

To what extent did the policy of peaceful coexistence improve superpower relations up to and including 1964? (M19)

Peaceful coexistence was a policy developed by Khrushchev to avoid full scale-conflict with the US. Both countries understood the dangers of a full scale nuclear conflict, and wanted to avoid the possibility of a nuclear war. Thus, attempts were made to establish a dialogue between the two superpowers and improve superpower relations. The time frame considered will be 1953, when Malenkov introduced the concept, to 1964, and superpower relations will be taken to mean the relationship between USSR and US. In 1953, the USSR introduced the policy of peaceful coexistence to defuse military tensions and prevent the outbreak of a nuclear war. On the other hand, the US had an increasingly hardliner Cold War policy in the wake of McCarthyism and the Korean War. This essay will argue that peaceful coexistence largely achieved its goals in defusing Cold War tensions, but was limited in its ability to maintain a peaceful resolution.

Firstly, peaceful coexistence largely improved superpower relations up till 1959, through the Soviet's de-escalation of military conflict. The end of the Korean War in July 1953, as well as the settlement of border disputes with Turkey and Iran and the recognition of Israel were significant steps in demonstrating the willingness of the USSR to seek peaceful resolution to conflicts. However, its role in improving tensions was limited, with Eisenhower remaining skeptical about the intentions of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the conflict with China over the Quemoy Islands increased Eisenhower's hardliner stance, as he feared the threat of communism spreading through Asia. Although the USSR did not restate their support for China until after the conflict, Eisenhower still remained skeptical, and reaffirmed his commitment to Taiwan, expressing his hardliner approach to Communism in his Domino Theory of 1954. Despite Eisenhower's hardliner stance, tensions were eased with the USSR's proposition of a formal peace treaty with Austria, which led to the full independence of Austria in May 1955. More significantly, the Belgrade declaration of 1955 marked the end of conflict between the USSR and Yugoslavia. The USSR's recognition of the independence of these Eastern European states demonstrated a willingness to relax control over their satellite states, which assuaged US fears of Soviet imperialism and strengthened relations with the USA. Eisenhower in particular looked favorably upon the ceasing of conflicts in Yugoslavia, calling it the greatest victory of the 1950s. These Soviet concessions demonstrated a willingness to cooperate that opened the door for the possibility of peaceful negotiations at the Geneva Summit, which will be elaborated on more in the next paragraph.

Furthermore, the policy of peaceful coexistence was largely successful in improving diplomatic relations between the superpowers, which can be seen by the successful establishment of diplomatic ties, with the Geneva Summit marking the first time the two superpowers met since Potsdam. The impact of the Geneva Summit, however, was limited, as Eisenhower's "Open Skies" treaty was rejected on the basis that it would favor the US which had had a stronger espionage air force. The superpowers were also unable to agree on how to best handle Germany, as the US wanted a unified and rearmed Germany, while the USSR wanted to unify and disarm Germany. Thus, while diplomatic relations were established, there was not much headway being made in terms of diplomatic compromises. However, Lightbody argues that the "Spirit of the Geneva" paved the way for more diplomatic relations, which can be seen by the subsequent Camp David visit and the Vienna Summit with Kennedy. This can be seen by the open exchanges and visits between American and Soviet scientists, as well as the demobilisation of the Red Army from 2 million to 600 thousand troops, as well as the Soviet recognition of West Germany, demonstrated a marked improvement in superpower relations. Thus, the Soviet's policy of peaceful coexistence resulted in the de-escalation of military conflict that ultimately led to improved relations between the US and USSR.

However, aggressive US foreign policy hampered the effect of peaceful coexistence on superpower relations. With the heavy losses of the Korean War, the US had hardened their Cold War attitudes with Dulles summarising their foreign policy as one of "rollback" of communism and "massive retaliation against the USSR". Eisenhower's New Look demonstrated US intention to use nuclear power to combat the overwhelming land forces of the Communist bloc, and his subsequent introduction of the Domino Theory and the rhetoric of "massive retaliation" gave the impression that the US was willing to resort to military conflict to resist the spread of communism. However, in practice, this policy of brinkmanship was often not reflected in the US response to global conflicts. The US did not use nuclear force to end the first Indochina War, despite the ultimate victory of the Vietminh, a communist force. Furthermore, the lackluster US reaction to USSR's suppression of protest in East Germany in 1953 and the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising demonstrated an unwillingness of the US to initiate conflict over the USSR's brutal methods of repression, and the USSR did the same when the US supported coups in Iran and Guatemala in 1953 and 1954. However, the diplomatic significance of these policies of non-interference are undermined by the Eisenhower Doctrine, which was a doctrine in 1957 that offered unconditional aid to the Middle East to aid the fight against communism. The doctrine was largely a response to the developing relations between Egypt and the USSR, and the fear that they would control the Suez Canal. However, the doctrine was less of an attack on communism than a pretext to counter Arab imperialism and a method to

secure the US imports of oil, as suggested by US Senators and later privately admitted by Eisenhower. Thus, while US rhetoric remained hostile, they largely did not interfere in the Soviet's control of their territories, which was reciprocated by the USSR, demonstrating how Eisenhower's aggressive New Look strategy was impractical for resolving minor conflicts, and that a policy of non-interference was ultimately adopted. This mismatch between rhetoric and action could largely be explained by the pressure that Eisenhower faced domestically to cater to the anti-communist sentiments spawned from McCarthyism and general fear of communism.

