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Regional Conflicts: New Thinking, Old Policy

PAUL WOLFOWITZ

Regional conflicts remain one of the most important issues on the superpower agenda, a fact reinforced by President Bush in his discussions with Chairman Gorbachev at Malta in December of last year. Working toward solutions to regional problems of all types—political, economic, environmental, and military—will be critical to stability and the reduction of tension worldwide. This subject occupies as important a place on the East-West agenda as nuclear arms control. Indeed, the two subjects are intimately connected. Finding solutions to regional conflicts is an essential part of the all-important task of preventing nuclear war. The disturbing frequency with which small wars have become big wars in the past gives caution to us all. As President Bush has said:

The threats to peace that nations face may today be changing, but they've not vanished. In fact, in a number of regions around the world, a dangerous combination is now emerging—regimes armed with old and unappeasable animosities—and modern weapons of mass destruction. This development will raise the stakes whenever war breaks out. Regional conflict may well threaten world peace as never before.¹

This does not mean that regional conflicts should be settled by the dictate of the superpowers, nor is it to deny that the people with the greatest stake in the settlement of regional conflicts are the participants themselves. Indeed, solutions to regional conflicts will be viable only when they reflect the will and desires of the people who must live with those solutions.

But the existence of nuclear weapons makes it important for the whole world, and particularly for the United States and the Soviet Union, to work to prevent those small conflicts that can contain the seeds of larger ones. It is useful to recall in this connection that regional conflicts played a great

part in the development of the Cold War and, more recently, in the demise of detente and the downturn in our relationship in the mid-1970s. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor, noted, SALT II was buried in the sands of the Ogaden.² Whether it happened there or in the mountains of Afghanistan, in either case the basic point is the same: even more than the massive buildup of Soviet military power under Brezhnev, it was the use of that military power directly in Afghanistan and indirectly in support of military interventions by Soviet allies in Angola, Ethiopia, Cambodia, El Salvador, and elsewhere that spelled the end of detente. To put US-Soviet relations on a more stable long-term basis, we need to find solutions to those problems and prevent new ones from developing.

We have seen dramatic progress in arms control between the super-powers and in human rights in the Soviet Union. We are hopeful—as are the Soviet people—that *perestroika* and *glasnost* will succeed in the long term. In the area of Soviet policy toward regional conflicts, there have also been some dramatic positive developments. However, I would be less than frank if I said that the United States government is satisfied with the situation it finds today in the Third World.

It is true that the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, as well as Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and Cubans from Angola, offers real promise of a more cooperative approach to these problems. Moreover, we have seen much evidence of progressive “new thinking” on the issue of regional conflicts. Key Soviet officials are repudiating past adventures—like the invasion of Afghanistan—and raising serious questions about Soviet interests in the Third World and the utility of military power there. Other Soviet authors have contrasted their own social progress at home with the repressive policies being followed by some of their friends who proclaim a socialist orientation.

However, amidst all the new thinking in the Soviet Union, there's a lot of old policy on regional conflicts. Some of the same areas that were problems in the 1970s—Afghanistan in particular—remain significant sore points today. The Soviet Union and its allies continue to supply sophisticated military equipment in large quantities to countries like North Korea, Nicaragua, and Libya, which threaten their neighbors and support international terrorism.

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White House Photo by David Valdez

The importance of regional issues was reinforced during the Malta Summit. Presidents Bush and Gorbachev are shown here in the conference room of the Soviet passenger liner *Maxim Gorky*, on 2 December 1989, along with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and US Secretary of State James A. Baker III.

In Afghanistan, Soviet military aid is pouring in to the Najibullah regime at the rate of more than \$250 million per month, dwarfing all the assistance received by the mujaheddin from all sources. New weapon systems—like the powerful SCUD missile—have been transferred to that regime in the largest airlift of arms and materiel in Soviet history. The whole world, including the United States, applauds Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's condemnation of the war and the secrecy of the decisionmaking process that brought it about; yet, at the same time, the details of this massive ongoing Soviet military assistance to Afghanistan remain unpublicized in the USSR. While the Foreign Minister criticizes the invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet military aid furthers the same objective of imposing an unwanted regime on the people of that country.

In Nicaragua, while we have been assured that direct Soviet military aid has stopped, East bloc and Cuban military aid continues at an annual rate of half a billion dollars per year, even though the United States has long since ceased its much smaller military aid to the resistance forces. In all, since 1980, Soviet bloc military aid to Nicaragua has totaled more than \$3 billion, permitting that country to become the most thoroughly militarized country in Central America.

