# Fragile Balances in a Changing Global Order: United States Foreign Policy and Ghana in the First Decade after Independence, 1957–1966

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**Abstract**

This article examines the evolution of diplomatic, economic,and ideological relations between the United States and Ghana during the first decade following Ghana's independence (1957-1966), focusing on the interaction between Kwame Nkrumah's Administration and the United States presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. It argues that the bilateral relations were shaped by a fragile equilibrium between cooperation and suspicion within the broader framework of Cold War bipolarity. Ghana's pursuit of political and economic autonomy, framed through the doctrine of positive neutralism and African socialism, intersected with United States containment strategies aimed at limiting Soviet expansion in Africa. The Volta River Project emerged as the central axis of cooperation, symbolizing both Ghana's industrial ambitions and Washington's geopolitical calculations. While the Eisenhower Administration adopted a cautious and pragmatic approach, Kennedy's pursued a more proactive engagement with Ghana as part of his broader Third World strategy. Under Johnson, however, shifting United States priorities and escalating ideological tensions contributed to a progressive deterioration of relations. Drawing on primary sources that include the Foreign Relations of the United States volumes, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports, treaties, and Ghanaian parliamentary records, this study reassesses the dynamics of United States–Ghana relations as a case study of Cold War diplomacy in postcolonial Africa. It concludes that the relationship ultimately reflected the structural limits of non-alignment in a bipolar international system.

Keywords: Ghana, United States, Foreign Policy, Kwame Nkrumah, Volta River Project, Cold War, Africa, Positive Neutralism

## Introduction

This article examines a central question in the history of Cold War diplomacy in postcolonial Africa: How did the structural logic of superpower bipolarity shape, constrain and, ultimately, undermine United States-Ghana bilateral relations during the first decade of Ghanaian independence (1957–1966)? It argues that the relationship was governed by a fragile equilibrium between cooperation and suspicion that reflected neither American bad

faith nor Ghanaian *naïveté*, but rather the systemic impossibility of genuine non-alignment within a bipolar international order. Ghana's pursuit of political and economic autonomy through Kwame Nkrumah's doctrine of "positive neutralism" intersected with American containment strategies in ways that generated mutual misperception, asymmetric development partnerships and, eventually, the conditions for regime change. By tracing this dynamic across three United States administrations (Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson), this study contributes to the historiography of Cold War Africa and to ongoing debates on the structural limits of small-state sovereignty.

On March 6, 1957, the former British colony of the Gold Coast achieved independence and assumed the name Ghana (Slater, 1930), becoming the first country in Africa South of the Sahara to break free from colonial rule (Sowa, 1991). This event marked a decisive turning point not only in West African history but also in the broader geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, as both the United States and the Soviet Union increasingly turned their attention to the African continent (Garland, 2022). Ghana's independence emerged from a complex political process that unfolded during the final decade of British colonial rule. Britain's gradual decentralization of colonial governance after World War II, combined with the broader global wave of decolonization inaugurated by India's independence in 1947, established favorable conditions for constitutional reform in the Gold Coast (Harris, 1958; Filesi, 1966). Within this context, Kwame Nkrumah, after years of political formation in the United States and the United Kingdom, returned to the Gold Coast and rapidly became the leading figure of the nationalist movement (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1997). The events of February 1948, including the Christiansborg Cross-Roads incident and the protest of war veterans, intensified popular mobilization and accelerated constitutional reform. The Coussey Constitution of 1951 and the electoral victory of the Convention People's Party (CPP) marked decisive steps toward self-government. Upon independence, the presence of international delegations at the independence ceremony, including United States Vice President Richard Nixon and United Nations Under-Secretary-General Ralph J. Bunche, reflected the symbolic and strategic importance attributed to the new state (BBC Four, 1957).

Many key concepts require definitions before proceeding. The term "positive neutralism," coined and championed by Nkrumah, refers to a foreign policy doctrine that explicitly rejected formal alignment with either the Western or Eastern blocs while simultaneously maintaining active diplomatic relations with both superpowers and asserting an autonomous African voice in international affairs (Rainero, 1965). Unlike "passive neutrality," which implied disengagement from global politics, "positive neutralism" sought to leverage Cold War competition in order to maximize developmental and political gains for newly independent African states. "African socialism," the second pillar of Nkrumah's ideological program, designated a state-led development model that sought to reconcile indigenous communal traditions with modern industrial planning, thereby distinguishing itself from Soviet-style Marxism while nonetheless accepting selective cooperation with socialist countries (Hodgkin, 1974). This developmental model intersects analytically with the tradition of Dependency Theory, particularly as elaborated by Cardoso and Faletto (1979) and Wallerstein (1974), insofar as it identifies the structural asymmetries of the international economic order, rather than domestic failure alone, as the primary obstacle to postcolonial development. The Volta River Project (VRP), as this study argues, can be read as a concrete instantiation of dependent development: modernization achieved through external capital under terms that reproduced rather than dissolved structural inequality.

"Cold War bipolarity," as used here, refers to the systemic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union that organized global politics around competing ideological, economic and military blocs following the Second World War (Noer, 1984). The concept of "postcolonial state" designates the newly independent nations emerging from European

colonial rule, characterized by the simultaneous challenges of state-building, national integration, economic development, and the assertion of sovereignty within an international order largely designed by and for the former colonial powers (Nkrumah, 1965). Ghana's position as a small, resource-dependent postcolonial state further invites analysis through the lens of "Small-state Diplomacy Theory" (Handel, 1981; Ingebritsen et al., 2006), which examines how states with limited material capabilities navigate asymmetric relationships with great powers. In this framework, "positive neutralism" can be understood not merely as an ideological preference but as a rational adaptive strategy, an attempt to maximize bargaining leverage by refusing exclusive alignment with either bloc.

