

THE COLD WAR: A PYRRHIC VICTORY?

IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN A DECADE SINCE THE U.S. WON THE COLD WAR.
BUT THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF OUR ANTI-SOVIET EFFORTS CONTRIBUTED
TO MANY OF THE PROBLEMS WE FACE TODAY.

BY DAVID D. NEWSOM

At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States faces threats of terrorism, antagonism in the Muslim world and suspicions of its motives throughout much of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Many of the roots of such problems lie in U.S. actions and policies of the last half-century — in the unintended consequences of the Cold War.

Conventional wisdom holds that the United States won the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, international communism ceased to be a threat, and the United States became the “world’s only superpower.”

But accompanying that “wisdom” is an uncertainty about the global future and, in the United States, questions as to why a nation so powerful and “good” has such difficulty in wielding its worldwide influence.

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In light of current challenges to U.S. interests, could it be that the presumed success in the Cold War was a Pyrrhic victory? Did the unintended consequences of our anti-Soviet efforts contribute to problems Washington faces today?

The confrontation with the Soviet Union was fought actively, not on the plains of Europe, but in the arena of Asian and African states emerging from colonialism and in Latin American countries resisting oligarchs. The greater part of my own diplomatic career and that of many of my Foreign Service colleagues was spent in these regions. American policies pursued much that was positive in these areas in supporting economic development, human rights, conflict resolution and multilateral cooperation. Nevertheless, in regions important to American interests, the United States was more often perceived as an interventionist instrument of neo-colonialism than as a democratic liberator. This view was not helped by perceptions of U.S. involvement in regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the Indian-Pakistani tensions over Kashmir, however positive Washington’s motives. In regions where emotions are rooted in history and memories are long, the effects of such a view continue.

In the immediate post-World War II period, communist parties in Western Europe, backed by a nuclear and ambitious Soviet Union, did represent both a political and military threat. The Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe had a profound effect on public opinion in the United States. No administration could have failed to respond. Actions of the countries of the Atlantic Alliance in initiat-

ing and supporting anti-Soviet policies were justified and understandable.

The Korean War gave further impetus to the fears of communist ambitions. The leftist rhetoric of leaders of newly independent countries and Soviet aid to these nations were seen as evidence of a continuing communist advance; in the views of Americans, nationalism became fused with Soviet ambitions.

Expanding Containment

To meet this perceived threat in the 1950s, the containment philosophy of the North Atlantic Treaty and the Truman Doctrine was extended eastward into Asia and southward to Africa and Latin America. Encirclement became the objective of global policy. The encirclement was accompanied by a series of military base arrangements in the Philippines, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Morocco. Such arrangements often incurred local resentment; political leaders insisted on substantial military and economic aid to help them weather resulting political storms. In at least one country, Libya, the presence of a U.S. base was a factor in the overthrow of a government friendly to the United States. For strategic thinkers at the time, the world became a giant game of Risk — with scant appreciation of the game board on which it was being played. The results still haunt us today.

The first manifestation of this approach came during the prime ministership of Mohammad Mossadeq in Iran in 1953. Washington became increasingly concerned that Mossadeq's policies, by creating unrest in the country and challenging the power of Shah Pahlevi, were providing opportunities to the local communists and the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the Eisenhower administration cooperated with the British to restore the shah to power and bring in a new government in Tehran. Subsequent U.S. administrations built up the shah as an anti-communist surrogate in the region. Such support was of little avail when, in 1979, Islamic militants overthrew the shah and took 53 American diplomats as hostage. The earlier U.S. role in the removal of Mossadeq figured prominently in the anti-American rhetoric of the Iranian revolution, and is still recalled in Iranian politics today.

In the wake of the Korean War and the Mossadeq

experience in Iran, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles began the effort to create a series of treaties that would contain the Soviet Union in Asia. Beginning with the signing of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization in 1954, the pacts were intended to close the circle between NATO and the U.S. strategic position in Japan. "Non-alignment," popular among the newly independent nations, was not, for Secretary Dulles, an option for free nations.

