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COMMITMENTS, CAPABILITIES, AND US SECURITY POLICIES IN THE 1980'S

by

J. DAVID SINGER

The Carter Administration has passed the halfway mark, and domestic and foreign criticism of global policies has become increasingly strident. When the confusion and partisan rhetoric is cleared away, we find that the debate is over two familiar questions. The first of these focuses on the range and type of US involvement in global affairs, and the second concerns the size and complexion of the military forces appropriate to that level of involvement.

These are by no means new problems. Not only do they lie at the heart of *every* nation's foreign policy dilemma, but the failure to bring them into harmony has led many a people to grief time and again over the centuries. For Americans, the general pattern since Washington's day has been to keep both commitments and capabilities at a fairly low level, although there have been more deviations from that practice than we like to admit. With World War II and its aftermath, however, the incentives were toward increased commitments and a more or less commensurate increase in military capabilities.

Despite some successes, the postwar formula has been basically flawed. Without implying American omnipotence, it was *not* inevitable that the US find itself today in so inhospitable a global environment. Not only is American physical security in greater jeopardy today than at any time since the British seized and laid waste to Washington in 1814, but it is also menaced by continuing uncertainty of access to raw materials abroad. And to say that American popularity around the world (or even in the Western Hemisphere) has been lower in recent years than at almost any point in our history is to put it mildly.

These losses in security, influence, and prestige can hardly be attributed to the attractiveness or capabilities of the adversaries, most of whom have shown themselves equally inept and more brutal. Rather, I would suggest that the explanation lies more in our tendency to support corrupt and/or reactionary regimes, our failure to respond to legitimate Third World aspirations, our periodic adventures in counterinsurgency, our clumsy efforts to dominate the United Nations, our rigidity on arms control and disarmament, and our obsession with military hardware. Nor have our failures at home in race relations, full employment, elite morality, and public health gone unnoticed abroad. In sum, we have followed the policies of the conventional wisdom, the crisis managers, the hard-nosed strategists, and the commercial interests, with results quite different from those we were promised. It may, thus, be timely to reexamine our behavior vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

Before examining the substance of our behavior, a brief digression regarding

procedure and method might not be amiss. Very simply, the basic issue is whether we will continue to rely on prescientific methods for observing, evaluating, and forecasting the state of the global system and the behavior of the actors that comprise the system. Without suggesting that the more rigorous methods have produced some radical breakthroughs on this front, there is little doubt that considerable progress has been made. Perhaps most important so far is the extent to which experienced intuition can now be aided by quantitative measurement in order to ascertain specific conditions and events and then compare them to earlier or related conditions and events. Researchers can now measure, with some degree of confidence, the changing composition of diplomatic or trade blocs, the bipolarity of the global system, and the stability of alliance configurations, for example.

Shifting from the links that bond nations to the rank positions that separate them, we can measure not only such obvious factors as gross national product, but also the military-industrial potential, diplomatic importance, or upward mobility of nations, with a fair amount of accuracy. Even the types of actions that nations employ have become increasingly amenable to systematic observation and measurement. Despite the rudimentary state of these measurement techniques, they permit the sort of explicit comparisons that should markedly improve our ability to monitor conditions, compare behaviors, and spot trends. Instead of the policymaker's seat-of-the-pants assertion that the Vietnam situation of 1961 was "just like" the Munich situation of 1939, we might readily spell out explicitly how similar or different such situations are in terms of the 10 or 20 or more characteristics that seem most germane for making the comparison.

But quantitative measurement can do more than provide accurate description in the global environment. It can also lead to the discovery of patterns and regularities upon which foreign policy predictions might be based. That is, if we can discover the frequency with which certain policies in certain contexts have produced the desirable and the undesirable outcomes over the past 30 years, we have some guidance as to which policies are more likely to work in similar contexts in the future. If, for example, we had measured and observed the more critical conditions and behaviors found in all territorial disputes since 1900, as well as the outcomes, we would have some grounds for choosing (or urging others to choose) one kind of strategy and avoiding others. Similarly, certain influence techniques usually work vis-à-vis certain types of regimes in certain contexts, and others do not. Systematic observation and measurement of those techniques, contexts, and outcomes would give us a better knowledge base than we now have for selecting techniques and predicting their results.

