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8 April 1983

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Meeting The Soviet Challenge in the Third World

I. A Little History

Somehow Americans thought their first loss of a major foreign war--Vietnam--would have no important consequences, especially inasmuch as it was accompanied by detente with the Soviet Union and the opening to China. Yet it was in fact a major watershed in post World War II history, especially as it coincided with other historic developments:

- The collapse of Portugal's colonial empire in Africa; the last such in the Third World.
- A return to the international stage of Cuba's Castro in 1975, willing, for internal reasons, to send Cuban soldiers abroad in large numbers to defend revolutionary regimes and radicals determined to consolidate their power.
- Immediately after the US expulsion from Saigon, the US Senate confirming for all the world America's withdrawal from the Third World by its defeat of a pittance of aid for Western supported forces in Angola, and the accompanying Clark Amendment.
- Soviet determination, initially at Castro's prodding, to seize the opportunity presented by the US defeat in Asia and resulting American abhorrence of involvement in the Third World.
- A revolution in Ethiopia, bringing to power the radical Mengistu.
- And, a wavering and misguided policy by the Carter Administration on human rights, and key allies that played a major role in revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua.

The effects of American defeats in Vietnam, Iran, and Nicaragua--and the coming to power of bitterly antagonistic and aggressive, destabilizing governments in all three countries--undermined the confidence of US friends and allies in the Third World (and Europe and Japan) and ensured that an opportunistic Soviet Union would see in the Third World its principal foreign policy opportunities for years to come. A Soviet strategy evolved in the mid-1970s that built on historic events and opportunities and combined them into an approach to the Third World that, even should the US decide to compete, would help frustrate an effective US response.

II. The Soviet Strategy

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.

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- 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, where in his turn Mengistu became dependent on their support. Unlike Sadat, neither the MPLA nor Mengistu could afford to order the Cubans and Soviets out. The cornerstone of the new Soviet approach then was the use of Cuban forces to establish and sustain the power of "revolutionary governments." The tactic of using Third World radical states as "surrogates" in the Third World would subsequently involve assisting Vietnam's conquest of the remainder of Indochina, Libya's designs in Chad and plotting against Sudan, the PDRY's aggression against Oman and the YAR, Algeria's support of the Polisario Front, Cuba's nurturing of revolutionary or radical regimes in Nicaragua, Grenada, and Suriname, and its support of the insurgency in El Salvador. All had one feature in common--the principal, obvious role in Third World countries was played by another Third World state; no superpower was seen to be guiding or arming or directing the radical forces at work; no numbers of white faces interfered in the internal affairs of Asian, African, or Latin countries; and wherever possible the host government was 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 came to power without the aid of foreign troops, as in Nicaragua or Suriname, the Soviets directly or through their surrogates helped in the establishment of an internal security structure to ensure that any possible challenge from within would be stamped out. There would be no more Allendes. Sometimes it worked--as in Ethiopia, 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 to regimes which either felt threatened or wished to use them for aggression; and, of course, the use of a wide range of active measures (covert action) to support friends or help destabilize unfriendly governments.
- Fourth, consistent with Russian expansionist policy of a thousand years, 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 seemed 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.

This strategy was intended to achieve three principal Soviet objectives in the Third World:

- The further spread of Communism in countries on the path of Soviet-style Socialism. However much Western commentators may assert the death of ideology among Soviet leaders, there is a genuine ideological

conviction that this is an historical imperative and that the future of Communism and its eventual victory depends on success in the Third World, a thesis put forward by Lenin himself.

- To achieve great power ambitions, including access to port facilities, airfields, and intelligence and reconnaissance installations; to obtain allies and friends whose support in international politics is assured; gain access to raw materials and markets and obtain hard currency customers for Soviet goods and weapons; and to acquire influence and power over dependent states.
- Finally, to divert and distract the United States through many simultaneous challenges--some pinpricks, some major; to exploit lingering repugnance in the US to Third World engagements and to build on resulting controversy to complicate other foreign policy and national security initiatives, including defense programs; and to deny the US access to facilities abroad such as the USSR itself seeks.

The centrality of the Third World in Soviet foreign policy is suggested by the fact that Moscow has chosen to allow its relationship with three successive US Administrations to deteriorate in substantial measure because of its refusal to moderate its aggressive pursuit of Third World opportunities, principally in Angola (Ford); Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Afghanistan (Carter); and Central America (Reagan).