In the mid-1950s, the United States faced two serious threats to its perceived interests in the region: more aggressive Soviet moves and strong Arab nationalist influences emanating from Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser. The two were intertwined. Two initiatives intended to counter both problems led to failures and further deterioration in the American position in the region. The U.S. opposition to the French, British, and Israeli attack on Suez in October 1956 only temporarily reversed this trend.

In 1955, Washington stimulated the organization of the Baghdad Pact, ultimately to include the United Kingdom, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and Iran. Secretary Dulles saw the pact not only as containing the Soviets, but as an effort to divert Arab, and especially Iraqi, attention away from Israel to the communist menace. Iraq, on the contrary, saw adherence as a possible way to gain greater American support for the Arab position. The United States did not formally join the pact, but supported it financially and militarily. The pact was attacked by Arab nationalists as an effort to continue the "colonial" domination of the period of the earlier British and French mandates, with serious consequences for U.S. policy.

In Baghdad the pact was seen as a continuation of the unpopular alliance with Britain. With the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, Iraq withdrew from the Baghdad Pact and the remaining members continued the alliance as the Central Treaty Organization. Significantly, the decision of Iraq's strongman, Prime Minister Nuri al Said, to join the pact was at least one of the factors that undermined the Hashemite monarchy and led to the revolution in Baghdad. The series of military coups that followed that event led ultimately to the rule of Saddam Hussein, with consequences clearly visible today.

Meanwhile, because of the continuing dispute with

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India over Kashmir, the adherence of Pakistan to CENTO raised suspicions in New Delhi of U.S. motives, suspicions that lasted well into the 1970s and the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi.

In 1957, seeking greater flexibility in the administration of economic and military aid to confront the perceived communist threat in the Middle East, the Eisenhower administration gained congressional approval of a Middle East resolution that promulgated what became the Eisenhower Doctrine. Two hundred million dollars in aid was offered to those countries that would commit themselves to opposing international communism. The administration basically wanted a means of circumventing strict congressional limits on the management of aid funds; it was true throughout the Cold War that, to be successful in Congress, any initiative on aid had to be wrapped in an anti-Soviet context.

A retired member of Congress, James P. Richards, was sent through the Arab Middle East to “sell” the doctrine and obtain commitments. Middle East nations, however, did not wish to “stand up and be counted,” particularly in the wake of U.S. support for the establishment of the state of Israel seven years earlier. Only two countries, Iraq and Lebanon, endorsed the doctrine. The Iraq Revolution occurred a year later. Lebanon was saved from chaos only by the intervention of U.S. Marines.

Asian Dominoes

Across Asia in Indochina, the French lost their position in Vietnam; at the Geneva Conference in 1954, the country was divided between North and South. The Kennedy administration saw the growing threat of North Vietnam to the anti-communist South as a wider threat to the nations of the region. The administration began a U.S.

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involvement that escalated eventually into a full-scale war. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam was perceived in Washington as an essential battle to prevent the fall of Asian “dominoes” to the communists. But, in much of Asia, it was viewed as an effort to perpetuate French colonialism.

One of the dominoes of concern to Washington was Indonesia. The Eisenhower administration and, especially, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, CIA chief Allen Dulles, were troubled by the policies of President Sukarno. They looked for dissident activities in the outer islands that might be supported to weaken or remove the Sukarno regime. The opportunity came in 1957 when dissident colonels in Sumatra organized a revolt and received arms from the CIA. The revolt collapsed and the CIA role was subsequently revealed, further enhancing the image of U.S. manipulation in Indonesia and the region.

Paul Gardner writes of the after-

math of this episode: “Although the U.S. denial of involvement in the PRRI/Permesta rebellion averted a situation in which the Indonesian government would have felt compelled to break diplomatic relations, it also caused Indonesians to dismiss denials of later reports of U.S. complicity in anti-Indonesian activities.”