The greater use of scientific method in the formulation and execution of foreign and defense policy is, of course, no guarantee of success. The basic research is only now beginning to accumulate, and even as the resulting knowledge increases in quality and in quantity, its application will not be a simple matter. But a major impetus to such research would be some sign that the administration includes people who can distinguish between anecdotal argument and reproducible evidence and who recognize the ways in which such evidence could be prudently included in the decisional mix.

A POLICY FOR THE 80's

Keeping the above comments in mind, let me return now to those policy failures mentioned earlier and examine some possible responses. To oversimplify somewhat, there are four options, if changes are called for. The first is essentially the *neoisolationist* option, urging a reduction in both capabilities and commitments. The second might be termed the *fortress America* option, with an increase in capabilities but a reduction in commitments. The third is the conventional *hawkish* option, with increases in both our capabilities and our commitments. Finally, there is the apparently paradoxical alternative of reducing capabilities while increasing commitments;

this might be labelled the *competitive coexistence and waging peace* option. Let me explore that option here, if only in the briefest terms.

Looking first at the isolationist-interventionist issue, all too many of those who turned against US involvement in the Vietnam War are now calling for a major reduction of US commitments and involvements all over the world. Some of the "neoisolationists" draw the line along the Oder and Neisse rivers, and urge a cutback of all commitments outside of Western Europe. The issue, it seems to me, is not one of geography, but of strategy. It is not one of deciding where to station military forces, but of what kinds of efforts and investments to make everywhere. It seems to me imperative that the US play an even more interventionist role in the future than in the past and that such interventionist policies be pursued in virtually every corner of the globe.

Now some will say that this ignores the "lesson of Vietnam," and that the US should stop trying to show the rest of the world how to live. While agreeing that a touch of humility might be useful, I would draw from the Southeast Asian disaster a different lesson: Do not try to impose anti-Communist regimes by force, subversion, or chicanery. The issue is not whether to intervene in the domestic affairs of others, but to what end and *via what means*. To engage in the same brutalities as the "revolutionaries," when more peaceful means might well be more successful, is to fail morally and pragmatically. And to join in a conspiracy with the forces of reaction, against the forces for change, is hardly the way to ride the tide of history. Had the US taken a more sophisticated view of "international Communism," understood its inherent divisions, and dealt in a businesslike fashion with the problems of China, Indochina, and Europe, for example, the world might look quite different today.

In sum, our intervention must take a radically different form than is traditionally associated with the term. It should be nonmilitary and it should be nonclandestine, directly and openly seeking to encourage liberal and democratic tendencies everywhere. The legal doctrine of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of other nations has always been a sham, and whether intended or not, the decisions and events that occur in any nation are bound to impinge on people in neighboring nations. Moreover, the stronger have consistently ignored the boundaries and sovereignties of the weaker in pursuit of various national, corporate, or factional interests.

All that is proposed here is that we recognize the considerable interdependence of today's world, as well as the fact that the political and economic organization of the global system is much "up for grabs." Thus, if one believes that the American way—however flawed—offers a better life for most of the world's people than do the other brands now on the market, one has an obligation to advocate and encourage its spread. But rather than engage in evasive legalisms, or carry on intervention by subterfuge, we might well

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come right out and explain—carefully and precisely—what we are doing and why. The administration's efforts on behalf of Soviet and other dissidents exemplify just what I have in mind. The investment and the costs of failure are relatively modest; the likelihood of eventual success is quite good; and the more we focus on civil liberties elsewhere, the more we must also attend to them at home.

However, it is essential that the struggle not be for mastery by one nation or interest group, but for the acceptance of certain ways of human governance. And, if Americans are pushing for the way of human rights, the sacredness of life, and democratic openness, we had better not corrupt those ends with foul means. Reference is, of course, to the use of subversion and all sorts of clandestine dirty tricks against the "enemies of our friends." Reference is, even more importantly, to the export of militarism in the form of weapons, personnel, and advice for our "friends" abroad. The quotation marks are to emphasize that the coddling and the support of those factions that thrive on clandestine strategies and militaristic solutions are just as counterproductive as engaging in these activities directly.

