Renewal and end of the Cold War – Afghanistan
Détente effectively ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the election of Ronald Reagan as US President in 1980. These events contributed to a return to the hostile atmosphere of the initial Cold War, which was to last until the end of the 1980s.

This second phase of the Cold War was at its most intense in the early 1980s, during the first four years of the Reagan administration. At this time, the renewed Cold War appeared to be more dangerous than it really was. It maintained its focus on regional proxy conflicts that were supported by the United States and the Soviet Union, such as Angola (1975–88), Nicaragua (1979–80) and Afghanistan (1979–89).

Historian Fred Halliday identified what he thought were the five characteristics of the renewed Cold War:
1 There was a renewal of the fear of conflict, with both sides openly expressing concern about the likelihood of war. In the United States, Reagan demanded a major arms build-up, and by 1979 the Soviet Union had placed new missiles, the SS20s, in Europe.

2 Hostile propaganda, similar to that used in the initial phase of the Cold War, returned. Reagan called the Soviet Union ‘evil’, and claimed that its economy was weak and that it was spending too much on arms. The Soviet Union described Reagan as ‘dangerous’ and a threat to world peace. Negotiations between the two nations were largely unsuccessful. There was more discussion than during the first Cold War, but little was achieved.

4 Both sides tightened controls on groups within their own society. The Reagan administration criticised ‘peace’ and ‘anti-nuclear’ groups, claiming they were helping the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, the government was less willing to let opponents of the leadership of the Communist Party speak out. While censorship was not as bad as it had been in Stalin’s day, it marked a significant change from the period of détente.

5 Fear of the Soviet threat again became the focus of US foreign policy. All other foreign policy matters were regarded as secondary.
The borders of the Soviet Union and Soviet-allied countries at the time of the invasion of Afghanistan
The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

In December 1979, the Soviets intervened in Afghanistan to prop up a pro-Soviet government. Like the Americans, the Soviets had been shaken by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and they feared that if the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan fell to Islamic insurgents then this could cause instability in the Muslim populated soviet Republic in Central Asia. In Soviet eyes this was defensive action but the rest of the world saw this as a blatant act of aggression and feared that the Soviets might engage in further adventurism and threaten oil supplies in the Middle East.
Reason for Soviet Intervention

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 by troops from the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union intervened in support of the Afghan communist government in its conflict with anti-communist Muslim guerrillas during the Afghan War (1978–92) and remained in Afghanistan until mid-February 1989.
In April 1978 Afghanistan’s centrist government, headed by Pres. Mohammad Daud Khan, was overthrown by left-wing military officers led by Nur Mohammad Taraki. Power was thereafter shared by two Marxist–Leninist political groups, the People’s (Khalq) Party and the Banner (Parcham) Party—which had earlier emerged from a single organization, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan—and had reunited in an uneasy coalition shortly before the coup. The new government, which had little popular support, forged close ties with the Soviet Union, launched ruthless purges of all domestic opposition, and began extensive land and social reforms that were bitterly resented by the devoutly Muslim and largely anti-communist population. Insurgencies arose against the government among both tribal and urban groups, and all of these—known collectively as the mujahideen (Arabic mujāhidūn, “those who engage in jihad”)—were Islamic in orientation.
These uprisings, along with internal fighting and coups within the government between the People’s and Banner factions, prompted the Soviets to invade the country on the night of December 24, 1979, sending in some 30,000 troops and toppling the short-lived presidency of People’s leader Hafizullah Amin. The aim of the Soviet operation was to prop up their new but faltering client state, now headed by Banner leader Babrak Karmal, but Karmal was unable to attain significant popular support. Backed by the United States, the mujahideen rebellion grew, spreading to all parts of the country. The Soviets initially left the suppression of the rebellion to the Afghan army, but the latter was beset by mass desertions and remained largely ineffective throughout the war.
The Afghan War quickly settled down into a stalemate, with more than 100,000 Soviet troops controlling the cities, larger towns, and major garrisons and the mujahideen moving with relative freedom throughout the countryside. Soviet troops tried to crush the insurgency by various tactics, but the guerrillas generally eluded their attacks. The Soviets then attempted to eliminate the mujahideen’s civilian support by bombing and depopulating the rural areas. These tactics sparked a massive flight from the countryside; by 1982 some 2.8 million Afghans had sought asylum in Pakistan, and another 1.5 million had fled to Iran. The mujahideen were eventually able to neutralize Soviet air power through the use of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles supplied by the Soviet Union’s Cold War adversary, the United States.
The mujahideen were fragmented politically into a handful of independent groups, and their military efforts remained uncoordinated throughout the war. The quality of their arms and combat organization gradually improved, however, owing to experience and to the large quantity of arms and other war matériel shipped to the rebels, via Pakistan, by the United States and other countries and by sympathetic Muslims from throughout the world. In addition, an indeterminate number of Muslim volunteers—popularly termed “Afghan-Arabs,” regardless of their ethnicity—traveled from all parts of the world to join the opposition.
Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; Afghan War
The war in Afghanistan became a quagmire for what by the late 1980s was a disintegrating Soviet Union. (The Soviets suffered some 15,000 dead and many more injured.) Despite having failed to implement a sympathetic regime in Afghanistan, in 1988 the Soviet Union signed an accord with the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and agreed to withdraw its troops. The Soviet withdrawal was completed on February 15, 1989, and Afghanistan returned to nonaligned status.
USA Response:
The USA and the western world condemned this as an invasion. This was the only time in the Cold War that the Soviet Union had invaded a country outside the Eastern bloc, and outside their traditional sphere of influence. President Jimmy Carter was outraged. Carter was decisive and took the following action:

