempt to prevent the establishment of a Korean state outside the West's control. The Communist-controlled North immediately claimed jurisdiction over the South. And the North Korean leader, Kim il-Sung, who had led the Communist resistance to the Japanese, sought Stalin's permission to re-unify Korea militarily and received a reluctant blessing from Moscow. These events have led many to suggest that the Korean War was a nationalist attempt to re-unify the country.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) The US external intelligence agency tasked with gathering and analysis of information on foreign countries. The CIA's paramilitary section carried out covert military action during the Cold War using a front airline called Civil Air Transport.

Domino theory Theory that if one state fell to communism its neighbours would also fall like a row of dominoes knocking each other over.

An American soldier is comforted during the Korean War, 1953





Agent Orange was a herbicide used to defoliate the jungle during the Vietnam War

US retaliation

The invasion almost succeeded and within a few weeks the North Koreans were in sight of victory. But US-led United Nations forces retaliated and had soon driven the North Koreans back to the 38th parallel. President Harry Truman believed that Moscow and Beijing would not oppose an invasion of the North and soon US forces were within sight of the Chinese border. This first attempt at 'rollback' proved to be a costly mistake as the Chinese army, supported by Soviet aircraft, launched a counterattack which drove the US-led forces back to the 38th parallel. Over the next 3 years the war became a bloody stalemate around the old temporary border.

The Korean War cost the lives of over 36,000 US soldiers and it led President Eisenhower to find new ways to fight the Cold War in order to limit American casualties.

Indonesia (1945–65)

The Netherlands East Indies (NEI) was the jewel in Holland's crown. Rich in natural resources, including oil, it was an archipelago of over 900 inhabited islands stretching across 3,000 miles. It was the fifth most populous territory in the world and, lying across the main sea routes, was also strategically vital to the British base at Singapore and the security of Australia.

At the end of the Second World War, the Dutch were unable to recover the colony, which was in a state of nationalist ferment and occupied by British forces. When the Dutch did finally return, in 1947,

they tried to defeat the nationalists, led by Sukarno, militarily and with the tacit support of the Americans. However, by 1949, the USA forced the Dutch to recognise that the only hope of keeping the colony in the West's orbit was to cede power to moderate nationalists. Indonesia was born.

Almost immediately, American attention was focused on Korea and responsibility for managing the West's relations with Indonesia was left with the Dutch. A mixture of American inattention, the unwillingness of the Dutch to treat the Indonesians with respect, and the desire of the Indonesians to assert their independence led to friction.

Along with other newly independent states like India, and with Chinese support, Sukarno formed the Non-Aligned Movement, which was promoted by Sukarno as a 'third way' between the Communist and capitalist powers. The USA, however, regarded it as a thinly disguised effort by Moscow and Beijing to extend their control. Relations deteriorated as the USA refused to offer the aid Sukarno sought on terms he would accept and the Soviets stepped in with economic and military aid.

The CIA's war

By 1958, the USA had decided that it could not accept Sukarno as Indonesia's leader and had forged alliances with dissident military commanders and politicians it viewed as moderate. When the rebel military leaders called for Sukarno's overthrow and the Indonesian army began operations to destroy the

rebellion, Washington deployed naval forces to the area and began an aerial campaign, using CIA planes and pilots, against the Indonesian government forces. However, when one of the planes was shot down and the pilot captured, Washington's secret war was exposed and CIA involvement ended.

The collapse of the rebellion drove Sukarno further towards the Soviets and China, and American hostility grew. Rather than supporting rebel military elements, Washington now began to work with the Indonesian military leadership, which had become alienated from Sukarno. In 1965, in what is commonly held to have been a CIA-supported coup, Sukarno was overthrown. The new military leader, Suharto, led a purge of suspected Communists and left-wing political elements in which as many as 1 million may have died.

Vietnam (1945–75)

The most catastrophic example of Washington's aversion to colonial nationalism was Vietnam. Vietnam was a country of no real importance to the US except that Washington was convinced by the 'domino theory'.

In 1945, Ho Chi Minh, who had led resistance to the Japanese occupation, had declared independence from France with words taken from the American Declaration of Independence and with an American secret agent by his side. The USA, however, tolerated the return of the French colonial government and soon Ho was fighting the French to achieve full independence. In 1954, at Dien Bien Phu, the Vietnamese inflicted a humiliating defeat on the French.

