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A Brief Neocolonial History of the Five UN Security Council Permanent Members

Teaser: Understanding the actions and justifications behind territorial colonial behavior by the UN Security Council since 1945.

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[Article Body:]

One of the underlying principles of the UN Charter is the protection of the sovereign rights of states. Yet since 1945, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (Soviet Union/Russia, France, UK, U.S., and China) have consistently used military force to undermine this notion. And while acts of seizing territory have grown rare, ongoing military domination allows imperialism to further manifest through economic, political, and cultural control.

[System justification theory](#) helps explain how policymakers and the public defend and rationalize unfair systems through the surprising capacity to find logical and moral

coherence in any society. “[Reframing](#)” neocolonial policies to reinforce system-justifying narratives, often by highlighting the need to defend historical and cultural ties and maintain geopolitical stability, has been essential to sustaining the status quo of international affairs.

Naturally, the five UNSC members have often accused one another of imperialism and colonialism to deflect criticism from their own practices. Yet prolonging these relationships in former colonies or spheres of influence simply perpetuates dependency, hinders economic development, and encourages instability through inequality and exploitation.

France

In response to comments made by Russia’s foreign ministry in February 2023, [which singled out France](#) for continuing to treat African countries “from the point of view of its colonial past,” the French foreign ministry [chastised Russia](#) for its “neocolonial political involvement” in Africa. The previous [June](#), French President Emmanuel Macron meanwhile accused Russia of being “one of the last colonial imperial powers” during a visit to Benin, a former French colony that last saw [an attempted coup](#) by French mercenaries in 1977.

Independence movements in European colonies grew substantially during World War II, and [Paris granted greater autonomy](#) to its possessions, most of them in Africa, in 1945. Yet France was intent on keeping most of its empire and became embroiled in independence conflicts in [Algeria](#) and [Indochina](#). Growing public sentiment in France, since referred to as “[utilitarian anti-colonialism](#),” meanwhile promoted decolonization, believing that the empire was actually holding back France economically and because “the emancipation of colonial people was unavoidable,” according to French journalist Raymond Cartier.

France left Indochina in defeat in 1954, while [in 1960](#), 14 of France’s former colonies gained independence. And after Algeria won its independence in 1962, France’s empire was all but gone. But like other newly independent states, many former French colonies were unstable and vulnerable to or reliant on French military power. France has [launched dozens of military interventions and coups](#) since the 1960s in Africa to stabilize friendly governments, topple hostile ones, and support its interests.

French military dominance has been able to secure a hospitable environment for [French multinational companies](#) and preferential trade [agreements and currency](#) arrangements. More recently, the French military has consistently intervened in Côte d’Ivoire [since 2002](#),

as well as in the countries of the Sahel region (particularly Mali) since 2013, and the Central African Republic (CAR) since 2016. The French-led campaigns have received [significant U.S. help](#). Speaking in 2019 on the French deployments, [Macron stated](#) that the French military was not there “for neo-colonialist, imperialist, or economic reasons. We’re there for our collective security and the region.”

But [growing anti-French sentiment](#) in former colonies in recent years has undermined Paris’ historical military dominance. Closer relations between Mali and Russia saw France pull the last of its troops out of the country [in 2022](#), with Russian private military company (PMC) forces replacing them. A similar situation occurred in the CAR [months later](#), and in 2023, French troops pulled out of Burkina Faso, with Russian PMC liaisons having reportedly been [observed in the country](#).

Frustration with the negative effects of France’s ongoing influence in former colonies has also been [directly tied to problems in immigrant communities living in France](#). The fatal shooting of a North African teenager by police in the suburbs of Paris in June 2023 caused nights of rioting, with Russia and China [accusing France of authoritarianism](#) for its security response.

UK

Shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson denounced the Russian president for still believing in “[imperial conquest](#).” Yet like France, the UK has often been accused of using military force to help promote British interests in its former empire, including the dominant role of [British banks and financial services](#) and other [firms](#), for decades.

As the only European colonial power not defeated by Nazi Germany, British forces were sent to secure [Indochina](#) and [Indonesia](#) before French and Dutch forces could return after World War II. But London’s focus soon turned to protecting its own empire and emerging independent states. British forces helped suppress a communist insurgency in [Malaysia](#) from 1948-1960, fought in the [Kenya Emergency](#) from 1952-1960, and [intervened across](#) former colonies in Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Pacific islands.

Additionally, British, French, and Israeli forces invaded Egypt in 1956 after the Egyptian government nationalized the Suez Canal before diplomatic pressure from the U.S. and Soviet Union forced them to retreat. [Over the next few decades](#), almost all former British colonies were steadily granted independence, and by 1980 the rate of British military interventions abroad had slowed.

Nonetheless, the 1982 Falklands War somewhat reversed the perception of the UK as a

declining, imperial power. The successful defense of the Falkland Islands' small, vulnerable population against Argentinian aggression enhanced the perception of the UK as a defender of human rights and champion of self-determination. [Additionally](#), Britain's focus on naval power "was important to the self-image of empire" as naval strength is often perceived as less threatening than land armies. Prominent British politicians such as former Prime Minister David Cameron have similarly restated Britain's commitment to [protecting the islands from Argentinian colonialism](#).

