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The Role of the Mediterranean Countries
and the Superpowers

by

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THE ROLE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES AND THE SUPERPOWERS

It would make a great difference, both in terms of the kind of analysis we would pursue and the kind of conclusions we would reach, whether or not we assumed that superpower relations in the Mediterranean and the Middle East were securely framed in détente or still suffer the weight of cold war polarities. One could probably say that without settlement of the Middle East crisis and bringing lasting stability to the Eastern Mediterranean, not only will détente be constantly threatened on a global scale but Cold War polarization might re-emerge in new forms. For the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, unlike Southeast Asia, represent a central area of superpower confrontation; and conflict here would have consequences of vast significance for the world economy and world peace. American withdrawal from Southeast Asia has brought to an end a major irritant in superpower relations in the Third World; and the Helsinki agreement has opened the way to better relations in Europe. But the Mediterranean and the Middle East remain the one area in the world where the possibility of superpower confrontation and conflict is still real and great.

I

Soviet policy in the Middle East, unlike that of the United States, has been characterized by its long-range perspective. The Soviet attitudes, unlike the American, have changed little since the end of the Second World War. For example, while the Americans have tended to react strongly, and often emotionally, to the vagaries of Middle East politics, the Soviets have

maintained coolness and restraint even under very trying conditions. In 1955 the Soviet Union was able to conclude the first arms deal with Egypt because the United States had unexpectedly rejected Nasser's bid to purchase American arms, and to undertake, in 1960, the construction of the High Dam at Aswan after Secretary Dulles had angrily withdrawn American support to it.

The Soviet Union, since its transformation into a Middle Eastern power, has followed a consistent approach in dealing with the problems of the region. This was characteristic particularly of its approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict and its relations with Egypt. Even when subjected to extreme pressures by the Egyptians after Nasser's death, the Soviet Union has maintained correct and friendly relations in the area. Neither the expulsion of the Soviet experts in 1972 nor the increasing friendship with the United States have caused the Soviet Union to take such retaliatory measures as would lead to a serious break with Egypt. As the tide in the Middle East changed in favor of the Americans after the October War, American relations with Egypt improved. The Soviet Union's reaction to this change was calm and realistic. Without attacking or criticising Egypt, the Soviet Union sought to consolidate its relations with Syria and Iraq and the PLO, and to establish new relations with Libya. And as far as the Arab-Israeli conflict was concerned, it called for negotiations along the lines of its long-standing policy on the issue.

II.

United States policy in the Middle East has been characterized by heavy reliance on military action. This may be seen in the direct and indirect exercise of such policy, as in the 1958

landing in Lebanon and in the use of the Sixth Fleet during the civil war in Jordan in 1970. This policy may also be seen in the maintenance of Israeli's military superiority through seemingly unlimited military aid. This policy is an extension of U.S. global policy, which aims at containing the Soviet Union (and "international Communism") by deterrence and intervention, and at maintaining American supremacy in the Free World.

U.S. policy in the Middle East in the post World War II period instead of bringing stability to the region, contributed to its polarization into "radical" and "moderate" states. The radical states, like Egypt (under Nasser) and Syria, were regarded as unfriendly to the United States for refusing to join American-sponsored defence arrangements and for choosing non-alignment. The moderate states, i.e. the ones which assumed a pro-American stance, like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, were regarded as part of the Free World. American obsession in this period with regional defense pacts and "international Communism" led the American policy-makers to under-estimate the region's central destabilizing issue, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and to address themselves to a threat that was peripheral and unreal to the inhabitants of the region.

Israel's quick victory in 1967 created the conviction in the U.S. Congress and in the Johnson administration that the support of a strong Israel is the best guarantee of preserving the status quo in the Middle East and of safe-guarding American interests there. U.S. arms started pouring into Israel in early 1968 and have continued to do so ever since. Although the position of the United States, as formally set forth in the Rogers Plan (1969), was for Israeli's withdrawal from occupied territories and for a just and durable peace based on the terri-

torial integrity of all the states in the region, no serious effort was made to implement these goals. Neither President Johnson nor President Nixon felt anxious about Israel's continued defiance of the UN resolutions, which was also defiance of the declared United States policy.