Throughout the 1960s, Washington was obsessed with Soviet and Chinese threats to the emerging independent states of Africa. Through both covert actions and proxy wars, the U.S. opposed groups seen by Washington as pro-communist but by many Africans as pro-independence. The murder of Patrice Lumumba in 1960, an independence hero in the Congo, is still blamed on the Americans. The accession of Mobutu Sese-Seko to power in Kinshasha became a prime example of America’s willingness to support corrupt and undemocratic autocrats in the name of fighting communism.

U.S. resistance to independence for the Portuguese colonies in Africa was viewed as an effort to perpetuate colonialism. U.S. covert support for Joseph Savimbi’s UNITA movement in Angola and the long civil war that followed in the name of fighting communism devastated a significant part of Africa.

Throughout this period, the U.S. image suffered through positions taken in the United Nations General Assembly on such issues as colonialism, apartheid and Palestine. Although the UNGA positions were not binding, the posture of the U.S. was frequently seen in Africa and Asia as reflecting opposition to basic nationalistic and racial attitudes in the newly emerging nations. The Reagan administration made matters worse by seeking to tie aid levels to votes by African and Asian countries on these issues.

Washington’s reaction to per-

ceived communist threats was not confined to Asia and Africa. In 1954, alarmed by the leftist tendencies of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman of Guatemala, the U.S. assisted in the overthrow of his government. In 1973, U.S. involvement was suspected in the overthrow and death of President Salvador Allende Gossens of Chile, another left-leaning Latin American leader. The Reagan administration saw a communist threat to the U.S. in the growing leftist movements in Central America, and undertook to support anti-communist elements in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. To many in the poorer countries of the Latin American region, such activities were further evidence of “gringo” manifest destiny.

Unintended Consequences

Undoubtedly the most damaging of the unintended consequences of the Cold War came through the support for the mujahedeen, Muslim fighters resisting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan after the invasion of 1978.

The Soviet invasion set off alarms in the Carter administration that the Soviets were about to realize their dream of gaining access to the Persian Gulf. The United States saw the opportunity to make the Soviets pay a price for the invasion through providing arms and assistance, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to the resistance. Muslim fighters from Arab countries and other Islamic regions were accepted and trained for jihad against the infidel invader. Islamic militantism was mobilized to fight the Soviets, but, once the Soviets left in 1989, the militants looked for new targets. Out of that effort to train and encourage militant Muslim forces to fight the Soviets — with extensive CIA help — grew the influence of Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida

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movement, arguably one of the most serious of the unintended consequences of the Cold War period.

The Cold War fears of communist advances were replaced in the 1990s by concern over the threat of Saddam Hussein to dominate the oil-rich region of the Gulf. But a consequence of the first Persian Gulf War was the strengthening of al-Qaida, fed by resentment over the presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia.

Opposition in the Middle East region to the U.S. invasion of Iraq is undoubtedly a reflection of beliefs fostered during the Cold War that America was anti-Muslim and sought to dominate the oil-rich region for its own purposes.

In the actions taken that led to the unintended consequences of the Cold War, policy-makers were, in the main, responding to fears and attitudes in the public, the media and Congress that overwhelmed contrary views. To be sure, some prescient observers did express concerns, but they were brushed aside.

Specifically, throughout the period a constant tension existed

between a view of the world held by many top policy-makers and members of Congress and the views of many with experience in the regions involved, whether diplomats, scholars, journalists or foreign observers.

Officers in the embassy in Baghdad in 1955 raised questions about the wisdom of pressing the Iraqi government into an anti-communist pact. Those serving in Tehran in later years expressed their doubts about the stability of Iran under the shah. But these views were unwelcome to decision-makers in Washington unwilling to hear challenges to established policy.

The debate over Vietnam policy is well documented. In his recent biography of Ellsworth Bunker (*Ellsworth Bunker: Global Troubleshooter; Vietnam Hawk*, University of North Carolina Press, 2003), who served as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam from 1967 to 1973, Howard Schaffer writes: “As he settled into a steady, mutually confident relationship with [President] Thieu in the Nixon-Kissinger years, his messages presented a picture of sustained if uneven advance toward stability, security and a measure of prosperity for South Vietnam.

