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THE US AND THE USSR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Over the past year, the USG has gone through a series of studies of the Communist position in Middle East. Last fall the IRG/NEA held a series of meetings on the subject. Since, there have been the Holmes study, the Rockwell paper, several intelligence estimates and numerous critiques of all. Since the debate provoked by these papers is now moving to higher levels, it seems worthwhile to isolate the main issues.

I. The nature of the Soviet threat is the starting point for the debate.

A. The Communist nations have substantially improved their position since the mid-1950's, largely by developing the instruments of contemporary statecraft--embassies, trade missions, clandestine apparatus, military relationships, economic aid programs, cultural and student exchange, propaganda missions. While they may not now be capable of outright takeover anywhere, they can influence policy decisions in some areas and are in position to capitalize on unexpected breaks.

B. Relatively, the US position has declined. This has happened partly because decolonization left a vacuum bigger than we alone wanted to fill and because neutralism has attracted the newly independent nations. But it has also happened because of Communist ability to create the impression that socialism alone is progressive, to tar us with the imperialist brush, to capitalize on our association with Israel and to saturate the political vocabulary and economic philosophy of the region with Marxist ideas. In trying to keep change as orderly as possible, we have often run afoul of the widespread movements protesting concentration of political and economic power in the hands of small ruling classes--movements which the Communists have willingly supported.

C. Apart from governmental orientation, a generation is growing up which accepts the goals and methods of socialism. We are less and less in touch with this generation. Not only do we fail to provide a standard around which it can rally. We also appear to oppose it because it aspires to an effective voice in plotting its future, while we support only narrowly based regimes that deny it that voice.

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D. In summary, if our objective is to encourage evolution of compatible nations and deny the area to Communist control, we have lost much ground and have only dim hope of avoiding further setbacks, even where we are now holding our own. Since the short-term Soviet goal is to erode Western positions and to win acceptance for Communist ideas and techniques, it is hard not to conclude that they are "winning."

E. But what "winning" means is the subject of wide-open debate. There are these, on the one hand, who see the Soviet thrust into the Middle East as a purposeful end-run after being blocked in Europe--an end-run threatening to win control of the Middle East with the explicit purpose of undoing NATO and the Atlantic Alliance. They believe we must stop this drive if the Alliance is to survive. Others say that some degree of East-West coexistence in the area is to be expected and point out the natural limits on Soviet gains--above all intense nationalism. They argue that no power will ever again enjoy the control over the Middle East enjoyed most recently by the Western imperial powers. The Middle East of the foreseeable future will be an arena where all the great powers will enjoy influence but none will dominate.

II. What we should do depends in part on how seriously we take the Soviet threat. But it also turns on the second issue--how important is the Middle East to us? How much effort and treasure should we spend to reverse this trend? Again, there seem to be two schools of thought:

A. One says that the Near East is important but not vital. On any tough priority rating of the world's main regions, perhaps only Africa ranks below it. Few have come right out and said this, but it is the only conclusion one can draw from decisions reached country by country that we cannot do more than we are already doing. Admittedly, this is a chicken-egg proposition: Have we adopted this attitude because we do not have enough aid to go around and policy-makers have consistently judged that there are higher priorities elsewhere? Or have we recognized the real priorities and allocated aid accordingly? Whichever the case, the argument goes like this:

1. US strategic interests there are dwindling, at least in terms of what the Near East contributes to our global capability to counter Soviet expansion. We no longer need air or missile bases on the Soviet perimeter. Overflight rights and the Suez Canal are convenient, but there are substitutes. The US does not depend on Mid-Eastern oil, though it is more nearly vital for our NATO allies. Intelligence facilities are important, but new technology will soon make them less so.

2. Of course, we are not prepared to write the Near East off. This region is the "cradle of our civilization," the site of substantial private American investment, the source of significant balance of payments income, the main source of oil for our allies, and the spiritual home of world Jewry. Besides, we are committed by past policy to prevent the spread of Communism there, and the US is not in a position to write off any major region.

3. However, the fact that we could survive without it gives us more maneuverability than we have, say, in Latin America. We can take bigger risks there and save our money for places where we can't afford to gamble. For instance, in the Near East:

--We can gamble that nationalism will win out over Communism--that it will reject Moscow's domination and become something we can live with. If we lose, a Cuba-type Syria, though troublesome, wouldn't touch vital interests or cause the same domestic furor as a Communist Dominican Republic.