One would have expected that the October War of 1973 would cause American policy-makers to change at least two assumptions they held since the 1967 war; namely, that the stability of the status quo in the Middle East could be protected by Israel, and that the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict could be put in deep-freeze indefinitely; American Middle East policy after the October War was seen as much more influenced by domestic issues than ever thought before. Some observers saw it as a function of American domestic politics.

In any event, as it now stands, United States policy aimed at three objectives: protecting the status quo by bolstering a militarily superior Israel; supporting the "moderate" Arab regimes; assuring the continuous flow of oil; and containing Soviet influence and restoring U.S. dominance in the region.

III.

Earlier I mentioned that superpower relations in the Middle East and the Mediterranean are fundamentally a function of the superpowers' global relations. There is general agreement that we are now entering a new period in world affairs in which the present structure of power and wealth, hitherto dominated by the industrialized countries of Europe and North America, is undergoing a radical change. Thus the disagreement between oil-producing countries and the industrialized oil-consuming countries is not merely about the price of oil. The deeper structural

issues in the emerging confrontation are obscured by the surface phenomena. As Professor Geoffry Barraclough put it, "The question we are faced with today is no longer oil, or the price of oil, but a conflict between two irreconcilable conceptions of a just world order." (1)

In this conflict, Dr. Kissinger is attempting to preserve the global status quo which has lasted since the end of the Second World War and in which the United States has enjoyed undisputed power. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, is content to sit back and watch the unfolding of a historical process which Marxist theory has envisioned. Thus while the United States struggles to preserve the crumbling old world order the Soviet Union reaps the political benefits of its failures.

Since the October War and the sudden jolt to the world economic system, the United States has striven to protect its economy against those of Western Europe and Japan by taking advantage of the rise of oil prices. Against the Soviet Union and the oil-producing countries it sought to strengthen its position by using food, "its secret weapon in the cold war which is developing." (2) In the United States there are those who believe that their government can force the hand of the oil-producing countries by "the skilful handling of the world's most essential raw material, food, which it dominates" (3). The United

(1) New York Review of Books (August, 1975), p. 29.

(2) Barraclough, ibid., p. 25.

(3) James P. Grant & Richard N. Gardner (ed.), The World Food and Energy Crisis (Institute on Man and Science, 1974), p. 35.

States seeks to uphold the existing order more directly in the Middle East and the Mediterranean by keeping open the option of military intervention. I have recently attended conferences in the United States where the most hairbrained ^{scenarios} for intervention and occupation in the Middle East and North Africa have been discussed with a straight face by well-known political scientists and economists. And it is well known that the Pentagon has contingency plans for the invasion of Libya and other Arab oil-producing countries in the Gulf.

In the looming struggle the Soviet policy will probably continue to be more passive than active, more defensive than aggressive, and not because of weakness or disarray. Indeed, from the Soviet Union's standpoint history is working in its favor in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. As seen in this perspective the United States is bound to become increasingly embroiled in economic and political crises the world over, and, as the process speeds up, it will be forced to resort to economic pressure against its industrialized West European and Japanese rivals, to withholding food from recalcitrant hungry nations, and to relying more and more on military force in areas it cannot manage.

IV.

In all this the Middle East plays a major role, both in that it is the locus of the world's principal oil resources and in that it is the main area of superpower confrontation.

It has been firmly established that world dependence on oil in the next ten or fifteen years will continue to increase. As one specialist, Melvin Gurtove, has put it:

Despite the development of new sources of oil and energy fuels in the future, /the needs of Western Europe and Japan/ and those of the United States, which already consumes 31 per cent of the world's oil, will severely rise. Recent projections show a growth rate in oil consumption of 84 per cent for the United States, 125 per cent for Western Europe, and still higher for Japan between 1970 and 1985. During this period it is expected that oil production will decline in North America but steadily increase in the Middle East. Clearly, Middle East oil is going to be of even greater importance to the developed capitalist economies over the next few decades than it has been in the past few. (1)

The power of the possessors of oil will consequently continue to grow economically, financially, as well as politically. And as a result of the shift in the importance of the international economic and political order from economic access to markets to access to resources, the world power structure has begun to change in favor of the resource-rich countries of the world. And foremost among these are the Arab countries which since the October War have begun to form a cohesive political and economic bloc whose weight in world affairs is already felt.