Furthermore, while peaceful coexistence was successful in defusing military conflicts and establishing diplomatic relations, it was largely unsuccessful in defusing the superpower rivalry. The two superpowers remained largely at odds, with the space race demonstrating an antagonistic relationship between the powers. When the Soviets launched Sputnik successfully into space, the US gained a renewed fear of a orbital missile strike, and responded with the formation of NASA in 1958, marking the escalation of the space race and the extension of the Cold War into space. While Eisenhower resisted the increase in defence spending, the space race would progress till a detente was reached in 1972, demonstrating a strong rivalry between the two superpowers, and prevailing concerns about the possibility of a nuclear conflict. Furthermore, the arms race persisted, with Soviet blustering driving Americans to mass produce nuclear weapons in an attempt to close the missile gap. This was accentuated by Khrushchev's dominance during the Vienna Summit, as well as the tensions of the Berlin Crisis. In 1961, Kennedy approved the construction of over 40 nuclear submarines and over 1000 ICBMs, as well as a major review and increase in conventional forces. However, the missile race ultimately resulted in a parity of nuclear threat, with the construction of hardened silos and nuclear submarines guaranteeing the possibility of a second strike. This nuclear parity led to the development of the MAD doctrine, and made diplomacy the impetus for both superpowers, which can be evidenced by Kennedy's abandonment of the doctrine of "massive retaliation" in favour of "flexible response".

Finally, the breakdown of relations from 1960 onward demonstrated how the policy of peaceful coexistence was largely unable to install lasting peaceful relations. The U2 spy plane incident of May 1960 dealt a great blow to diplomatic relations, as Eisenhower refused to apologise or ban future U2 flights, causing the Soviets to walk out of the Paris Summit. The crack in relations was not resolved at the subsequent Vienna Summit. At the summit, Khrushchev wished to negotiate for the Western withdrawal from East Berlin due to the mass exodus of East Berliners to the West. Kennedy's refusal to withdraw from Berlin resulted in Khrushchev taking unilateral action and erecting the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961. The breakdown of negotiations resulted

in a corresponding deterioration of relations, culminating in the confrontation of US and Soviet tanks at Checkpoint Charlie. The conflict in Cuba would mark a further breakdown in relations, with the Cuban Missile Crisis arising from the Soviet Union installing a missile base on Cuba in October 1962. Lightbody suggests that this marked the highest tension points of the Cold War, with the threats of nuclear holocaust. However, the high tensions of both crises made it more imperative for both leaders to seek diplomatic resolution to the conflicts, with Kennedy and Khrushchev reaching a compromise in Berlin for a slow withdrawal of troops, and Kennedy removing US missiles in Turkey in exchange for Khrushchev's removal of missiles in Berlin. This new imperative for diplomacy in terms of military conflicts would persist with the establishment of the crisis hotline between Khrushchev and Kennedy in June 1963, and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in August of the same year. US rhetoric toward the USSR softened in 1963, with Kennedy acknowledging the losses of the USSR in WWII, and pushing for a common cause with the Soviets. Thus, while there was a deterioration in superpower relations and subsequent conflicts, these high tension moments brought about the recognition of the importance to de-escalate tension, which opened the door to a new era in Cold War relations. In comparison to the Korean War, the diplomatic manner in which the conflicts were resolved with no loss of life marked a distinct improvement in relations even up till 1964.

In conclusion, the policy of peaceful coexistence was largely successful in improving superpower relations from 1953-1959, but the exposure of US espionage and the subsequent Berlin and Cuban Missile Crisis ensured that this improvement was only temporary. However, the purpose of peaceful coexistence was never to improve relations, but rather to defuse military tensions in order to prevent the possibility of a nuclear conflict. Khrushchev himself made it clear that he thought the socialist system would outlast the capitalist one, demonstrating a clear opposition to reconciliation. Furthermore, the resolution of the subsequent crises through diplomatic terms demonstrated a clear improvement in diplomatic relations, at least in the sphere of military conflict. Thus, the policy of peaceful coexistence was largely successful in improving superpower relations in military conflicts, but superpower rivalry still remained.