- Sent a sharply worded letter to Brezhnev denouncing the invasion
- In his State of the Union Address he pledged to protect the oil supplies in the Middle East from Soviet invasion
- Imposed economic sanctions on the USSR Boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics Gave military aid to Afghan rebels

Only after ten years of bloody warfare did the Soviets finally withdraw by February 1989, while Gorbachev was General Secretary.
President Carter’s foreign policy

In the second half of the 1970s, détente started to look shaky. In the 1976 US presidential election campaign, President Ford dropped any reference to détente mainly to blunt attacks in the Republican Party primaries from his right-wing challenger, Ronald Reagan. Though Jimmy Carter won the 1976 election and pursued détente until 1979, the Republican opposition had lurched to the right.

President Carter was a breath of fresh air for the American public, who were sick of the years of the Watergate scandal concerning President Nixon. Carter started with high hopes for his foreign policy and was very cautious about deploying military force, while also being a ‘flamethrower of soft power’. He placed a heavy emphasis on promoting human rights, believing that a nation’s foreign policy should reflect its highest moral principles.
This was a distinct break from the Nixon administration. Carter normalised relations with Communist China and achieved peace between Egypt and Israel. He also signed SALT II with Brezhnev, though the Soviet leader was annoyed with Carter’s promotion of human rights (particularly as it involved of the track record of the Soviet Union in regard to human rights). The relationship soon soured. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, President Carter went into Cold War warrior mode. Not only did he take action against the Soviets, but he gave serious consideration for developing new nuclear weapons (such as the neutron bomb), using the MX missile and deploying Pershing missiles and cruise missiles to Europe. By the end of Carter’s presidency, the United States had 24 000 nuclear weapons, while the Soviets had 32 000.
Carter’s remaining time as president came to be dominated by another event in the Middle East: the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In November 1979, the US Embassy was attacked, and 52 US Embassy staff were taken hostage. They were held for 444 days. The Carter Administration engaged in protracted negotiations to get their release. This made the United States look impotent, according to historian Nancy Mitchell:

“It led Carter, in his final year as president, to adopt the muscular rhetoric of the Cold War and put into motion an exploding defense budget. The policy, which Regan would embrace, appealed to the American. It made them feel strong again. The irony is that, in the Cold War during the Carter years, Americans were much stronger than they, or their president knew.”

From the American perspective, the end of the 1970s was a bleak time. The United States had been wearied by the war in Vietnam which lasted until 1975. Even despite détente, there was still Cold War rivalry in Africa and other places. In 1979, the Soviets were in Afghanistan. From the American perspective, things were viewed with doom and gloom. However, although this was not appreciated at the time, the reality was actually the opposite. The United States may well have been competing against the Soviets in Angola, the Horn of Africa and other places, but these conflicts were at the periphery and of little geopolitical significance. The United States was in a much stronger position economically, while the Soviet Union economy had stagnated. They were falling behind the West, which was also experiencing the beginnings of an information revolution. The Soviet Union was in a much weaker position geopolitically, though with nuclear missiles they were intent on catching up and seeking parity with the United States. Brezhnev, though committed to détente, also believed that ‘defence is sacrosanct’. Brezhnev was part of the World War II generation who saw Soviet forces crushed by the Nazi onslaught and were determined to never be in that position again. Also, Brezhnev all too easily gave into the demands of the military-industrial complex in the Soviet Union and granted the requests of the generals.