The significance of examining United States–Ghana relations during this foundational decade lies in its capacity to illuminate broader patterns of Cold War diplomacy in postcolonial Africa. As the first independent state in Africa South of the Sahara, Ghana occupied a uniquely prominent position in the global imagination of the late 1950s and early 1960s: it was viewed by both superpowers as a potential model whose political trajectory could influence the broader direction of decolonization across the continent (Garland, 2022). For the United States, Ghana represented an opportunity to demonstrate that Western-oriented development assistance could anchor newly independent African states within a liberal international order, thereby limiting Soviet influence (Haefele, 2001; Muehlenbeck, 2012). For Nkrumah, United States engagement offered access to capital and technology essential to his ambitious industrialization agenda, even as it risked entangling Ghana in a bipolar competition that threatened African autonomy (US Department of State, 1957c). The resulting relationship thus offers a rich case study in the structural tensions between superpower interests and postcolonial aspirations during the height of the Cold War. Ghana's trajectory served as a reference point for other African territories moving toward independence, and its fate under the pressures of bipolar competition carried implications that extended well beyond the bilateral relationship (Dodoo, 2012).

This study proceeds as follows. The section on Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology outlines the analytical approach, primary and secondary sources employed, and the methodological strengths and limitations of the research. The three subsequent analytical sections examine, in turn, the evolution of diplomatic relations between Ghana and the United States across three successive American administrations; the centrality of economic cooperation, particularly the VRP, in shaping bilateral engagement; and the ideological tensions that ultimately undermined the relationship. Each section presents competing scholarly interpretations of the evidence and advances a synthesis that situates the bilateral relationship within the broader structural dynamics of Cold War bipolarity and postcolonial development. The concluding section synthesizes the key findings, assesses their implications for understanding Cold War diplomacy in Africa, and advances policy recommendations relevant to contemporary debates on international development and great power engagement with the Global South.

## Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology grounded in the systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources related to Ghana–United States relations between 1957 and 1966. Qualitative historical methodology, as deployed here, involves the interpretive reconstruction of past events and processes through the critical examination of documentary evidence, situating specific bilateral interactions within broader structural contexts of international politics and postcolonial development (Dodoo, 2012). Rather than seeking to quantify or model the dynamics of United States-Ghana relations, this approach prioritizes the recovery of actor intentions, institutional logics, and ideological frameworks as they

emerge from the archival record. The chronological-thematic (or diachronic-synchronic) structure adopted for the analysis reflects the need to balance narrative coherence, thereby tracing the evolution of relations across three United States administrations (Eisenhower, 1957–1961; Kennedy, 1961–1963; Johnson, 1963–1966) with analytical depth, examining the interconnected dimensions of diplomacy, economics, and ideology as they shaped bilateral engagement.

The core documentary foundation of this research consists of the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) volumes covering Africa between 1955 and 1968. These volumes, produced by the Office of the Historian of the United States Department of State, compile declassified diplomatic memoranda, presidential correspondence, policy papers, and telegrams that illuminate the strategic calculations of the three administrations under study. Particular attention has been devoted to documents concerning the VRP, the Congo Crisis, and internal debates within the State Department and the White House. Intelligence perspectives are reconstructed through declassified reports and memoranda issued by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), including National Intelligence Estimates and situation reports addressing Ghana's domestic political climate and its relations with the Soviet bloc (Central Intelligence Agency, 1961, 1964). Economic and developmental dimensions are examined through official agreements and institutional reports, including the United States Treaties and Other International Agreements series (US Department of State, 1957d, 1958, 1959), documentation from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD, 1957), International Monetary Fund annual reports (IMF, 1965), and Ghana's Seven-Year Development Plan (Government of Ghana, 1964). Parliamentary debates from both the British House of Commons (United Kingdom Parliament, 1948, 1957) and Ghana's post-independence legislature further contextualize the constitutional and economic transitions of the period. Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) is analyzed as both a political manifesto and a primary source reflecting the deteriorating relationship with the West.

Secondary literature is employed to frame and interpret primary materials within broader historiographical debates. Foundational works include Thompson's 1969 study of Ghana's foreign policy, Landricina's 2016 archival examination of the Ghana experiment in British, American, German, and Ghanaian archives, and Quaidoo's 2010 analysis of United States involvement in Nkrumah's overthrow. These studies provide complementary archival perspectives and interpretive frameworks. Scholarly analyses of Kennedy's Third World strategy and African diplomacy (Noer, 1984; Haefele, 2001; Muehlenbeck, 2012) contribute to understanding the evolution of United States policy. Studies on the Congo Crisis clarify the divergent approaches adopted by Ghana and the United States (Nwaubani, 2001). Economic assessments of the VRP (Hart, 1980; Chambers, 1970) are employed to evaluate both developmental expectations and social consequences. Broader contextual works on African socialism and neutralism inform the interpretation of Nkrumah's ideological positioning (Rainero, 1965). Research on race relations and United States cultural diplomacy in Ghana contributes to understanding tensions beyond formal diplomacy (Heger, 1999). Recent scholarship on Soviet-Ghanaian relations complements the analysis of the superpower competition in Accra (Stanek, 2015; Kulkova and Sanusi, 2016). More recent scholarship has further enriched the historiographical foundations of this study: Gerits (2023) situates the ideological competition over Africa within a broader framework of anticolonial modernity, while Ahlman (2017) provides a ground-level perspective on the domestic dimensions of Nkrumahism that complements the diplomatic focus of the present analysis.