More recently, the British military intervened in the Sierra Leone Civil War [in 2000](#) and was also a crucial partner for the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. And alongside ongoing [official deployments](#), British Special Forces have meanwhile been active in 11 countries secretly from 2011-2023, a report by [Action Against Armed Violence revealed](#). The residual presence of the British military has often made it difficult to embrace the "new and equal partnership" between Britain and former colonies, championed by former British Foreign Minister William Hague [in 2012](#).

The domestic perception of Britain's colonial legacy continues to play a divisive role in British politics and society. Winston Churchill, the winner of a [2002 BBC poll](#) on the top 100 Great Britons, was "cited as a defender of an endangered country/people/culture, not as an exponent of empire." Yet during anti-racism [protests in the UK in 2020](#), a statue of the former prime minister was covered up to avoid being damaged by protestors. Believing him to be a figurehead of the cruelty of British colonialism, the covering up of Churchill's statue shows the contrasting and evolving domestic views of British imperialism.

Soviet Union/Russia

After 1945, Soviet troops were stationed across the Eastern Bloc to deter NATO and suppress dissent. Several military operations in support of communist governments against "counterrevolutionary" protestors were approved in East Germany ([1953](#)), Hungary ([1956](#)), and Czechoslovakia ([1968](#)). Soviet forces also took part in a decade-long conflict to prop up Afghanistan's government from [1979-1989](#).

In [Asia](#), [Africa](#), and [Latin America](#), however, the Soviet Union presented itself as the leading anti-colonial force. It proclaimed an ideological duty to financially, politically, and militarily support numerous pro-independence/communist movements and governments, tying these efforts to confronting the colonial West.

The Soviet collapse forced Moscow to prioritize maintaining Russia's influence in former Soviet states. But even today, [many Russians](#) do not see the Soviet Union and the Russian

Empire as empires, as [Russians insist](#) that they lived alongside their colonized subjects through a “[Friendship of Peoples](#),” unlike the British or French. This sentiment drives much of the rhetoric defending Russia’s ongoing dominance across parts of the former Soviet Union.

On the eve of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin once again [called into question Ukrainian statehood](#). Ukraine, like [other former Soviet states](#), has often been labeled an artificial creation by Russian politicians. Alongside [the necessity of military force to protect](#) Russian speakers/citizens, Russian officials have justified conflict and exploitation of fragile post-Soviet borders in separatist regions of [Georgia](#), [Moldova](#), and [Armenia/Azerbaijan](#) since the early 1990s.

Russia has also worked to maintain a dependency on its military power in former Soviet states. The Kazakh government’s reliance on the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance was clearly demonstrated during the CSTO intervention during protests [in January 2022](#). Prominent Russian politicians such as Sergey Lavrov have consistently compared the CSTO favorably to [NATO](#), but the lack of support from CSTO member states (except for Belarus) for Russia in its war with Ukraine has demonstrated its limitations.

The Russian military has also been active in Syria since 2011, while dozens of Russian private military companies have increased operations [across Africa](#) over the last decade. The Kremlin is increasingly tying these conflicts, as well as [Russia’s war](#) in Ukraine, to reinforce Moscow’s traditional role as an anti-colonial power. Russia has performed significant [outreach to Africa](#) since the start of the war, and at the annual St. Petersburg economic forum in 2023, Putin declared the “[ugly neo-colonialism](#)” of international affairs was ending as a result of its war.

By amplifying criticism over the domination of global affairs by the “[Golden Billion](#)” in the West, the Kremlin believes it can blunt foreign and domestic criticism over its war in Ukraine, as well as over its approach to other post-Soviet states.

USA

The USA, born out of an anti-colonial struggle, has naturally been wary of being perceived as a colonial power. U.S. Presidents voiced support for decolonization after World War II, [particularly John F. Kennedy](#). But because “[anti-communism came before anti-colonialism](#),” Washington often supported neocolonial practices by European powers to prevent the spread of Soviet influence and secure Western interests.

The U.S. has also been criticized for its own imperial behavior toward Latin America

since 1823 when the Monroe Doctrine was first proclaimed. The United States's sentiment that it had a special right to intervene in the Americas increased during the Cold War as Washington grew wary of communism. U.S. military forces intervened in Guatemala in [1954](#), Cuba in [1961](#), the Dominican Republic in [1965](#), Grenada in [1983](#), and Panama in [1989](#) to enforce Washington's political will.

The U.S. War on Drugs, launched in 1969, also [destabilized much of Latin America](#), while other instances of covertly [fostering instability](#) have prevented the emergence of strong sovereign states in the region.

Major foreign conflicts involving U.S. forces since 1945 meanwhile include the Korean War (1950-1953) Vietnam War (1955-1975), the Gulf War (1990), intervention in the Yugoslav Wars (1991,1999), and the War on Terror (2001-present). U.S. forces also intervened in Haiti in [1994-1995](#) during "Operation Uphold Democracy" and again [in 2004](#), while leading international interventions in Libya (2011) and Syria (2014). These interventions have often been criticized for perpetuating instability and weakening local institutions.