--We can gamble that nationalism will undermine any coalition of local forces dangerous to our interests. The UAC as a serious threat to Israel disintegrated even before Israel's onslaught. A union of Syria, Iraq and the UAR seems unlikely. Even Nasser's conquest of Yemen foundered on local unwillingness to accept the Egyptian yoke. If an unlikely union succeeds somewhere, we can probably live with it as we did with the Syrian-Egyptian union.

--We can gamble that political instability will thwart the Communists just as it has the West. Conditions ranging from the tribalism of South Arabia, Yemen and the Gulf to the disorganization of semi-developed Syria will go through many stages before settling down. The intervening lurches are just as likely to unseat a pro-Communist as a neutralist or pro-Western regime. We can risk Communist maneuvering more readily there than in, say, the Dominican Republic.

--We can gamble that "Arab socialism" will remain Arab enough not to become a carbon of the Soviet model. We don't have an immediate stake in the kinds of political or economic systems that evolve. We don't have the broad commitment we have in the Alliance for Progress to develop a region of people living together on a comparable scale without jealousy and with compatible political values. We don't even have the same objective we have in India where we seek to demonstrate that an Asian variety of democracy can meet the problems of a huge underdeveloped nation.

--We can even gamble that slowly paced economic development will not work to our disadvantage. In fact, uneven growth and serious economic difficulty in the more radical states may even help us. Socialist ideas applied there have worked so poorly that Egypt, Iraq and Syria probably will have to backtrack to some degree. The conservative regimes are moving effectively enough for the moment to keep pace with the economic and social aspirations of their people. Without much help from us, they have a good chance of eventually turning in a better performance.

--We can gamble that international pressures and peacekeeping machinery will halt any serious military confrontation before introduction of US troops would be necessary. This is not true of conquest in a backwater like Yemen but recent experience suggests that it probably would be true of any Saudi-UAR or Arab-Israeli clash. Experience also suggests that the USSR doesn't want a major showdown any more than we.

B. The other answer is that the Middle East--if admittedly not "vital"--is crucial to the US precisely because it is so important to both Western Europe and to the USSR.

1. The direction of Communist resources, diplomacy and propaganda over the past decade all prove its importance for the USSR. The Soviet Union has sent about 38% of its total economic aid (including Turkey and Iran) and 48% of its military aid there since 1954. Today about 38% of its technicians are there, and 35% of the foreign technical trainees in the USSR come from there. It is second in Soviet attention only to Eastern Europe, and only India--another proximate area of traditional Russian concern--is in the same league.

2. It is shortsighted to ignore the fact that Western Europe is becoming increasingly dependent on Middle East oil. Experience during the current crisis will be instructive on the costs--to Arabs and Europeans both--of various oil embargoes and transport problems caused by closing the Suez Canal. But despite apparent confirmation of Arab unwillingness to cut off all oil revenues for political purposes, no one can dismiss out of hand such facts as these: OECD Europe will inevitably become more dependent on energy imports over the next 15 years. The Middle East and Africa will be the main sources, and the Middle East especially will be the reservoir which the world must tap to make up the difference between supply and demand after all other suppliers are producing near capacity. Already nearly 70% of Western Europe's oil comes from the Middle East.

3. US strategy has been to blunt the Communist thrust wherever it is most pointed--after 1945 with the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine, in 1950 in Korea, in 1958 with the Eisenhower Doctrine and today in South Vietnam. We have made less spectacular moves in Iran and Turkey, and it is hard to imagine that any American administration could easily rationalize not reacting to Communist takeover in Syria, the UAR or any other Mid-Eastern state. We have ignored the Soviet thrust into the Middle East only because it has been so gradual.

4. We have a moral commitment to insure Israel's existence. Say what we like about our other interests in the area, pressure for US intervention would be irresistible if Israel were about to go under. Therefore, we need a reasonable base to operate from in a contingency. Foresight requires that we not let the USSR foreclose all such bases to us.

5. Since we can see the red handwriting on the wall in the Middle East, it does not make sense to gamble that nationalism and genuine non-alignment will win out. Therefore, we ought to be doing more to block the Soviet thrust.

C. These two approaches to the Middle East don't represent mutually exclusive extremes. All of us have elements of both in our thinking. However, it is useful to define them because each of us tends to lean toward one or the other. How far we lean is to some extent determined by how serious the threat of actual Soviet control seems at any given time.