The principal strengths of this methodological approach lie in the richness and diversity of the primary source base. The combination of United States diplomatic archives, CIA intelligence assessments, international financial documentation, and Ghanaian

parliamentary and policy records enables a multi-perspectival reconstruction of bilateral relations that moves beyond a purely United States-centric narrative. By juxtaposing American strategic calculations against Ghanaian policy formulations and development priorities, the study can illuminate the dynamics of asymmetric interdependence that characterized the relationship. The inclusion of intelligence assessments alongside formal diplomatic correspondence further allows for the identification of discrepancies between public rhetoric and private calculation, thereby enriching the interpretive analysis and guarding against overly schematic readings of either American benevolence or deliberate bad faith.

The analytical procedure applied to these sources operates on three levels. At the first level, United States diplomatic and intelligence documents are read against Ghanaian parliamentary records and policy texts in order to identify convergences and divergences between American perceptions of Ghanaian intentions and Ghanaian actors' own articulations of their priorities, a juxtaposition that reveals the extent to which mutual misperception, rather than deliberate bad faith, shaped the bilateral dynamic. At the second level, formal diplomatic correspondence is systematically compared with intelligence assessments and internal memoranda in order to detect discrepancies between public rhetoric and private calculation; where such discrepancies are identified, the private record is treated as analytically primary. At the third level, competing historiographical interpretations are weighed against the primary evidence rather than simply summarized: revisionist, liberal-internationalist, and agency-centered readings are each tested against the documentary record, and a synthetic position is advanced only where the evidence supports it. Throughout, a distinction is maintained between four categories of source material (archival diplomatic documents, intelligence assessments, journalistic accounts and secondary scholarship) each of which carries different epistemic weight: archival sources are treated as the evidentiary foundation; intelligence documents as evidence of perception and calculation rather than objective fact; journalistic accounts as corroborating or contextualizing material; and secondary scholarship as the interpretive framework within which primary evidence is situated.

Several significant limitations must be acknowledged. First, the documentary base remains heavily weighted toward United States archival sources. While the FRUS volumes and CIA records provide extensive insight into American perceptions and decision-making, they inevitably reflect the epistemological horizons of Washington policymakers, potentially overstating American agency and underrepresenting the autonomous dynamics of Ghanaian political life. Second, access to Ghanaian national archives from the Nkrumah period remains constrained by availability and declassification status, thereby limiting the extent to which the analysis can fully recover Ghanaian actors' own framings of bilateral negotiations. Third, the near-total absence of Soviet archival materials prevents a fully triangulated assessment of how Soviet engagement with Ghana shaped American perceptions and responses—a gap that recent scholarship has begun to address but which remains only partially resolved.

These limitations are partially mitigated through a range of compensatory strategies. Exclusive reliance on United States sources is counterbalanced by sustained attention to Ghanaian parliamentary records, Nkrumah's published speeches and theoretical writings, and the Seven-Year Development Plan, all of which provide direct insight into Ghanaian priorities and self-understanding. Secondary scholarship drawing on Ghanaian archival sources, most notably Landricina's 2016 research in the National Archives of Ghana, is employed to triangulate United States-sourced perspectives. The absence of Soviet materials is partially addressed through reference to recent scholarship on Soviet-Ghanaian technical and cultural exchanges (Stanek, 2015; Kulkova and Sanusi, 2016). While these strategies do not fully resolve the asymmetries of the archival record, they significantly enrich the

interpretive framework and help prevent oversimplification of the relationship's dynamics.

## Diplomatic Relations: Between Pragmatism and Suspicion

The diplomatic dimension of United States-Ghana relations between 1957 and 1966 constitutes the most visible and institutionally structured arena of bilateral engagement. From the symbolic ceremony of Ghanaian independence in March 1957, attended by United States Vice President Nixon, to the progressive cooling of relations under the Johnson Administration, diplomatic interactions were shaped by a complex negotiation between American strategic imperatives and Ghanaian assertions of sovereign autonomy (US Department of State, 1957b). Understanding this dimension requires attention not only to the formal record of state-to-state exchanges but also to the deeper assumptions about African political capacity, racial hierarchy, and developmental potential that informed American diplomacy throughout the period (Heger, 1999). The diplomatic relationship evolved across three distinct phases corresponding to the three successive United States administrations, each characterized by a different balance between engagement and suspicion.

Under the Eisenhower Administration, United States policy toward Ghana was characterized by cautious pragmatism. The establishment of the United States Embassy in Accra formalized bilateral engagement, and Nixon's meeting with Nkrumah at the independence ceremony signaled Washington's recognition of Ghana's strategic importance as the first independent state in Africa South of the Sahara (US Department of State, 1957a). Nevertheless, the State Department viewed Nkrumah's declared commitment to positive neutralism with persistent ambivalence. While Eisenhower's foreign policy team acknowledged the tactical appeal of cultivating constructive relations with Accra, it remained deeply wary of what it perceived as Nkrumah's ideological flexibility and his willingness to develop ties with Moscow. The opening of Soviet and Ghanaian embassies in Accra and Moscow between 1959 and 1960 heightened American concerns regarding possible ideological alignment (Stanek, 2015), and for Washington policymakers operating within the polarized epistemology of Cold War bipolarity, Nkrumah's maintenance of cordial relations with the Eastern bloc was increasingly difficult to reconcile with his professions of non-alignment.