Nonetheless, the global U.S. military presence has continued to grow. [Since 2007](#), United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) has seen the U.S. expand its military footprint across Africa and today, [750 known military bases](#) are spread across 80 countries. U.S. special operations forces are meanwhile estimated to be active [in 154 countries](#). The U.S. global military presence also gives Washington considerable control over transportation routes, with the U.S. Navy routinely [seizingships](#) violating trade restrictions.

U.S. officials have continued to lean on the country's history as a former British colony to highlight solidarity with other countries and propose greater cooperation. [In 2013](#), for example, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stated that the Monroe Doctrine, which allowed the U.S. "to step in and oppose the influence of European powers in Latin America," was over. And in a 2023 address from the White House briefing room proclaiming the start of Caribbean-American history month, [President Biden noted](#) how the U.S. and Caribbean countries are bound by common values and a shared history of "overcoming the yoke of colonialism."

But [domestic divides over Washington's](#) role in global affairs have increased calls for the U.S. to return to its early foreign policy of isolationism. While this will not be enough for the U.S. to retreat on the global stage, it has helped prevent the U.S. military from committing to new major conflicts in recent years.

China

The conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 marked the end of China's "[Century of Humiliation](#)" at the hands of European powers, the U.S., and Japan. The victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) allowed Beijing to consolidate power and look toward expanding China's borders. This included launching the "peaceful liberation" of both [Xinjiang](#) in 1949 and [Tibet](#) in 1950, steadily bringing these regions under China's control - though China only took Taiwan's seat at the UN in 1971.

China's history of exploitation by foreign powers has [frequently been cited](#) by Beijing to increase solidarity with other countries which suffered from Western imperialism. Key to this messaging was fighting [against U.S.-led forces](#) in the Korean War, as part of a "[Great Movement to Resist America and Assist Korea](#)" and opposing wider Western neocolonialism, while Chinese forces also engaged in border clashes with the [Soviet Union](#) as relations between Moscow and Beijing soured in the 1960s.

But Chinese forces have also been involved in clashes with former European colonies. This includes confrontations [with India](#), as well as China's launch of a major invasion of northern Vietnam [in 1979](#). Tens of thousands of casualties were recorded on both sides during the month-long operation, while continued border clashes between Chinese and Vietnamese forces continued until relations were normalized in 1991.

Since 2003, Chinese officials have instead placed great emphasis on China's "[peaceful rise](#)," which has seen the country drastically increase its power in world affairs without having to resort to military force. But while large-scale Chinese military operations have not materialized, China has [rapidly increased](#) the construction of ports, air bases, and other military installations to enforce its territorial control over the South China Sea over the last decade, at the expense of several Southeast Asian countries. Chinese President Xi Jinping has [justified these developments](#) because the islands "have been China's territory since ancient times."

China's extensive [maritime militias and civilian distant-water fishing](#) (DWF) fleets have also been accused of asserting Chinese maritime territorial claims while blurring the lines between civilian and military force. Additionally, there is also fear that China's growing economic and military might will be enough to force countries in Central Asia [to accept the Chinese position](#) on various territorial disputes.

While China has avoided any major military operations this century, it has used its growing economic and military might to pressure other countries into accepting its territorial claims. To offset criticism, Chinese officials have turned their attention toward ongoing and historical imperialism by the West. Following British criticism over China's

handling of pro-democracy protests in 2019, China criticized the UK for acting with a “colonial mindset,” and, in support of Argentina, accused the UK of practicing [colonialism in the Falklands in 2021](#). These claims help sustain domestic support for China’s policies, help to increase solidarity among other countries which have suffered from Western imperialism, and put China’s geopolitical rivals on the defensive.

Conclusions

It is true that the U.S. military provides necessary security deterrence to numerous countries, and has also proven essential to [responding to natural disasters](#) and other emergencies. But like other major powers, the use of U.S. military force has consistently been abused since 1945. The historical legacy of Western imperialism and interventionism has helped explain why Western calls for global solidarity with Ukraine have [often fallen on deaf ears today](#).

Additionally, some of the consequences of the war in Ukraine, including rising energy and food prices, are being [most acutely felt](#) in poorer countries, while the [growing dominance](#) of Western firms in crucial Ukrainian economic sectors has also undermined the West’s messaging over Ukraine further.

Honest accountability by major powers for the historical and ongoing exploitation of weaker countries remains rare. But public, government-funded initiatives, such as the U.S. [Imperial Visions and Revisions](#) exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC, documents the beginning and justification behind empire-building in the U.S., and is an important step to addressing past and contemporary wrongdoing, as envisioned by the UN Charter in 1945. [In 2018](#), French President Macron meanwhile commissioned a report that discovered that “around 90 to 95 percent of African cultural heritage” was located abroad, prompting the French parliament to pass a bill in 2020 allowing these artifacts to be returned.

The promotion of actual history and accountability may also remove barriers to more selfless assistance to weaker countries by major powers. This approach could, in turn, invite greater cooperation and positive repercussions than costly military interventions, and would also serve as an example for weaker states grappling with their own legacies of violence, exploitation, and suppression.