

"Wag the Dog"

Politics at the Frontiers of the Cold War

Bernd Greiner /

Berlin Center for Cold War Studies, Hamburg Institute for Social
Research

Historian Bernd Greiner's observations and propositions on a topic that deserves greater attention.

Unraveling the multiple, entangled strands of the history of the Cold War remains one of the great challenges of research into the recent past, and especially in what was then the Third World. Because the frontiers of the rival spheres of influence in the Northern Hemisphere stayed fixed and, for the foreseeable future, seemed impenetrable, from the late 1950s onward the US and USSR increasingly shifted their struggle for resources, dominance and prestige toward the Global South. In Asia, Africa and Latin America they staked their political claims to being the sole correct role model for modernity, competing for support and perhaps even obedience. Whether the instruments put into play were political, economic or military depended on local circumstances.

Essentially it was always a matter of trying to undermine and possibly topple the other side's bastions at their fringes. And, propelled by maxims of rapid development and modernization, a surprisingly large



share of Third World elites voluntarily joined in this competition – indeed, all the more as the rewards of real or perceived loyalty rose. Again and again, the superpowers’ commitment revealed unexpected spaces for initiative among supposedly “weaker” states. The mere threat of defecting to the rival camp proved to be a reliable instrument for securing stepped-up economic and military aid from “powerful” ones. This was also, of course, a reason that local and regional conflicts, which would otherwise have come to nothing or petered out for lack of resources, were actually intensified and drawn out – to say nothing of deliberately staged “proxy wars.”

A reconstruction of this tangled history would focus more than previously on “back-bench charismatic actors.” These included the potentates [Fidel Castro](#), [Norodom Sihanouk](#), [Pol Pot](#), [Haji Mohamed Suharto](#), [Mobutu Sese Seko](#), [Saddam Hussein](#), [Jonas Savimbi](#), [Julius Nyerere](#) or [Nguyen Van Thieu](#), who, using sense and effort, played off the primary East-West powers against each other occasionally conveying the impression that the tail was wagging the dog. Representatives of the “non-aligned” movement including [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#) and [Indira Gandhi](#) could be likewise included among this cohort, pursuing less of a “third way” than a “see-saw” policy between East and West. Their examples make clear the frontiers of the Cold War – geographical, ideological and political-diplomatic fault lines along the peripheries that also impacted the policy at the cores.



Professor Bernd Greiner is the head of the [Berlin Center for Cold War Studies](#). He works for the [Hamburg Institute for Social Research](#) and teaches at the University of Hamburg.

Recommended Citation:

Bernd Greiner, "Wag the Dog" – Politics at the Frontiers of the Cold War, 03/01/2016, <http://www.berlinerkolleg.com/en/blog/wag-dog-politics-frontiers-cold-war> (please add the date of the last call to this page in brackets).