The Congo Crisis of 1960 represented a critical rupture in bilateral perceptions. Ghana strongly supported Patrice Lumumba's government and actively participated in the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC), advocating for the territorial integrity of the newly independent state (Nwaubani, 2001). The United States, by contrast, adopted a containment-oriented strategy that prioritized anti-communist stability over the defense of Congolese sovereignty, ultimately supporting Mobutu Sese Seko's consolidation of power (Quaidoo, 2010). Nkrumah publicly accused Western powers of interfering in Congolese affairs—a charge that deepened mistrust on both sides and marked an early test of the limits of Ghanaian-American diplomatic understanding (Noer, 1984). Under Kennedy, however, diplomatic engagement intensified markedly. Nkrumah's visit to the White House in March of 1961 symbolized a renewed effort to strengthen personal and institutional ties (Schmidt, 1961), and Kennedy's broader Third World strategy placed Ghana at the center of United States African diplomacy (Haefele, 2001; Muehlenbeck, 2012). Nevertheless, intelligence reports reveal persistent skepticism within the State Department and the CIA regarding Nkrumah's ideological trajectory (Central Intelligence Agency, 1961). Under Johnson, diplomatic exchanges became increasingly formal and less strategically central. Africa gradually declined in United States foreign policy priorities, overshadowed by Vietnam and domestic civil rights concerns (Morgenthau, 1968). Nkrumah's 1965 publication of *Neo-Colonialism* marked a public denunciation of Western interference that intensified

ideological confrontation (Nkrumah, 1965), and by 1966 bilateral relations had deteriorated significantly, reflecting structural tensions accumulated over the previous decade (US Department of State, 1964).

Some historians have interpreted the diplomatic record in markedly different ways, reflecting deeper disagreements about the nature of American foreign policy in postcolonial Africa. A revisionist strand of scholarship, exemplified by Quaidoo (2010) and elements of Noer's 1984 analysis, argues that American diplomacy toward Ghana was fundamentally shaped by an ideological hostility to non-alignment that bordered on bad faith. From this perspective, Washington's professions of respect for Ghanaian sovereignty were instrumentalized, deployed rhetorically when convenient, abandoned when Nkrumah's autonomous foreign policy threatened the structural logic of Cold War bipolarity. The CIA's sustained monitoring of Nkrumah's government, including alleged involvement in the political climate surrounding assassination attempts following the Kulungugu incident of 1962, is cited as evidence that American diplomatic engagement was never fully divorced from covert efforts to shape Ghanaian political dynamics in Washington's favor (Central Intelligence Agency, 1964). On this reading, the progressive deterioration of the relationship was not an unforeseen outcome but a structural consequence of American unwillingness to genuinely accept postcolonial autonomy.

A contrasting liberal-internationalist interpretation, associated with scholars such as Muehlenbeck (2012) and Haefele (2001), emphasizes the genuine transformative ambitions of Kennedy's African diplomacy. In this reading, the Kennedy Administration represented a meaningful departure from Eisenhower's Cold War rigidity, seeking to engage African nationalism on its own terms and to demonstrate that Western-oriented development assistance was compatible with political independence. The acceleration of United States support for the VRP and the expansion of Peace Corps and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programs in Ghana are presented as evidence of this more constructive orientation. The persistent skepticism of the State Department and CIA is acknowledged but framed as institutional inertia to be overcome rather than as evidence of fundamental bad faith (Muehlenbeck, 2012). A third perspective, grounded in Ghanaian agency, foregrounds Nkrumah's sophisticated attempt to leverage superpower competition in support of Ghana's developmental agenda and Pan-African ambitions. Scholars such as Dodoo (2012) and Landricina (2016) argue that this strategy was neither naive nor simply reactive, a position that the revisionist and liberal-internationalist readings alike risk underestimating when they center their analyses on Washington's motivations and calculations.

A synthesis of these competing interpretations suggests that United States–Ghana diplomatic relations were shaped by mutually reinforcing misperceptions and structural constraints rather than by any single overriding logic. Each interpretive strand captures a partial truth while obscuring another: the costs of Cold War ideology were real, Kennedy's reformism was genuine if constrained, and Ghanaian agency was neither naive nor simply reactive. The diplomatic record ultimately reveals a relationship oscillating between genuine engagement and structural suspicion, a dynamic that prevented the crystallization of either durable partnership or outright rupture until the coup of February 1966 definitively closed the Nkrumah chapter.

## Economic Cooperation and the Volta River Project

Economic cooperation formed the backbone of Ghana–United States relations throughout the period under study, providing both the primary vehicle for bilateral engagement and the most tangible legacy of the relationship. At the center of this economic dimension stood the VRP,

a large-scale hydroelectric and industrial initiative centered on the construction of the Akosombo Dam, designed to diversify Ghana's cocoa-dependent economy through large-scale electricity generation and aluminum smelting (Hart, 1980). The VRP had been conceived in outline as early as the colonial period and had been the subject of intermittent negotiations during the Gold Coast years. Upon independence, it became the central symbol of Nkrumah's developmental ambitions and the principal arena in which Ghana sought to secure Western, and particularly American, investment and technical assistance (US Department of State, 1961b).