“Some on the embassy staff differed sharply with his assessments, especially officers in the political section but others, mostly younger officers, as well. These negative views about Vietnam’s prospects were shared by many American correspondents, with whom they regularly compared notes. This pattern, senior officials taking an optimistic view of developments, more junior ones and media representatives more skeptical, was not uncommon throughout the war.”

Foreign observers were equally skeptical. Indonesians were part of an international commission in Vietnam and traveled throughout the country. In January 1975 (four

months before the fall of Saigon), Graham Martin, the U.S. ambassador to Saigon, came to Jakarta to brief Indonesians. He painted a rosy picture of progress and denigrated U.S. critics of the war. One of the Indonesian observers later said to an American embassy officer: "We were most interested in what Ambassador Martin had to say. He must be working in a different country than we are."

Available information on the growth of al-Qaida in Afghanistan contains little evidence that doubts were raised about the possible long-term risks of assisting militant Islamic groups to oppose the Soviets. Debates during the mujahedeen period seemed to revolve mostly around doubts about collaboration with Pakistani intelligence and with various possible radical elements among the Afghan warlords. It was only after three major terrorist attacks on U.S. targets — the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam in 1998, and the *USS Cole* in 2000 — that the full extent of bin Laden's role and of the al-Qaida threat became known. But, even then, the worst consequences of the unintended results of the U.S. war against the Soviets in Afghanistan still lay ahead.

This pattern of U.S. ambassadors faithfully pursuing policies devised in the political and strategic arena of Washington in the face of contrary assessments by others has been repeated in every one of the U.S. Cold War crises in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The Road Not Taken

Should the United States, then, have been inactive in the face of threats to pro-Western, anti-communist governments beyond Europe? Would the U.S. position be better today if it had not intervened in the

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countries of the Middle East, Indonesia, Vietnam, Angola and Nicaragua? Would the Soviet Union have collapsed without the U.S. challenges in the Third World?

Certainly many of the long-range assessments that drove U.S. policy were off the mark. The dominoes did not fall in Southeast Asia. The U.S. today has friendly relations with Vietnam. Indonesia has had two consecutive directly elected presidents. The perceived threat to U.S. interests in Latin America has faded.

Information on the origins of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan suggest the action was less part of a drive to the oil-rich Persian Gulf than an effort to curb the influence of Islamic militants on Soviet Central Asia. It is tempting to wonder whether recent history, including the 9/11 attacks, would have been different if the U.S. had not supported the fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, a fight against a weakening USSR that was ultimately forced by its own weakness to withdraw from its Asian satellites.

It is difficult to predict what might have happened in Iran and Iraq. It is hard to imagine that, under a continuation of the Mossadegh government in Tehran, the U.S.

position today would be any worse. Clearly, the end result of the expenditure of U.S. lives and resources in Iraq is yet to be determined, but the American dream of a pro-American, democratic Iraq is still far from realization.

The fall of the Soviet Union demonstrated the inherent weakness of that nation and certainly raises questions about its long-range capacity to alter societies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The endless hours spent by U.S. officials seeking to counter Soviet and Chinese offers of aid to these continents seemed essential at the time, but, in retrospect seem less justified.

U.S. interventions beyond Europe during the Cold War did not create the current terrorist threat. They did create fears of Western intervention and emotions against the West in areas that had experienced colonialism and European domination in other forms.

Such fears of renewed occupation lie dormant throughout the region, subject to exploitation by demagogues and autocrats. In the Middle East, the continuing U.S. identification with the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian issue makes the exploitation possibility especially real.

The clash between Washington's perceptions of an issue, created by the inevitable interplay of politics, pressures and interests that characterize U.S. foreign policy-making, and a different reality seen by observers on the ground will never end. The results of Cold War policies cannot be reversed, but setting forth the consequences can, perhaps, lead to a better understanding of the limitations of a superpower's ability to control global events today. That understanding can also demonstrate how difficult it is, under the pressures of immediate action, to foresee the longer-term consequences of that action. ■