At the Geneva Conference of 1955, a peace deal was reached which temporarily split Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with Ho's nationalists and Communists in the North and a temporary French administration in the South. The agreement provided for national elections in 1956. The Americans, however, refused to accept the deal because of Communist involvement with Ho's nationalists. They believed, almost certainly correctly, that Ho and his supporters would convincingly win the elections.

Instead, the Americans set up a puppet government in the South under a Japanese collaborator named Ngo Dinh Diem and the die was cast. The Americans embarked on a plan to set up South Vietnam as an anti-Communist state.

Questions



- Why was Asia so important in the Cold War?
- Was the Vietnam War really a 'pointless war'?
- How did US Cold War policy change between 1945 and 1975?

Initially the war was fought by Vietnamese, with the North Vietnam Army (NVA) fighting a conventional war and the Viet Cong fighting a guerrilla insurgency against the Republic of Vietnam's army. Up to 1961, during Eisenhower's presidency, US military numbers in Vietnam never exceeded 1,000 and were, officially at least, not involved in combat.

US ground troops

The election of John F. Kennedy to the US presidency in 1961 brought to the White House a man whose campaign had criticised Eisenhower's failure to confront communism. Kennedy was not going to lose South Vietnam and he sent the first combat troops to the war. By 1963, there were about 16,000 US troops fighting in Vietnam.

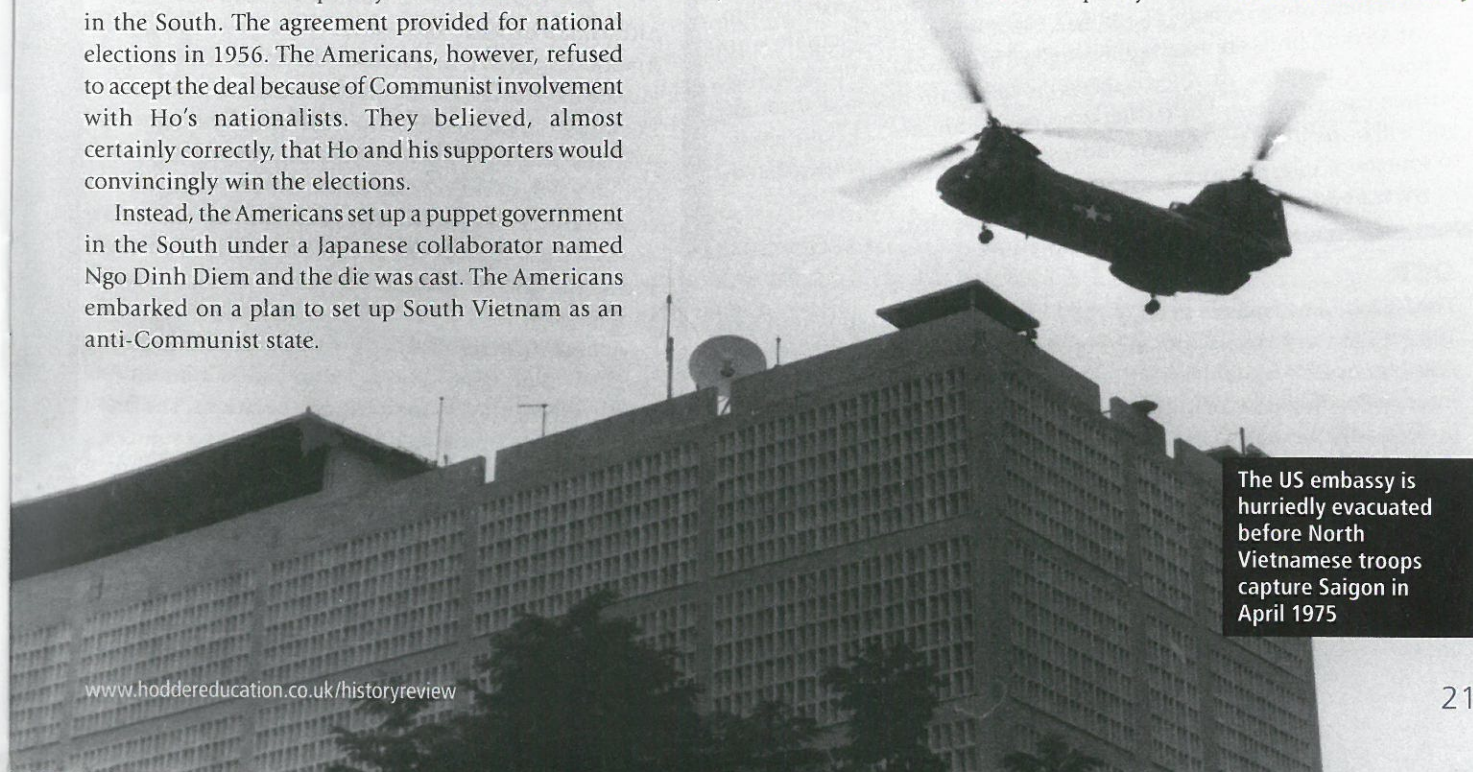
Increasingly, the Americans committed greater resources to the war, deploying more troops and the most sophisticated weaponry in its arsenal. By 1969, over 550,000 US troops and about 1,000,000 troops from South Vietnam, South Korea, Australia and other countries were fighting against the North. The USA dropped more bombs on Vietnam than had been dropped by the Allies on Germany and Japan in the Second World War and they used chemical weapons, including **napalm** and **Agent Orange**, in their effort to defeat the Vietnamese. It is estimated that 2 million Vietnamese died.