The economic relationship between Ghana and the United States extended well beyond the VRP. Under the Eisenhower Administration, bilateral economic engagement was formalized through a series of technical cooperation agreements (US Department of State, 1957d), a guaranty of private investments (US Department of State, 1958), and provisions for duty-free entry of United States relief supplies (US Department of State, 1959). The Peace Corps Agreement of 1961 inaugurated a program of technical assistance and educational exchange that would eventually involve hundreds of American volunteers in agricultural development and educational programs across Ghana (US Department of State, 1961c). USAID initiatives and Fulbright Program exchanges further expanded the scope of bilateral economic and educational engagement, supporting thousands of Ghanaian farmers and fostering elite formation aligned with Western institutions (Heger, 1999). Early negotiations regarding the VRP under Eisenhower were marked by feasibility studies and cautious financial assessments, reflecting Washington's uncertainty about the long-term economic viability of the project amid fluctuations in the global aluminum market (Hart, 1980; IBRD, 1957).

The decisive turning point came under Kennedy. Influenced by geopolitical calculations, including the memory of the Aswan Dam episode, in which Soviet financing of the Egyptian megaproject had yielded significant strategic gains for Moscow, Kennedy approved United States participation in the VRP in 1962 despite domestic opposition (Muehlenbeck, 2012; US Department of State, 1961a). The involvement of Kaiser Aluminum and the establishment of the Volta Aluminum Company (VALCO) illustrated the integration of private capital into Cold War development policy, reflecting the broader American preference for channeling development assistance through private enterprise rather than state-to-state transfers (Young, 1965). The construction and eventual inauguration of the Akosombo Dam in 1966 represented a tangible achievement of bilateral cooperation: the dam provided electricity for industrial and domestic use across much of Ghana, dramatically transforming the country's energy landscape. At the same time, the construction of Lake Volta, the largest artificial lake in the world by surface area, necessitated the resettlement of approximately 80,000 people, generating substantial social disruption and administrative challenges (Chambers, 1970; Lumsden, 1973). By the mid-1960s, United States economic assistance began to decline: the Johnson Administration reduced Food for Peace support and rejected additional large-scale financial requests from Accra (Deaton, 1980), while Ghana's Seven-Year Development Plan encountered structural obstacles including the 1965 cocoa crisis and mounting fiscal imbalances (Kolavalli and Vigneri, 2011; IMF, 1965).

The VRP and the broader framework of United States economic assistance to Ghana have been interpreted in fundamentally different ways by scholars working within distinct analytical traditions. A developmental optimist strand, represented by Hart's 1980 foundational study, foregrounds the project's achievements in terms of electricity generation, industrial capacity, and economic diversification. On this reading, the VRP represented a successful example of international economic cooperation in service of postcolonial development goals, constrained but not ultimately negated by the geopolitical calculations that motivated American participation. The electricity generated by the Akosombo Dam

transformed Ghana's productive capacity and laid the infrastructural groundwork for industrial development that outlasted Nkrumah's government.

A critical political economy perspective, informed by Dependency Theory and neo-colonial analysis, arrives at a starkly different assessment. From this vantage point, anticipating themes that Nkrumah himself articulated in *Neo-Colonialism* (1965), the VRP was less an act of genuine development assistance than an instrument of structural dependency. The terms of the VALCO agreement, which guaranteed Kaiser Aluminum preferential electricity rates and export privileges, are cited as evidence that the economic benefits of the project were weighted disproportionately toward Western corporate interests rather than the Ghanaian public. The cocoa crisis of 1965 and the fiscal imbalances generated by the Seven-Year Development Plan further exposed the structural vulnerabilities of an economy that had been modernized along the lines prescribed by external donors without achieving genuine economic autonomy (Kolavalli and Vigneri, 2011). From this perspective, American development assistance was not separable from American economic interest but was rather its extension by other means—a neo-colonial mechanism for securing privileged access to Ghanaian resources and markets under the banner of developmental partnership.

A third perspective, associated with institutional economists and development historians, emphasizes the technical and administrative complexities of implementing large-scale infrastructure projects in newly independent states with limited administrative capacity. Chambers (1970) and Lumsden (1973) draw attention to the human and social costs of the VRP that were inadequately anticipated by project planners, including the disruptive effects of resettlement on affected communities and the environmental consequences of lake formation. These studies suggest that the limitations of the VRP were as much a function of inadequate planning and governance capacity as of deliberate neocolonial design, and that attributing all project failures to Western manipulation risks an oversimplification that obscures the genuine administrative challenges of postcolonial state-building.

A synthesis of these perspectives reveals that the VRP embodied the fundamental ambivalence of Cold War development assistance: it was simultaneously an instrument of genuine development, a vehicle for geopolitical influence, and a mechanism of structural dependency, and these three functions were inextricably intertwined. Each interpretive strand captures a partial truth: material achievements were real, structural asymmetries were by design, and administrative failures were not reducible to external manipulation alone. The VRP thus emerges not as the straightforward success of development cooperation nor as the transparent instrument of neo-colonial domination, but as a profoundly ambiguous artifact of postcolonial modernity, one that transformed Ghana's physical and economic landscape while simultaneously embedding the country more deeply in a network of international economic relationships that constrained its developmental autonomy. This ambivalence was not lost on contemporaries: the official inauguration of the Akosombo Dam in 1966 coincided with the progressive marginalization of Ghana from American development priorities, a poignant illustration of the instrumental, geopolitically conditioned nature of Cold War development assistance.

