

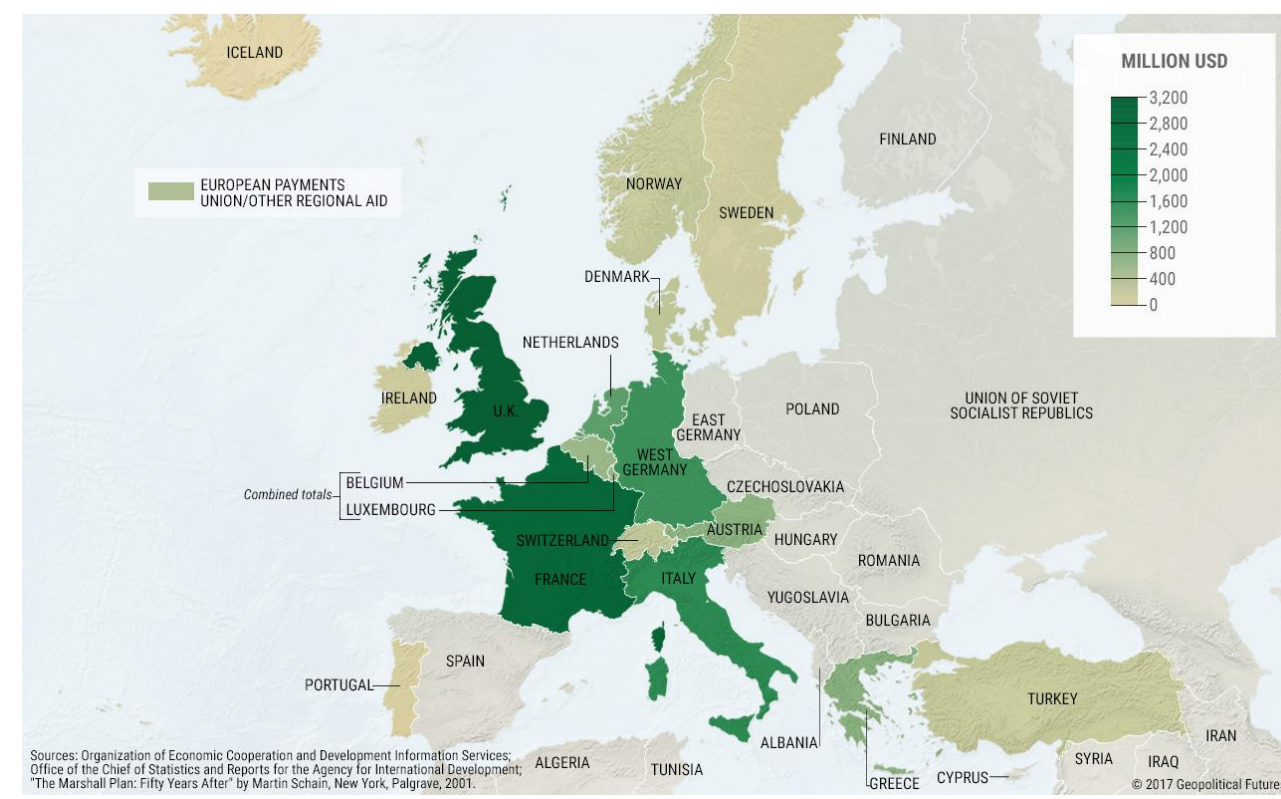
U.S. Foreign Policy: The Marshall Plan

Introduction

In 1947, during the aftermath of World War II and the devastation of European economies, George Marshall gave a speech at Harvard University, calling for the **U.S. to finance the largest economic reconstruction plan in American history**. Lasting three years and costing \$13 billion, the U.S. offered loans, materials, and technical assistance to 17 European nations, under one condition: **they would cooperate in a joint plan of democratic economic recovery**. This course asks: What conditions enabled the Marshall Plan to achieve its economic and geopolitical goals? In this course, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the Marshall Plan, the Cold War context, and the diplomatic strategy that shaped the United States' post-WWII behavior. I then **compared the Marshall Plan with two contemporary U.S. foreign aid plans**, evaluating each case study within its greater context.



Churchill, Truman, and Stalin at the Potsdam Conference (1945)