III. Where does this debate come out? In policy papers and in debate, much of the USG worries its way closer to the second view and is uneasy that we are not doing more. But in analysis not related to policy and in what we actually do, the USG seems to accept the more detached view and seems willing to gamble. There are several reasons for this:

A. This position was supported by the intelligence community's judgment in 1965: "We believe that the forces of nationalism will remain strong, and that nationalist leaders will continue, by and large successfully, to play off East against West." At that time, the community did hedge its bets by pointing to two situations that could give the Communists a considerable victory: (1) the appearance of a Castro who decided to take his country into the Communist orbit; or (2) the evolution of feeling in the Arab world that the West, and especially the US, inevitably opposes its desire for independence and progress (SNIE 10-2-65). Either of these possibilities is real enough to make anyone uncomfortable about taking too many long shots, but the most recent estimate (NIE 11-6-67) reaffirms the judgment that while the USSR "will stimulate and assist anti-Western nationalist forces which would be present in any case, generally they do not control these forces and have little prospect of doing so."

B. Limitations on our own resources make it unlikely that we will have more money to spend here unless we reverse present trends in legislation and appropriations. We seem resigned to tight Congressional purse strings, and it is hard to see the Administration broadening commitments here while we're so deeply involved in Vietnam. Moreover, as a matter of principle it seems unwise to spend our scarce money in oil-rich countries when teaching them to spend their own effectively will produce greater progress in the long run.

C. Conditions and interests elsewhere around the globe have forced us to give other regions higher priority. For instance, during the UK defense review, we weighed the relative importance we attach to having the British maintain a position East of Suez. A consensus emerged something like this: The two areas where British presence is most important are NATO Europe and Singapore-Malaysia. Over the long run, Western

Europe is the prime area of strategic concern, but during our involvement in Vietnam, it is more harmful to us for the US to cut back in Asia than in Europe. We regard the Near East, particularly the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf area, as having third priority.

D. The mood in much of the Near East itself makes it questionable whether we could do much more. Even before the June war we were severely circumscribed in Syria, just about out of steam in the UAR, all but expelled from Yemen. Possibilities in Iraq were limited, and South Arabia was a question mark. In the aftermath of the war we are doubly hobbled by our association with Israel and by the immobility which results from our Congressional tactics. Before the war we were trying to decide whether to choose sides openly with the moderates or to go on trying to "avoid polarization." The war has made part of that choice for us.

E. In sum, a policy of limited engagement may be the most realistic response to limitations on all fronts. But in all honesty it is hard to know whether this is a make-do-with-what-we-have effort or what we really feel to be the best possible US posture in the Near East.

IV. Where do we go from here?

A. The possible. Given the domestic lack of support for aid, we're not likely to mount a Marshall Plan or an Alliance for Progress in the Middle East. Nor--some would argue--should we, since neither our interest nor the degree of Soviet control likely is great enough to justify such an effort. Besides, the tools of the 1950's--large-scale military aid, pacts like CENTO, supporting assistance--are clearly tools of the past, which will not be reliable building blocks for policy in the 1970's. NATO in its current form may even fall into that category.

B. The desirable. On the other hand, no one can argue credibly that we should withdraw from the contest in the Middle East. Our interests--even if not vital--are important. And besides, no Administration could pay the domestic political price of abandoning a major region of the world to give the Communists free run.

C. Therefore, it becomes important to look ahead to the kind of Middle East we will have to work in during the early 1970's and to concentrate on developing now the tools that will be usable then. We want to remember that economic aid as one of the highly successful tools of the past 20 years was virtually an American invention. One of the most hard-headed tributes to its success was the Soviets' decision to copy it. While they may be ahead of us in using aid (especially military) as a device for enhancing their political influence, they are still years behind in knowing how to use economic aid to modernize a nation and to produce real progress. It should not be beyond us to be the first to come up with the tools needed for the 1970's.

D. What this means is that any proposal that concentrates on the tools and concepts developed in the 1950's--keeping NATO from being "outflanked," viewing CENTO as important for its "blocking position," relying on large-scale supporting assistance--is more likely to offer a transitional action program for the next year or two than a prescription for policy in the 1970's. There is no question that for the next several years we must go on dealing with the tools, institutions and concepts now at hand--because we have nothing better. For instance, the best justification that we can think of for not letting CENTO die a natural death is that it may preserve a useful web of relationships until something better is ready to take its place.