## Ideological Tensions and the Limits of Non-Alignment

The ideological dimension of United States-Ghana relations constituted the most persistent and ultimately decisive source of friction between the two countries throughout the decade under review. Nkrumah's articulation of African socialism and his doctrine of positive neutralism generated a profound and ultimately irresolvable tension with American Cold War ideology, which was fundamentally unable to accommodate the possibility of a genuinely independent third path between the Western and Eastern blocs. Understanding this

ideological dimension requires attention to both the content of Nkrumah's political theory and the specific ways in which American policymakers—diplomatic, intelligence, and analytical—perceived and responded to it, as well as to how domestic political dynamics within both Ghana and the United States shaped the ideological framing of the bilateral relationship.

Nkrumah's African socialism, as articulated in a series of theoretical works and political speeches spanning the period, was conceived as a synthesis of African communal traditions, modern developmentalist planning, and a principled rejection of both Western capitalism and Soviet-style command economy (Hodgkin, 1974). In Nkrumah's formulation, the African continent possessed cultural and historical resources, particularly the tradition of communal land tenure and collective social organization, that distinguished African socialism from its European counterparts and made it a potentially more authentic and humanistic path to modernity. Economically, African socialism implied state leadership of the industrialization process, the nationalization of strategic industries, and the subordination of foreign investment to nationally-determined development priorities. The visit of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to Accra in February f 1961, combined with agreements concerning nuclear research cooperation and the expansion of Soviet technical assistance programs in Ghana, reinforced American concerns about the direction of Ghanaian foreign policy (Kulkova and Sanusi, 2016; Central Intelligence Agency, 1961). Domestically, Nkrumah's implementation of the Preventive Detention Act in 1958 and his progressive consolidation of one-party rule through the early 1960s contradicted his international rhetoric of democracy and self-determination, thereby weakening his legitimacy in Western eyes (International Commission of Jurists, 1961).

Accusations of CIA involvement in multiple assassination attempts against Nkrumah—particularly following the Kulungugu incident of August 1962, in which a grenade attack killed several bystanders, deepened mutual distrust (Central Intelligence Agency, 1964). While definitive evidence of direct American orchestration of these attacks remains contested in historiography, declassified intelligence documents reveal sustained covert efforts to monitor and influence Ghanaian political dynamics, including surveillance of Nkrumah's inner circle and contacts with political opponents. The publication of Neo-Colonialism: *The Last Stage of Imperialism* in 1965 marked the culmination of ideological estrangement. In this text, Nkrumah explicitly accused Western powers, and implicitly the United States, of perpetuating economic domination under new forms following formal decolonization, identifying multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and intelligence agencies as the instruments of a new imperialism that operated through market mechanisms and covert political manipulation rather than direct colonial administration (Nkrumah, 1965). The Johnson Administration's response was immediate and hostile, and bilateral relations entered a period of marked chill from which they would not recover before the coup of February 1966.

The mechanics of United States intelligence involvement in the events leading to the coup of February 1966 merit closer examination than they have typically received in the secondary literature. Declassified documentation reveals that plans for a military coup against Nkrumah were actively underway as early as March of 1965, coordinated by Police Commissioner John Willie Kofi Harlley and Generals Stephen Otu and Joseph Ankrah (Quaidoo, 2010). Crucially, by May of 1965, senior National Security Council (NSC) staff member Robert Komer had already informed National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy of the imminent coup plot, and Washington chose not to intervene to prevent it (US Department of State, 1966b). The CIA's role extended beyond passive awareness: Howard Thomas Bane, the Agency's station chief in Accra, formally requested authorization from CIA headquarters for a detachment of paramilitary specialists from the Special Operations Group to be

deployed in support of Nkrumah's removal, a request that was ultimately denied in order to avoid compromising American international credibility (Hersh, 1978). Furthermore, the Agency sought the authorization of Committee 303, the NSC's covert action subcommittee, for a more direct operational role in the regime change, although this too did not materialize in the form requested. CIA officer John R. Stockwell subsequently acknowledged in an internal publication that the Agency had contributed to the organizational phase of the coup (US Department of State, 1966a). An Office of Current Intelligence assessment dated February 10, 1966—a mere two weeks before the putsch—noted that plotting was actively underway and that execution was imminent, with American intelligence monitoring the timing of the operation to ensure it unfolded during Nkrumah's absence abroad. This evidence, while stopping short of demonstrating direct operational control by Washington, establishes American foreknowledge and facilitation as structural components of the regime change, lending significant empirical weight to the revisionist historiographical position advanced by Quaidoo (2010) and others.