As to the argument that our "enemies" give us no choice and require us to play their sordid game, let me merely ask: Since when does the chastened, but still dominant, competitor permit the challengers to make up the rules of the game? On the openness question, if American influence attempts were carried out in broad daylight, our opponents might easily be smoked out into the open also. On the weapons and personnel question, it might well be—despite a balance-of-payment problem abroad and hawkish factions at home—that the Soviets (and the Czechs and the Chinese and the French) could welcome some sort of "sanity code." While they may be as energetic as the Americans in pushing their people and their policies around the world, they are no more eager than we for a proxy war that could easily embroil us all.

THE MILITARY ROLE

Turning to the capabilities side of the equation, if we recognize three basic principles, the choices become less painful. First, there is not now, and never has been, a highly reliable military deterrent. No matter how overwhelming the quantity and ingenious the mix, military deterrents only deter in some situations for some length of time. Military force, then, must be viewed as a necessary, but temporary, expensive, and dangerous source of national security. Second, and not quite as obvious, is the fact that military capabilities cannot be a substitute for diplomatic competence, economic rationality, and strategic prudence. Unlike the famous soap product, force does not do everything. It often can serve as the short-run deterrent to direct assault noted above, but to ask a given deployment of missiles and other strategic weapons to inhibit a wide range of Soviet or other behaviors in all parts of the world is to ask too much.

A third and even less obvious principle is that we should not expect our strategic forces to play both a *deter*-the-war and a *win*-the-war role at the same time. The objectives are quite different, the requirements are quite different, and the trade-offs between them are inevitable. Thus, if we succumb to the temptations associated with a damage-limiting-target doctrine, we may well reduce the deterrent effects and increase the provocative ones, and if we go to active or passive defenses, the same danger arises. In sum, it is essential to decide on the major mission of our strategic forces and then decide on the minimum numbers and types of weapons necessary for that purpose. Otherwise, there will be the endless demands for one new weapon system after another, each to cope with yet another problem or opportunity, real or imagined. The result will not only be a further erosion of our strategic deterrent, but a further heating up of the arms race that our confused strategic doctrine of the past 15 years has already helped to lay upon the world.

Whether we talk of changes in our overseas commitments or of changes in our forces, we cannot avoid the problem of Soviet (and to a lesser extent, Chinese) response. There is

certainly no guarantee that other nations will accept these rules of the game. But it is fairly clear that if *we* continue to rely so heavily on strategic preponderance, military intervention, clandestine subversion, and the rest, they will also be tempted to stop at nothing. The fact that the US enjoys a clear edge on virtually every dimension of the rivalry, from nuclear warheads through industrial productivity to diplomatic competence, makes it much less risky for us to take the initiative than to follow the old "game plan." And if, as I suggest, this combination of a strategy of open, nonmilitary interventionism and a restraint in weapons acquisition and deployment—but *not* in research and development—begins to pay off for our side, the adversaries will be under strong pressure to follow suit.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Finally, there is the problem of reorganizing the international system. As long as the global community tries to stumble along without any effective government, the stronger powers will continue to bully and dominate, and the weaker ones will continue to be manipulated, exploited, and "liberated" over and over. Further, the major powers will be able to claim that "necessity" dictates their chauvinistic and shortsighted policies and that they have "no choice" but to escalate the arms race, waste precious lives and resources, subvert others, resist economic development and political freedom, and bring the peoples to the brink of war again and again.

If the major powers were to move toward anything like serious arms reduction, we would probably require a fairly potent global agency for inspection, supervision, and enforcement of the arms reduction schedule. And, conversely, if they showed any signs of serious commitment to stronger supranational organization, and actually began to construct such institutions, the chances for a reversal in the arms race would certainly improve. That is, increases in global governance and decreases in national force levels will probably have to proceed concurrently, but the question is how to initiate the process. The problem is a complex one, and its solution will require not only an act of will on the part of the two superpowers, and a strong impetus from other governments, but some historical opportunities as well.

In this brief article, many issues have been ignored, and some have been oversimplified, but the general theme should be clear. This is hardly the time for the US to retreat into one form or another of isolationism, nor is it the time to resume the briefly interrupted strategies of the cold war, despite occasional provocation from domestic as well as foreign sources. Rather, it is time to move—prudently but vigorously—toward a more fully integrated and constructive set of military, diplomatic, and economic policies. Central to that task is the transformation of the global system, and if we and our allies begin to act on that awareness, we may yet succeed in creating a global habitat that is safe for the human race.

NOTE

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