E. But how do we find that "something better"? Perhaps the most important thing we can do at this stage of our debate is to pose some of the questions that need to be answered as a guide to further work--both in the planners' shops and in the week-to-week grind of decision-making:

1. US resources. Is it realistic to assume that, when Vietnam costs decline, we can hope to shift substantial amounts from the savings there into foreign aid? If we can, then are we justified in thinking of significant new aid programs to support our policy in the Middle East? If we can't, are there other resources we can tap?

2. Western European and Japanese resources. If we can't bear the whole aid burden, can we rely increasingly on the other industrialized nations to share the load? If so, will the present consortium approach continue to be the best method for marshaling those resources? If we can't count on these sources to do the job, what other resource is there?

3. Regional resources. In the Middle East, can we expect to turn oil wealth increasingly to national and regional development? If so, what institutions and political concepts will be needed? Are aid funds from the industrial world likely to be so inadequate as to make it imperative that we give top priority to encouraging these regional institutions?

4. Post-aid presence. If US aid is likely to dwindle in most Mid-Eastern countries, what kind of political presence and influence can we hope for? In Western Europe and Japan, strong commercial and security ties followed economic restoration. To what extent can we look to either to tie the Middle East to us in the 1970's? If commercial ties were to be a main pillar of our policy then, what more should we be doing now to insure that technical, professional, financial and commercial relationships become so strong that they could be broken only at great loss? Should cultural and technical exchange increase sharply as other aid declines? Do we need a new agency to handle this transition from aid to commerce?

5. Private US investors. If we are likely to be relying heavily on private enterprise to carry the flag, what kinds of revised financial relationships are possible that might pre-empt nationalistic pressures for nationalization, which many consider inevitable?

6. Military aid. If arms aid is likely to diminish too, is it imperative that we push harder than ever toward arms limitation? If this is unrealistic, can we develop new institutions which the Congress will accept for preventing the USSR from gaining the upper hand by meeting legitimate defense needs? In the absence of arms aid, should advisory and training relationships be strengthened to help fill the gap? With the NPT now

tabled, does this offer the best opportunity we may have for some time to win tacit Soviet cooperation on arms limitation--as the price for an Israeli signature?

7. Military ties. If organizations like CENTO are creatures of the past, shall we rely more heavily on bilateral commitments, or are they impossible in the likely post-Vietnam US political atmosphere? If so, what basis for a relationship can there be? Can the promise of US support for a UN aggression-halting capacity be enough? If so, should we redouble our efforts for UN peacekeeping, despite its recent setback in the Sinai?

8. Middle East's evolving relationship with Europe and the USSR. The "thaw" in US-Soviet relations has affected political relationships in the Middle East as well as in Eastern Europe. As old bloc structures become less rigid, will the new political and economic relationships--rather than producing new Soviet penetration--be so diverse as to cast the threat of Soviet domination and control in a somewhat less glaring light? Five Mid-Eastern and North African countries (six if we include Greece) have applied for association with the European Common Market. Should we concentrate our European consultations on future economic relationships with the Middle East rather than on NATO (except as a handy place to provoke interest)? How will discussions on the future of NATO affect the Middle East?

9. Political development. Is monarchy a fading institution, or can the monarchies by good economic performance save themselves? Should we be pressing harder, delicate as the subject may be, for these regimes to broaden their bases? Can we use our involvement in economic development to promote more representative political institutions--at least representative enough to withstand foreseeable stresses?

10. Arab unity. Will this ideal remain so strong that we will have to defer to it? Or are the Arabs themselves--like Hussein on his recent trip--becoming convinced that it's a pipedream? If so, should we make it a conscious objective to encourage pluralism and diversity? In the long run will we be so much better off to have several centers of influence that it's worth the risks of bucking "Arab unity?" Are natural sub-regional and functional groupings pragmatically attractive enough to draw nations away from the ideal?

F. In summary, even these questions are only the most obvious that pop from our minds today. Deeper thought about the future would surface more. The answers--tentative as they must be--would not produce a dramatic new policy, but they might give us a sense of where we're going. We have come as far as the President's "five principles of peace." Perhaps the next step is to formulate the principles for building peace and progress beyond the war's aftermath. After our coming discussions, I would hope that we might formulate terms of reference for further study along these lines. The debate over the past year has been useful; I'd hate to see us fail to capitalize on it.

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