It is worth noting that according to recent estimates the accumulation of financial assets by the OPEC countries (of which the Arab producers are the majority) will have reached \$250 by 1980 (in 1970 dollars). Already developments in the past year have shown how much these countries can directly influence the international economic and monetary system and how little the

(1) The United States Against the Third World (New York, 1974), pp. 15-16.

industrialized countries can do about it. Dr. Kissinger's hawkish attitude toward the oil-producers has so far proved ineffective, and the United States will have no choice for the time being but to go along with the Europeans and the Japanese in their more conciliatory approach to the problem.

V.

It is a well-known fact that the core of the Middle East crisis is the Arab-Israeli conflict. The formula for the resolution of this conflict has been agreed upon by the international community and fully adhered to by both the United States and the Soviet Union. This formula incorporates three basic conditions for achieving a solution: first, Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab territories; second, restoration of Palestinian rights to self-determination and sovereignty; and third, safeguarding the security and territorial integrity of all the states of the region.

For their part, the Arab states and the PLO have accepted these conditions. But Israeli has declared that it will withdraw from only parts of the occupied territories for vital security reasons, and that it will not recognize Palestinian demands. From Israel's point of view the interim agreements of 1974 and 1975 with Egypt and Syria constitute significant territorial concessions; Israel would like to wait another few years before making further concessions and taking more steps toward an overall settlement.

For the Arab states, the interim agreements represent only a first step toward total Israeli withdrawal and overall settlement. So freezing the situation, as Israel wishes to do, would mean going back to the state of no-peace-no-war, which the

Arabs waged the 1973 War to change. Such a deadlock in the two positions would probably lead to another war. Both Israel and the Arab states have been building up their military forces; and they are now greater on both sides than they were before the October War. Also both sides have expressed their readiness to go to war. Thus the will and the capacity are there, only the pretext or provocation is needed to start it. The next war will most likely break out suddenly, as a preemptive strike by either of the two sides. But a war of attrition, if started by either side, will rapidly and inevitably turn into full-scale war.

A fifth Arab-Israeli war, all agree, will have incalculable consequences for the region and the world at large. It will matter little in the long run if Israel were to emerge victorious; the devastation that the two sides are able to inflict on one another will cancel out any gains secured by either side. From the political standpoint, the war is likely to be sterile, altering little in the present political situation.

Another Arab-Israeli war will almost certainly bring about an oil embargo. Whatever the circumstances might be, even if the United States does not airlift arms to Israel as it did in the October War, the Arab oil-producing countries will most probably use the oil weapon. And there is always the possibility that if an oil embargo is imposed the United States might intervene militarily. Judging by statements made by the U.S. government officials over the past few months, the possibility of such intervention by the United States must not be excluded. What is more problematic is Soviet reaction to such a move.

In a study published last summer by the American Enterprise Institute in Washington the warning is given that a fifth Arab-

-Israeli war, if allowed to break out, may lead to nuclear warfare in the region. The authors of the study (1) argue that if a peace settlement was not achieved in the Middle East, war may break out any time. They put forth a number of scenarios in which nuclear weapons may be used; they reach the conclusion that a war in the Middle East "could well spread to world atomic war, a wild fire whose only containment would come when it devoured itself." (2)

VI.

What are the prospects of political settlement and peace in the Middle East?

Despite agreement on the basic conditions for settlement, the United States and the Soviet Union still differ on some important aspects. Although their differences center mostly on the question of approach, substantive issues are also involved. Disagreement on whether settlement should be achieved step-by-step or approached comprehensively also involves disagreement as to the nature of the settlement to be reached. The Soviet Union in insisting on convening the Geneva Conference has argued that the step-by-step approach cannot bring the parties to an overall settlement; that the piece-meal approach will only temporarily diffuse the Middle East crisis, but in the end maintain the polarization between the two sides.