While the military capability of the resistance is receding, Nicaragua maintains a military force much larger than the armies of all of the Central American democracies combined. Nicaragua continues its support for insurgents

in Honduras and El Salvador despite Daniel Ortega's promise to stop shipping arms to the FMLN. For example, on 18 October of last year, Honduran authorities captured a truckload of assault rifles, grenades, and explosives from Nicaragua that were destined for the Salvadoran guerrillas. President Ortega announced in early November that he was suspending the cease-fire, despite restraint by the United States and by Nicaragua's neighbors. In sum, the backing that Soviet bloc military assistance provides for Nicaraguan policy remains a serious impediment to peace and the just resolution of conflicts in the Western Hemisphere.

North Korea provides a less publicized but perhaps even more dangerous situation. North Korea has repeatedly demonstrated a flagrant disregard for commonly accepted norms of international behavior, while Soviet arms transfers continue to increase its considerable military capabilities. Recent arms deliveries have included advanced fighter aircraft and advanced surface-to-air missiles and radars. The range of these aircraft and missiles extends well south of Seoul, threatening both civilian airliners and US reconnaissance flights that monitor North Korean compliance with the armistice agreement signed 36 years ago. Soviet deliveries of less-sophisticated military equipment such as artillery, trucks, and armored personnel carriers over the last two decades have helped maintain North Korea's significant military advantage over the South and contributed to the continued tension on the peninsula. There are disturbing signs that North Korea may be in the process of developing a nuclear weapon capability, raising even more questions about the purpose of Soviet military support to this irresponsible government.

This pattern of behavior raises some fundamental questions about the extent to which "new thinking" truly guides the Soviet approach to regional conflicts. Does the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and other countries reflect Soviet recognition that the peoples of these countries are entitled to governments of their own choosing? Or does it simply reflect a decision to pursue the same ends by different, less costly, and less controversial means? Unfortunately, today the weight of evidence still appears to support the latter conclusion, which is all the more ironic at a time when the Soviet Union, with a boldness that has captured the world's imagination, is facing up to the need to bring greater openness and democracy into the political process at home.

The solution to many regional problems would benefit from a greater infusion of *glasnost*, if it is fair to interpret that term as implying outcomes that are based, as far as possible, on the desires of the peoples involved, expressed freely through open political processes. This is true for a couple of important reasons. It is true, first, because it is right. People should have a right to determine their own destinies, not to have them imposed by one superpower or another, or even by both acting in concert. Having been

involved in formulating US policy toward the Philippines during the last years of the Marcos regime, I can say that the commitment of the United States to democratic solutions runs deep. We have supported such outcomes, even at some risk, not only in the Philippines but elsewhere in Asia, in Latin America, and throughout the world.

A second reason we favor democratic outcomes is our belief that governments that enjoy true popular support are less likely, in the long run, to provide opportunities for outside military intervention. More specifically, governments that are genuinely open to popular criticism are less likely to engage in military aggression. It is no accident that two of the Soviet allies whose foreign behavior causes us the most concern—North Korea and Cuba—have perhaps the most unreconstructed Stalinist regimes in the world today and most decisively reject the ideas of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

We believe that this contradiction between the new principles that the Soviet Union is applying at home and the old principles of the regimes it is supporting abroad can best be resolved through more open debate about foreign policy. For example, it will be a positive development if public scrutiny in the USSR of Soviet arms transfers and military assistance increases. As Foreign Minister Shevardnadze has noted:

The shortage of democratic culture, vestiges of an elitist awareness, has given rise to a certain "silent zone" around our nation's diplomatic center. The caste-like exclusiveness of some of its workers, false defensiveness and excessive secrecy, the complete absence of information about its inner life and the artificially implanted assumption of infallibility have contributed greatly during the years of stagnation to the alienating of people from foreign policy and foreign policy from the people.³

In all, we're still awaiting a new Soviet policy toward regional conflicts that fully complements its new thinking—a new policy that shows the same flexibility and good sense as recent Soviet arms control efforts, a new policy that is prepared to apply abroad the very principles the Soviet government has been pioneering at home.

We must act quickly and comprehensively. As Secretary of State Baker reminded us in his recent speech to the Foreign Policy Association:

With the spread of missiles and chemical weapons throughout volatile regions, conflicts in the Third World are likely to take on a more dangerous character. Regional conflicts are likely to be more difficult to contain, more likely to engulf more countries, and more susceptible to escalation.⁴

For stability and the sake of a more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship, the superpowers must put the same emphasis and expend the

same energy on solving regional conflicts as they have on arms control. Thus, where do we go from here?