Despite regularly predicting the defeat of the North, the Americans were unable to pacify the

Viet Cong A political organisation and army — containing regular troops and guerrilla units — which fought against the US and South Vietnamese forces in the Vietnam War.

napalm A petrol gel which sets on fire and sticks to skin, causing intense burn injuries. It is usually delivered by bombs.

Agent Orange A highly poisonous cocktail of toxic chemicals sprayed on trees to kill their leaves. In the Vietnam War the aim was to defoliate trees in order to track the movement of enemy troops within forests. Certain areas where it was used are still uninhabitable today.



The US embassy is hurriedly evacuated before North Vietnamese troops capture Saigon in April 1975

Further reading

The National Archive online exhibition on the Cold War:
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/coldwar

The National Security online archive:
www.nsarchive.org

The CIA online archive: www.cia.gov

country. The ability of the NVA and the Viet Cong to maintain military resistance, rising American casualties — 58,000 were to die in Vietnam — and the vociferous anti-war movement at home eventually forced the US to seek a way out.

In 1973, the Paris Peace Treaty led to a cessation of fighting and the withdrawal of American troops. Washington's objective of securing a dignified exit could not obscure the fact that it had suffered a massive defeat, both militarily and politically. With American troops gone, the North resumed the war in 1974 and, on the 30 April 1975, their troops entered Saigon (renaming it Ho Chi Minh City) to reunite

Vietnam. The final ignominy for the Americans was the sight of desperate Vietnamese who had supported the South trying to board CIA helicopters to get out of the country as the USA finally abandoned Vietnam.

Conclusion

With the Cold War in Europe stalemated by the prospect of mutual annihilation if the Cold War turned hot, Asia became a more important focus for Washington, Moscow and Beijing. Cold War confrontation in Asia was regarded by the major powers as a less risky option. It is estimated 1 million Indonesians, 2.5 million Koreans and up to 3.5 million Vietnamese perished in countries not regarded by Kennan as central to the West's Cold War strategy.

Dr Andrew Roadnight lectures at The University of Warwick on the USA and the Cold War. He has published *United States Policy Towards Indonesia in the Truman and Eisenhower Years* (2002).

Using this article in your exam

How might this topic come up in your exam?



AQA

The Cold War in Asia features in two AQA units: 1K, The making of a superpower: USA, 1865-1975, and 2R, The Cold War, c.1945-1991. Andrew Roadnight's article covers a number of the key issues addressed within both of these units, including both the Korean War and the Vietnam War. At AS both units are assessed through written examinations, lasting 1 hour 30 minutes. At A-level the units are again assessed through written examinations, but lasting 2 hours 30 minutes. At both levels you will be required to complete both essay questions and those related to sources or interpretations.