The immediate aftermath of the coup confirmed with striking clarity the structural logic that had underpinned the deterioration of United States-Ghana relations throughout the preceding decade. The National Liberation Council (NLC), led by General Ankrah, moved with deliberate speed to signal its pro-Western orientation: Soviet and Chinese advisors were expelled, diplomatic relations with Eastern bloc countries were reviewed, and the new government signaled its readiness to renegotiate Ghana's development financing on Western terms. In his first substantive meeting with United States Ambassador William Patrick Mahoney, Jr. in early March of 1966, General Ankrah explicitly pledged to distance the new regime from its Soviet entanglements, reportedly venting his personal frustration with the intimacy of the relationship between Nkrumah and the Soviet ambassador: in the general's own recorded words, "that damn Russian Ambassador was in the Flagstaff House every five minutes" (US Department of State, 1966b). American recognition of the NLC, calibrated to follow that of Nigeria and the Francophone African states within the Organisation Commune Africaine et Malgache or Common African and Malagasy Organization (OCAM) grouping so as to avoid the appearance of orchestration, was extended within weeks. Simultaneously, the IMF and the IBRD, whose assistance to Ghana had been effectively constrained under Nkrumah, signaled their readiness to re-engage with the new government, whose pledges of fiscal discipline and international financial compliance aligned closely with Western institutional priorities (IMF, 1965). The rapidity and completeness of this reorientation speaks eloquently to the structural dimensions of United States-Ghana relations across the entire decade under review: what had appeared to American policymakers as ideological intransigence on Nkrumah's part was revealed, in the cold light of the post-coup settlement, to have been an obstacle not to a genuine bilateral partnership but to a relationship structured by the requirements of Western-oriented economic governance, precisely the neo-colonial dynamic that Nkrumah's positive neutralism had sought to resist and that his *Neo-Colonialism* had sought to theorize.

Scholars have interpreted Nkrumah's ideological program and its implications for United States-Ghana relations in fundamentally different ways. A United States government-aligned perspective, reflected in CIA assessments of the period, tended to view Nkrumah's non-alignment as a smokescreen for pro-Soviet sympathies. From this perspective, the evidence of Soviet technical and educational presence in Ghana, the acceptance of Eastern bloc financial assistance, and Nkrumah's rhetorical attacks on Western imperialism constituted a coherent pattern of ideological alignment that posed genuine strategic risks to American interests in Africa (Central Intelligence Agency, 1961). This interpretation drove the hardening of American policy under Johnson and informed the intelligence climate of tolerance toward regime change observable around the 1966 coup, a tolerance confirmed by

the NSC's foreknowledge of the plot and its choice not to intervene (US Department of State, 1966b).

A revisionist African nationalist perspective, advanced by scholars sympathetic to Nkrumah's project, argues that positive neutralism was a coherent and principled foreign policy doctrine that was systematically misread by American analysts imprisoned within Cold War binary thinking. In this reading, Nkrumah's acceptance of Soviet assistance was a rational strategy for maximizing developmental resources rather than evidence of ideological alignment; his engagement with the Eastern bloc was precisely symmetrical to his engagement with the West. The failure of the United States to accept this symmetry reveals not Nkrumah's duplicity but rather the fundamental incompatibility of Cold War epistemology with genuine non-alignment (Dodoo, 2012; Landricina, 2016). On this reading, American facilitation of the 1966 coup was the logical endpoint of a decade of ideological tunnel vision, the structural consequence of Washington's refusal to accept the possibility of a genuinely third path.

A third, structural-systemic perspective seeks to move beyond the debate about Nkrumah's true ideological orientation to examine the conditions that made genuine non-alignment impossible within the Cold War order. Scholars working in this tradition argue that the ideological tensions were not primarily a function of misperception but of the structural impossibility of the position Nkrumah sought to occupy: in a bipolar system characterized by intense security competition, the assertion of genuine autonomy by a small, resource-dependent postcolonial state was structurally threatening to both superpowers (Noer, 1984). The coup of 1966 was, on this reading, neither an act of deliberate American orchestration nor a spontaneous domestic reaction, but the predictable crystallization of systemic pressures that had accumulated over a decade, the point at which the structural limits of non-alignment became impossible to defer.

A synthesis of these perspectives yields an interpretation that acknowledges both agency and structure, perception and reality. Each reading contributes a necessary corrective: the government-aligned view identifies real strategic tensions, the nationalist revisionist view exposes real perceptual failures, and the structural-systemic perspective, the most analytically powerful of the three, locates the fundamental obstacle not in Nkrumah's ideology or American misperception alone, but in the systemic constraints of a bipolar order that left little room for genuine small-state autonomy. The coup d'état of February 24, 1966, which overthrew Nkrumah while he was abroad on a diplomatic mission, marked the definitive end of this first phase of United States-Ghana relations. The new military government moved quickly to expel Soviet and Chinese advisors and align itself firmly with Western economic and political norms, confirming in practice the structural limits of non-alignment within the Cold War order. Whatever the precise extent of American orchestration, a question on which the historical record remains contested, the coup crystallized the systemic tensions that had accumulated over the preceding decade and confirmed the vulnerability of postcolonial leadership within a global order organized around superpower rivalry (US Department of State, 1966b).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The evolution of relations between Ghana and the United States from 1957 to 1966 reveals a dynamic interplay among cooperation, ideological tension, and geopolitical calculation within the broader framework of the Cold War. Far from following a linear trajectory from promise to rupture, the bilateral relations oscillated between pragmatic engagement and mutual suspicion, reflecting both the structural imperatives of Cold War bipolarity and the more contingent dynamics of domestic politics and leadership styles in both countries. Under

the Eisenhower Administration, cautious pragmatism characterized United States policy: Washington sought to cultivate constructive relations with the first independent state in Africa South of the Sahara while monitoring Nkrumah's diplomatic overtures to the Soviet Union, attempting to anchor Ghana within a Western-oriented development framework without overt interference (US Department of State, 1957d, 1958). The Kennedy years marked the high point of bilateral engagement, as the new administration's Third World strategy combined economic assistance, personal diplomacy, and support for the VRP in a more proactive effort to demonstrate the compatibility of Western development with postcolonial independence (Haefele, 2001). Yet, even during this period of relative convergence, intelligence assessments reveal persistent doubts regarding Nkrumah's ideological trajectory (Central Intelligence Agency, 1961). Under Johnson, shifting United States priorities, Nkrumah's ideological radicalization and Ghana's deteriorating economic situation contributed to a progressive erosion of political trust that set the stage for the 1966 coup (US Department of State, 1965). The VRP stands as the most emblematic expression of this dual nature: an achievement of genuine developmental cooperation that simultaneously embedded Ghana in a network of asymmetric international economic relationships whose terms reflected geopolitical imperatives as much as developmental priorities (Young, 1965; Chambers, 1970).