The United States had its way with the step-by-step approach because it was supported by both Israel and Egypt. This

(1) Robert J. Pranger & Dale R. Tahtinen, "Nuclear Threat in the Middle East", Washington, 1975.

(2) Ibid., p. 57.

has enabled Dr. Kissinger to reduce the Soviet Union's role in the peace-making process and thereby retarding it.

It is now clear that whether or not the step-by-step approach is preferable to the comprehensive approach, the stage has been reached where the Geneva Conference is the only means of negotiating a final settlement. The maximum that could have been achieved by Dr. Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy has already been achieved, and the possibilities of the step-by-step approach have been exhausted. The United States alone cannot bring the parties to an overall agreement; the Soviet Union must be involved in the negotiation process. And such involvement can take place only within the framework of a comprehensive approach as envisaged by the Geneva conference.

VII.

There seems to exist, especially in the United States, certain misconceptions regarding the Arab attitude toward a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. There is the idea, implicit in the ongoing negotiations, that it is possible to diffuse the conflict without really solving it. But simply to keep diplomatic momentum going will obviously not be enough.

Another misconception held by Washington is that the oil-producing countries, eager to dispose of the twenty-seven year problem, will accept any arrangement that looks feasible. The Economist in a special issue last May went so far as to suggest that even the restoration of Arab Jerusalem, a central condition laid down by the Arab states for any settlement, may be overlooked if circumstances were favorable. This is highly speculative and hard to conceive as happening.

The United States has been particularly hostile in its

attitude toward the Palestinians. Although the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination and sovereignty have been recognized by the international community, the United States has thus far refused to extend any kind of recognition to them. Dr. Kissinger's approach has excluded the Palestinians from participating in negotiations and has entrusted the settlement of the Palestinian problem to the Arab states and Israel. He has refused to recognize the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and made it clear that the United States will deal only with the established governments.

It is necessary to stress a fundamental characteristic of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It may be put in this way: The conflict is nothing but the Palestine problem, and the Palestine problem is an Arab problem, not merely a Palestinian one. It is not the number of the Palestinians or their firepower which make them such a crucial factor in the political life of the region. It is rather that the Palestinian problem is deeply embedded in the national psyche of the Arab people and it is not likely to disappear if a settlement is reached which fails to satisfy the Palestinians' legitimate and deep-seated demands.

VIII.

The last Arab-Israeli war brought confrontation between the superpowers and could have triggered a world conflict; it caused the oil embargo which led to a world economic crisis.

In the past two years, the United States has failed in solving any of the problems created by the October War. By following a hardline on the oil issue, the United States exacerbated rather than reduced the tension between the industrialized countries and the oil-producing countries. And by insisting on a piece-

-meal rather than a comprehensive approach in the Arab-Israeli conflict it reduced its chances of overall settlement and increased the risk of war.

There is at present a growing rift between the United States and Europe over the energy crisis. Two approaches have emerged, one which may be called the Atlantic approach, represented by the American hardline approach; and the other is the French approach, which may be called the Mediterranean approach, which advocates conciliation and cooperation rather than confrontation and force. The difference between the two approaches is basically one of method and strategy; but it also derives from divergence of interest. The interest of the Atlantic states and those of the Mediterranean states overlap in a number of vital areas, which allows us to talk about Europe and the West as a single unit and which accounts for inclusion of the countries of the northern Mediterranean shore in the Atlantic world, as in NATO. But there are significant areas in which interests diverge. It is only recently, under increased economic and political stresses, that this has become clear. General de Gaulle, the first European statesman to fully articulate this diversion of interests, marked out the new policies and opened up the way to new relations with the Soviet Union and the Arab world. This viewpoint is no longer strictly that of France or of French foreign policy; it has been adopted in one form or another by all the countries of the north Mediterranean.

The remaining few years of this decade will witness the taking of decisions of world historical significance. Whether the tensions of the Cold War will be preserved in the new relations now emerging, and the old monopoly of wealth and power

will be maintained and consolidated, or whether a new order of cooperation and interdependence based on relations of equality and friendship will be established, all depends on whether the Atlantic approach or the Mediterranean approach will prevail in dealing with issues confronting us in the Middle East and the Mediterranean today.

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