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OCR

The USA in Asia features in OCR Y222 and Y252, The Cold War in Asia, 1945-1993, and covers topics from the decisions made at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945 up to the creation of the Cambodian kingdom in 1993. Andrew Roadnight's article spends some time assessing American strategy in Asia and this fits in perfectly with the first key topic in this unit, Western policies in postwar Asia, 1945-1979. Similarly, key topic 2 covers the Korean War, 3 the issue of Indochina, and 4 Vietnam and Cambodia. Andrew Roadnight's article has a series of sub-headings which neatly fit into these key topics. Both units are assessed by written examination.

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Edexcel

This topic features in Edexcel paper 2H.1, The USA, c.1920-55: boom, bust and recovery, and paper 2H.2, The USA, 1955-92: conformity and challenge. Although neither of these units focus specifically on American foreign policy in Asia, they both contain key areas within them which link to this article. Andrew Roadnight writes about the American strategy in Asia and this fits in neatly with the area of study in option 2H.1 on the context of the Cold War and anti-communist feeling in America. Similarly option 2H.2 assesses the impact in the USA of the war in Vietnam, looking at such events as the Kent State University shootings.

At both AS and A-level you will be assessed through a written examination lasting 1 hour and 30 minutes. At AS you are required to complete two questions. The first question is compulsory and is based on two sources. The second one is an essay from a choice of three questions. At A-level you must answer a compulsory question based on two extracts and an essay question from a choice of two.

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King Oliver?

Cromwell and the crown

Bernard Capp



Oliver Cromwell considered that the English could not settle without a king. Would it be Cromwell himself?

Exam links

AQA 1D Stuart Britain and the crisis of monarchy, 1603-1702

AQA 2E The English revolution, 1625-1660

Edexcel paper 1 option C Britain, 1625-1701: conflict, revolution and settlement

OCR Y108/Y138 The Early Stuarts and the origins of the Civil War 1603-1660

We remember Oliver Cromwell today as the driving force behind the trial and execution of King Charles I in 1649. Following the English civil wars, Parliament abolished the monarchy and declared that England was now a 'commonwealth' or republic. Yet only a few years later, early in 1657, Parliament offered Cromwell himself the crown, and he thought long and hard about accepting it. How can we explain this apparent reversal? Was he a scheming hypocrite, driven by personal ambition, as many of his enemies alleged? Or did other factors shape his seemingly inconsistent moves?

Cromwell and Charles I

Cromwell was never, in fact, a committed republican. By the winter of 1648 he had come to the reluctant conclusion that Charles was a hopelessly untrustworthy king, who could never be relied upon to negotiate in good faith or stand by his word. The

first civil war (1642-46) was widely viewed as an accident, a tragic conflict no one had wanted. By contrast, Charles himself had deliberately engineered the second civil war in 1648, in an attempt to reverse the royalists' defeat. As long as he lived, even as a prisoner, there would always be the risk of cavalier conspiracies, renewed civil war, or even foreign invasion.

As a result, Cromwell and his friends decided the king would have to die, much as Queen Elizabeth had decided in 1587 that her cousin Mary Queen of Scots must die, as the only way to end a succession of assassination plots and conspiracies. Charles died not because he was a king, but because he was seen as a dangerous and untrustworthy one. The execution owed nothing to republican ideology. The king was beheaded in January 1649, but it was not until May that year that Parliament declared England was now a republic.

Cromwell and the Rump

England was now ruled by the small number of MPs willing to continue serving in Parliament after the king's execution, a body that later became known as the 'Rump', or remnant, of the parliament that had first met in 1640. Cromwell, though one of them, was often away in 1649-50, fighting to enforce Parliament's authority over Ireland and then Scotland, which had both declared their allegiance to the king's son and heir, the future Charles II.

Like most contemporaries, Cromwell saw the Rump as merely a stop-gap arrangement until a new constitutional system could be designed and approved. He became increasingly dissatisfied when it failed to come forward with any new plans, or arrange

Rump Parliament of approximately 210 MPs who had supported the execution of Charles I. Sat intermittently from 1648 to 1660.