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MEETING THE SOVIET CHALLENGE IN THE THIRD WORLD

The effects of American defeats in Vietnam and Iran undermined the confidence of US friends and allies in the Third World (and Europe and Japan) and ensured that the Soviet Union would see in the Third World its principal foreign policy opportunities for years to come.

The Soviets themselves suffered setbacks in the 1960s and early 70s in the Third World. They suffered one setback after another in Africa. They saw their hopes in South America dashed by the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile and were humiliatingly expelled from Egypt in 1972. When they turned again to the Third World in 1975, it was with a strategy designed to minimize the chance of a repetition of those setbacks. The strategy, enriched and strengthened over several years, is realistic and calculated to exploit effectively both events and opportunities.

-- First, shown the way by Castro in Angola, they helped him consolidate the radical power of the MPLA there, creating a government dependent on Soviet and Cuban support for survival. This was followed by the dispatch of thousands of Cuban troops to Ethiopia. Unlike Sadat, neither the MPLA nor Mengistu could afford to order the Cubans and Soviets out. In the new strategy, the principal, obvious role in Third World countries would be played by another Third World state--Libya, Vietnam, Nicaragua. No superpower would be seen to be guiding or arming or directing the radical forces at work; the host government would be maintained by foreign advisors and troops who could not be expelled. It was a strategy that made (and makes) any direct response appear neo-imperialistic, and a change of heart by the host government difficult if not impossible.

-- Second, when radical governments come to power, the Soviets directly or through their surrogates help establish an internal security structure to ensure that any challenge from within would be stamped out. There would be no more Allendes. Sometimes it worked--as in Ethiopia and Angola, and sometimes there was not enough time--as in Jamaica.

-- Third, the Soviets continued to supplement these tactics with its more traditional offerings, such as technical (and political) training in the USSR; the rapid supply of weapons; and, the use of propaganda and subversion to support friends or help destabilize unfriendly governments.

-- Fourth, where a vacuum existed or the costs and risks were low, the USSR proved still willing to launch its own forces at targets on its periphery--Afghanistan, and perhaps elsewhere when and if circumstances seem right.

-- Fifth, the Soviets advised new radical regimes to mute their revolutionary rhetoric and to try to keep their links to Western commercial resources, foreign assistance, and international financial institutions. Moscow's ambitions did not cloud recognition that it could not afford more economic dependents such as Cuba and Vietnam.

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This strategy has worked. A Soviet Union that had found itself in 1972 without major successes and with many failures in the Third World after two decades of effort could count the following achievements by the end of 1982, ten years later:

- Victory in Vietnam and Hanoi's consolidation of power in all of Indochina.
- New radical regimes in Ethiopia, Angola, and Nicaragua.
- Possession of Afghanistan, a Russian goal for over a century.
- Cuban control of Grenada (and new military facilities there for support of further subversion).
- An active insurgency in El Salvador where US assistance had rekindled old Vietnam memories.
- Nicaraguan support of revolutionary violence in Honduras and Guatemala, as well as El Salvador.
- US expulsion from Iran, which, though not through any Soviet action, represented a major strategic gain for the USSR.
- Rapid progress toward Cuban control of Suriname, the first breakthrough on the South American continent.
- Pro-Western regimes under siege in Chad and the Sudan.

Beyond these successes, the Soviets could see opportunities, actual or potential, to achieve its objectives in many other places.

The US is in need of a realistic counter-strategy. Many components of that strategy also are familiar, though they must be approached and linked in new ways. The measures needed to address the Soviet challenge in the Third World have the additional appeal that they represent also a sensible American approach to the Third World whether or not the USSR is involved:

1. We have too often neglected our friends and neutrals in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia until they become a problem or are threatened by developments we consider hostile to our interests. The Third World now buys 40 percent of our exports; that alone is reason enough to pay greater attention to the problems of the LDCs before we confront coups, insurgencies, or instability. Except when we confront a situation we consider dangerous to ourselves, the Third World has been a very low priority. The priority of the Third World in our overall foreign policy must be raised and sustained. The Executive Branch must do more to educate the public, the Congress, and Third World governments about Soviet strategy in the LDCs generally.
2. The US must establish for itself priorities in terms of major commitments. President Nixon wanted to rely on key regional states as bulwarks for stability and keeping the peace. There are some dangers in this approach

(Iran was to be the key state in the Persian Gulf), but it is generally a sensible strategy. If our early help fails to prevent serious trouble, for which countries are we prepared to put our chips on the table? We should choose ahead of time and in consultation with key members or committees of Congress so that their support at crucial moments is more likely. Great losing battles for FMS, economic assistance, and the like, played out on the world stage and at critical times represent devastating setbacks for the US with ramifications going far beyond the affected country.

3. We must be prepared to demand firmly but tactfully and privately that our friends observe certain standards of behavior with regard to basic human rights. It is required by our own principles and essential to political support in the US. Moreover, we have to be willing to talk straight to those we would help about issues they must address to block foreign exploitation of their problems--issues such as land reform, corruption, and the like. We need to show how the Soviets have exploited such vulnerabilities elsewhere to good effect to make clear we are not preaching out of cultural arrogance but are making recommendations based on experience elsewhere.

4. We need to be ready to help our friends defend themselves. We can train them in counterinsurgency tactics and upgrade their communications, mobility and intelligence. We need changes in our foreign military sales laws to permit the US to provide arms more quickly. We also need to change our military procurement policies so as to have stocks of certain basic kinds of weapons more readily available.

5. We must find a way to mobilize and use our greatest asset in the Third World--private business. Few in the Third World wish to adopt the Soviet economic system. Neither we nor the Soviets can offer unlimited or even large-scale economic assistance to the LDCs. Investment is the key to economic success or at least survival in the Third World and we, our NATO allies and Japan need to develop a common strategy to promote investment in the Third World. The Soviets are helpless to compete with private capital in these countries. The US needs to explore incentives to encourage the private sector to play a greater role in the LDCs, especially in countries of key importance.

6. Finally, the Executive Branch needs to collaborate more closely in the setting of strategy with key members and committees of Congress. Too often opportunities to counter the Soviets have been lost by clashes between the two Branches. The independent stand of Congress is a fact of life, and any effort to counter the Soviets in the Third World will fail unless the Congress is made a party to the Executive's thinking and planning--all along the way. Support for a Third World policy must be bi-partisan and stable.

Without a sustained, constant policy applied over a number of years, we cannot counter the relentless pressure of the USSR in the Third World. It is past time for the American Government--Executive and Congress--to take the Soviet challenge in the Third World seriously and to develop a broad, integrated strategy for countering it. It will be the principal US-Soviet battleground for many years to come.