The first step in dealing with regional conflicts is for both the United States and the Soviet Union to recognize each other's common interest in the solution of these conflicts by peaceful means, as well as the basic principles on which we believe regional conflicts should be solved. For our part—as a maritime nation whose markets and resources are often found overseas—we believe that we have important and growing interests abroad. These interests include alliances with more than 40 nations and strong bonds with many others. Regional conflicts threaten these friends and allies and hold an unhealthy possibility for escalation.

The United States believes that regional conflicts should be resolved on the basis of self-determination, independence, and democracy. We believe that by promoting freedom and self-determination, we build what is ultimately the most secure foundation for peace as well. Ultimately, peace and freedom are inseparable.

We do not favor spheres-of-influence schemes that are often proposed by armchair strategists. Dividing the world into spheres of influence won't end superpower competition; the dividing line itself would become the crucial locus of contention. "Swapping" influence in one country for advantage in another is as illegitimate as it is impractical—and impossible. We think the Soviet Union would agree with us on that point.

Second, all industrialized nations should join together in taking precautions not to export materials or technologies that will facilitate the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, or missile-delivered weapons. The proliferation of these weapons and technologies has already progressed to a dangerous level. By the year 2000 it is anticipated that more than a dozen Third World countries may be able to deploy nuclear weapons. Many more nations will have chemical weapons, like those used in the Iran-Iraq War, and a dozen developing nations will have a ballistic missile delivery capability. Together, the United States and the Soviet Union must work toward correcting or reducing the scope of this challenge to peace.

Finally, and perhaps most important, we have to realize that the superpowers are not the primary cause of regional conflicts. Such conflicts arise out of ethnic strife, historical animosities, poverty, famine, and uneven levels of political and economic development. Thus, the fundamental solutions to regional conflicts won't be found in armaments or even in arms control. To dampen regional conflicts, we must ultimately deal with their causes, primarily through efforts to promote economic and political development.

There is a broad range of actions that we can and do take to achieve those purposes. One is through bilateral and multilateral economic assistance to developing countries. The United States and its allies provide massive amounts

of such assistance, and we would welcome the Soviet Union's joining that effort. Even more important are the markets that the West provides for the new products of developing countries. We would hope, as Soviet economic restructuring proceeds, to see the Soviet Union play a greater role in this area as well.

Among our own contributions, however, two basic ideas are more important than any material aid we might extend. One is that the route to economic development lies not through government control of economic activity but through freeing the creative energies of individuals. The second idea is that democracy and openness are not obstacles to economic development—as was once commonly argued—but, to the contrary, are necessary for its full realization. Those countries that in the past gave up fundamental freedoms in the belief that they would develop faster most often ended up with neither freedom nor prosperity. When the government controls the economy and the government is not open to criticism, the economy does not work.

These two ideas are old and familiar ones to the Western democracies and they seem to be borne out by the experience of the newly developing countries. If I understand the terms correctly, the words *perestroika* and *glasnost* incorporate a Soviet recognition of these two fundamental truths. When, in the past, we suggested to developing countries that they can find useful lessons in our experience, we were often accused of ethnocentrism and parochialism. If today, in fact, the United States and the Soviet Union can agree in broad terms about what works, that is bound to have a positive effect on the rest of the world. There is a connection, for example, between the declining support for a violent Marxist revolution in the Philippines and the growing awareness in that country of the Soviet Union's abandonment of classical Marxism.

The future is fraught with difficult problems requiring increased US-Soviet cooperation on issues ranging from arms control to air pollution. To solve them, we must assure that the current improvement in superpower relations is never again buried in the quicksand of regional conflicts.

NOTES

1. President George Bush, "Outlines of a New World of Freedom," speech to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 25 September 1989.
2. This refers to the fact that Cuban troops supported by Soviet equipment were fighting in Ethiopia in support of the Marxist government in early 1978, long before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 which ostensibly was the provocation that doomed Senate ratification of SALT II.
3. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, speech to the 19th All-Union CPSU Conference on Foreign Policy and Diplomacy, Moscow, 25 July 1989.
4. Secretary of State James A. Baker III, "Points of Mutual Advantage," speech before the Foreign Policy Association, New York, 16 October 1989.