The Ghanaian case illuminates the inherent tensions of non-alignment during the Cold War. Nkrumah's doctrine of positive neutralism sought to maximize autonomy by engaging both superpowers but generated suspicion on both sides: for the United States, neutrality appeared indistinguishable from latent Soviet alignment, while Western assistance appeared to Nkrumah as conditional and intrusive (Rainero, 1965; Noer, 1984). The coup of February 1966 confirmed the structural vulnerability of postcolonial leadership in a global order organized around superpower rivalry. The decade of 1957–1966 can be understood in retrospect as a laboratory of Cold War diplomacy in Africa, demonstrating that development, diplomacy, and ideology were inseparable dimensions of international politics in the postcolonial era (Dodoo, 2012; Landricina, 2016). The relationship between Accra and Washington ultimately reflected the structural constraints of a bipolar system in which autonomy was possible only within narrow margins.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for understanding Cold War history, postcolonial politics, and the politics of international development. They confirm that the Cold War was not only a strategic competition between superpowers but also a profound constraint on the exercise of sovereignty by newly independent states. The pattern of engagement observed in United States-Ghana relations (periodic cooperation punctuated by structural suspicion) was not unique to this bilateral relationship but reflects a systemic dynamic that shaped America's engagement with postcolonial Africa more broadly. The case also offers insights into the politics of international development assistance: the VRP illustrates that development aid, even when channeled through apparently consensual bilateral mechanisms, carries with it ideological assumptions, structural conditionalities, and geopolitical expectations that may be incompatible with the developmental autonomy of recipient states (Hart, 1980; Nkrumah, 1965). These dynamics prefigure the structural adjustment controversies of the 1980s and 1990s and the ongoing debates about conditionalities attached to contemporary development finance.

The historical record of United States-Ghana relations in the first decade of Ghanaian independence yields several policy-relevant lessons that retain their pertinence for contemporary discussions of great power engagement with Africa and the Global South. First, policymakers engaged in development partnership with African states should be alert to the ways in which Cold War-era frameworks of suspicion and containment have been carried forward into contemporary geopolitical competition, including competition with China. The

systematic misreading of Ghanaian non-alignment as crypto-Soviet orientation, a misreading that contributed to the destabilization of a democratically elected government, offers a precise historical template for the costs of ideological tunnel vision: when great power competition overrides genuine engagement with African agency, the result is neither effective diplomacy nor durable partnership, but the reproduction of structural dependency under new forms.\

Second, the terms and architecture of development partnerships must be designed to genuinely serve the developmental priorities of recipient states rather than the strategic or commercial interests of donor governments and their corporate allies. The VALCO agreement's preferential electricity rates for Kaiser Aluminum, secured at the expense of Ghanaian industrial consumers, illustrates precisely the kind of asymmetric arrangement that undermines both the developmental effectiveness and the political legitimacy of international cooperation. Contemporary infrastructure initiatives in Africa, including those operating under the framework of great power competition, risk reproducing this pattern unless their terms are subject to genuine multilateral scrutiny and recipient-state oversight.

Third, the international community should invest in strengthening multilateral frameworks that provide developing and postcolonial states with institutional recourse when bilateral development relationships become instruments of political pressure. The absence of such mechanisms in the Cold War international order left Ghana with no institutional channel through which to defend its sovereign autonomy against superpower manipulation, a structural weakness that the 1966 coup exposed with stark clarity. The partial strengthening of multilateral institutions since the Cold War era has not fully resolved this vulnerability, as the conditionality attached to contemporary development finance continues to constrain the policy autonomy of recipient states in ways that echo the dynamics examined in this study.

Fourth, and most broadly, great power engagement in Africa should be governed by a principled commitment to African agency and developmental self-determination. The historical record examined in this study demonstrates that great power competition prosecuted without regard for African agency tends ultimately to serve neither the developmental interests of African peoples nor the long-term strategic interests of the competing powers themselves: the United States' facilitation of Nkrumah's overthrow neither stabilized Ghana nor advanced American developmental objectives in Africa, but merely substituted one set of structural vulnerabilities for another. This lesson retains its pertinence in an era of renewed great power competition over African resources, markets, and political alignments.

This study has sought to demonstrate that the history of United States-Ghana relations between 1957 and 1966 is more than a bilateral case study: it is a window onto the structural dynamics of Cold War diplomacy in postcolonial Africa, illuminating the systemic constraints that shaped the exercise of sovereignty, the politics of development assistance, and the limits of non-alignment in a bipolar international order. By situating diplomatic, economic, and ideological dimensions within a unified analytical framework, and by drawing on a multi-perspectival primary source base that juxtaposes American and Ghanaian documentary records, this study advances a synthetic interpretation that moves beyond the binary of American bad faith versus postcolonial naïveté toward a more nuanced account of structural constraint and contingent agency. The fragile balances of the Nkrumah decade have much to teach a world in which the politics of development, sovereignty, and great power competition remain as entangled as they were in the age of decolonization.

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