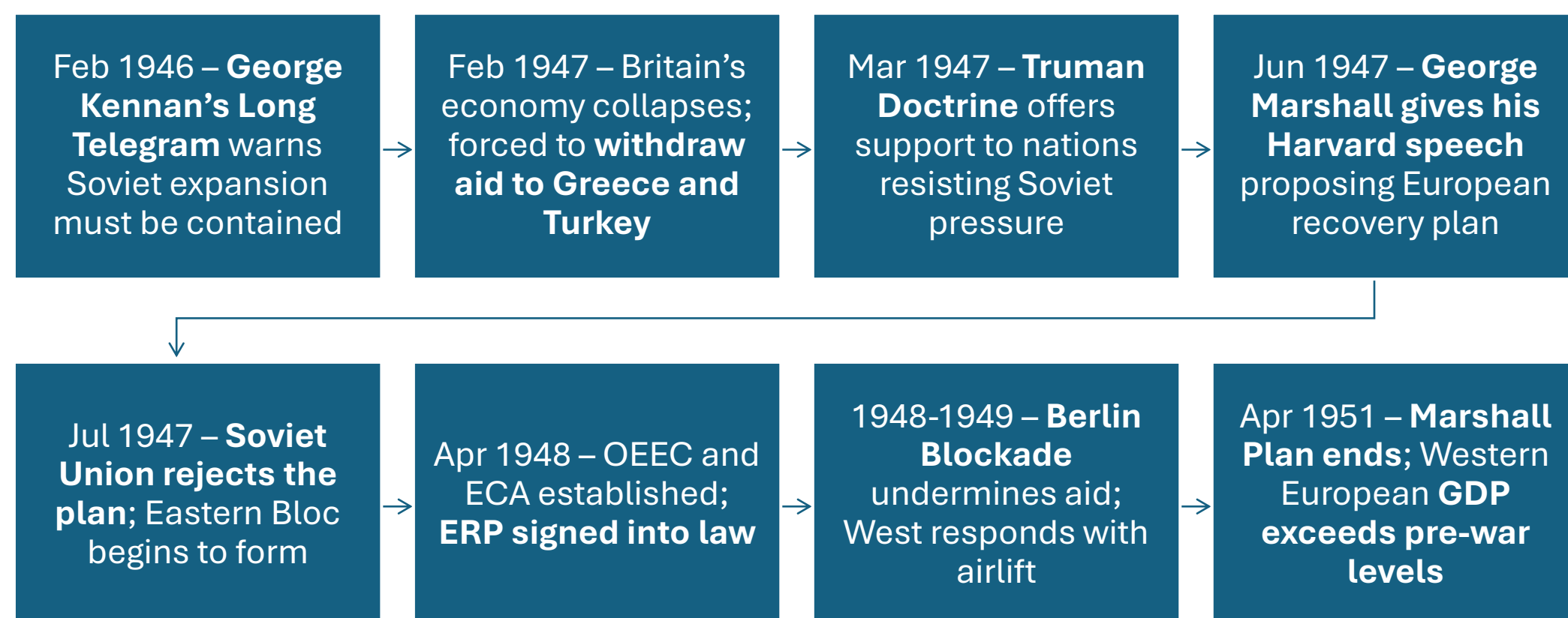


U.S. Contributions to the Marshall Plan Countries, 1948-1952

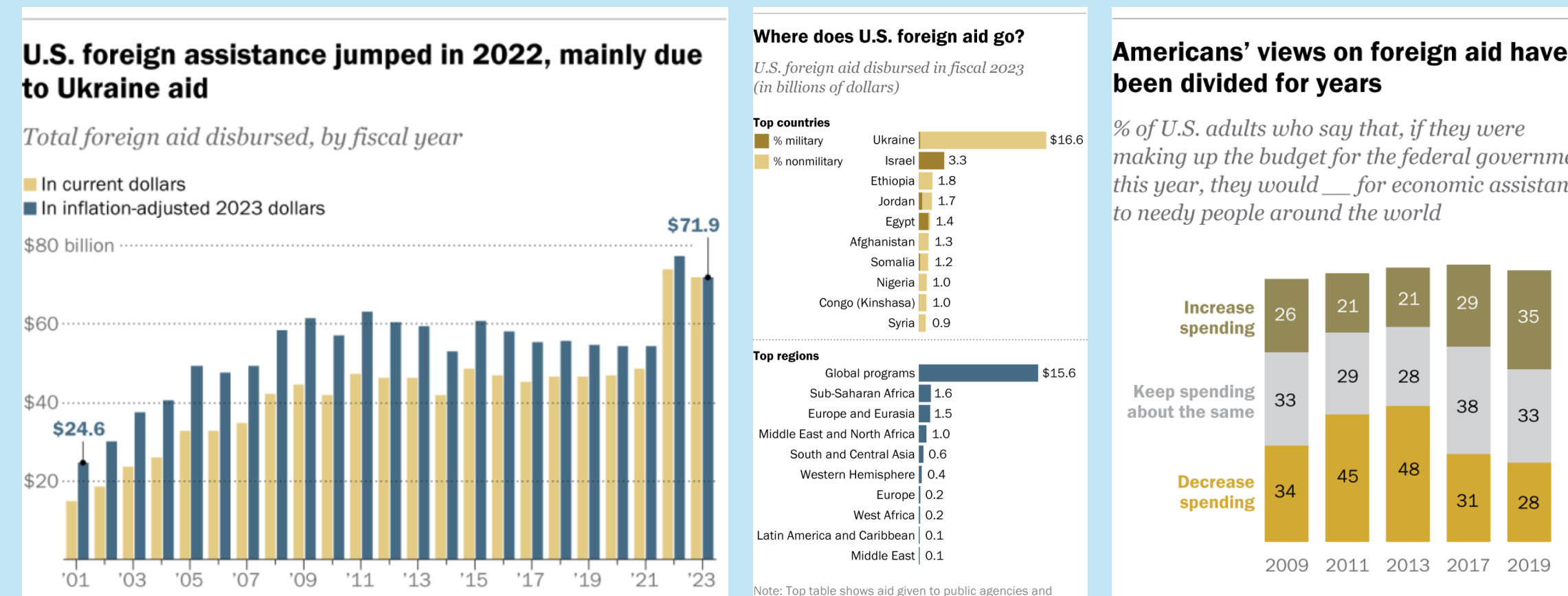
Historical Overview

The Marshall Plan was as much a diplomatic tool as it was an economic recovery plan. While the rhetoric of Truman and his cabinet to sell the ERP to the American public focused on supporting “free peoples” and countering tyranny, **it further alienated Russia, thereby forging two spheres of conflicting ideologies**. It also brought the U.S. closer to its European allies by laying the groundwork for the Economic Cooperation Administration, the precursor to the EU. The Marshall Plan is known for its contribution to the Cold War, but it also **changed U.S. domestic foreign policy from isolationist to interventionist**. Vandenberg, a Republican senator from Michigan who had formerly been an isolationist, became a key proponent of the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO.

Timeline



Modern Foreign Aid



Conditional Success

The Marshall Plan is often considered the epitome of noble and strategic foreign intervention by those who cite it as evidence of a successful foreign aid program. Yet **no post-Cold War policy resembles the Marshall Plan in scale, economic success, or long-term impact on geopolitical relations**. It was the result of unique conditions that enabled a policy against all odds. Made possible by **favorable industrialized economies and bureaucratic governments in Western Europe**, tensions with the Soviet Union that incentivized urgency, and shifting domestic policy away from isolationism and towards interventionism, **the Marshall Plan was a specific policy for a specific historical circumstance**.

Iraq

After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the country faced damaged infrastructure. **Reconstruction efforts aimed to restore essential services**, led by the Coalition Provisional Authority, but the plan faced many obstacles.

Failures:

- Weak coordination between departments
- DoD not built for civil planning
- De-Ba'athification weakened Iraqi staffing

Afghanistan

The U.S. occupied Afghanistan following 9/11 with the goal of eliminating al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Spanning 20 years and costing \$2.3 trillion, the **Taliban seized back control in 2021** following the withdrawal of troops.

Failures:

- Inability to implement strategy
- Many institutions were unstable
- Disconnected reconstruction efforts
- Constant conflict and insecurity

Ukraine

Foreign aid to Ukraine is **primarily military**, but long-term reconstruction will be necessary after the conflict ends. Ukraine faces a demographic crisis due to “brain drain”, with **6.5 million refugees having fled the country**. Reconstruction efforts should aim to increase the labor force by encouraging repatriation, **build up the country’s private sector** to incentivize foreign investment, and **tackle corruption in the Ukrainian government**. The World Bank estimates post-war aid to cost \$486 billion.

Challenges

One challenge I faced was developing a **focused argument that integrated the Marshall Plan and the chosen case studies**. This was difficult because there were many perspectives I could have taken, such as a more traditional cause-and-effect analysis of the Marshall Plan and the Cold War. However, I opted for an approach that would allow me to **compare the Marshall Plan with other examples of foreign aid that differed in nature and context**. This meant evaluating the conditions that facilitated the plan, then examining how it impacted future interventionism. I struggled with the scope of my study for the first module, feeling **overwhelmed by the variety of analyses I was engaging with**. However, the project began to take shape after I studied Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, recognizing patterns and gaining a deeper understanding of the role of aid in American foreign policy.

Takeaways

I started this study with a vastly different vision than what it became. Throughout the process, I learned how to **constantly adapt, synthesize information from various sources, and form my own arguments**. Undertaking an independent study has been a great choice for my academic career because it has allowed me to explore topics that the typical curriculum cannot offer. By constructing my own course plan and focusing on a specific topic in my area of interest, **I experienced what it would be like to conduct independent research in college**. I now have an idea of what I would like to continue researching in my next independent study and beyond. One moment of joy during this process was completing my midterm paper, as I felt I was going beyond the analysis of my texts for the first time and was prepared to expand the scope of my project.

Content Expert

Thank you to my content expert, **Dr. Alex Langer**. He is knowledgeable about U.S. diplomatic history and the **Cold War**, and he wrote his **Ph.D. dissertation on the diplomacy of American tourism in Italy**. Dr. Langer assisted me with my research by helping me frame my argument.