III. The Soviet Balance Sheet

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 all the old Vietnam memories at home.
- 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:

- Success in El Salvador would likely bring gains in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, perhaps then opening the way to creating problems for the US in Panama and even Mexico.
- Habre in Chad and Nimieri in Sudan both are vulnerable and the fall of both, but especially Nimieri, seems only a matter of time.
- Mozambique on the verge of requesting Cuban forces to fight the South African sponsored insurgency.
- Zimbabwe on the brink again of civil war, perhaps offering an opportunity to make gains lost by Mugabe's victory.
- A big prize, Zaire, continues to tantalize, the Soviets aware that Mobutu cannot last indefinitely and that a struggle will follow his departure.
- Long-time Soviet support for SWAPO, promising opportunity in Namibia either by its inclusion in a government or by civil war.
- Insecure regimes in both the Seychelles and Mauritius interested in expanding contacts with the Soviet Union.
- Zia's regime in Pakistan growing weary of the burdens of supporting the Afghan insurgency and confronted with mounting internal problems.
- In Asia, prospects less bright but the insurgency in the Philippines worth watching and potentially a major breakthrough in the region.

Against these successes and opportunities, the Soviets had to count:

- A still weak position in the Middle East.
- Failure to make any headway with the Iranian regime.
- US aid to the Salvadoran regime, Habre, and Nimieri.
- The regional strength of ASEAN and general internal stability of its members.
- Vietnamese inability to crush the Kampuchean resistance totally, and
- Soviet inability to crush the Afghan resistance.

All in all, the balance sheet is strongly favorable and encouraging to the Soviets. The opportunities for and ease of destabilizing regimes and exploiting economic and social problems promise continued high priority of the Third World and intense Soviet involvement and success in the Third World in the last decade and a half of the century.

IV. A US Counterstrategy: The Realities

Three successive Presidents have tried to grapple with the Soviet offensive in the Third World. While their actions have at times increased the costs to the Soviets and their surrogates, in only one instance--Chad--have they succeeded fully in blocking externally supported destabilization.

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A US counterstrategy in the Third World needs to be based on domestic and foreign realities:

- The Vietnam Syndrome is a reality; the Congress will not support or allow the use of US combat forces in the Third World. As El Salvador has shown, even a training role is suspect.
- Nearly every Third World government, friend or foe, is authoritarian and can fairly be accused of repression, corruption, and failure to observe democratic procedures and basic human rights. Thus, few if any countries we seek or need to help will meet the standards of behavior set by many in Congress and the media.
- The US cannot provide sufficient economic assistance to every friendly government which faces destabilizing economic problems susceptible to foreign exploitation.



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- It will be difficult to develop political support in the US to help most Third World countries threatened with destabilization or insurgencies. The Soviet hand will be ambiguous at best and the benefit to the US of maintaining or restoring a friendly government will often be difficult to demonstrate concretely. This will be especially true of small countries like Suriname, Grenada, or Mauritius; of some large ones like the Philippines where insurgencies will be regarded in the US with some accuracy as the consequence of repression and corruption (a view that will be fostered by emigre activities); and of many countries remote to Americans like Chad, Zaire, Mozambique, and Namibia.
- Overt US intervention--political, military, or economic--will be castigated abroad as neo-imperialism, as motivated by US economic interests and the like. It will appear to be both bullying and racist.

V. A US Counterstrategy: What is to be Done?

Soviet ambition in the Third World is not exactly a new problem, even though the tactics are in some respects. Thus, while the US is in need of a new strategy, many components of that strategy also are familiar, though they must be approached and linked in new ways. What follows is a number of steps to address the Soviet challenge in the Third World. They have the additional appeal that they represent also a sensible American approach to the Third World whether or not the USSR is involved.

1. As stated above, the Third World has (and has had for years) a central priority place in Soviet foreign policy. If for no other reason than this, the US must begin to take the Third World and its problems seriously. We have too often neglected our friends and neutrals in Africa, 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 that affect us adversely. Except when we confront a situation we consider dangerous to ourselves, the Third World has been a very low priority. This has resulted in a case by

case, fragmented response to Soviet and Cuban actions. The priority of the Third World in our overall foreign policy must be raised and sustained.

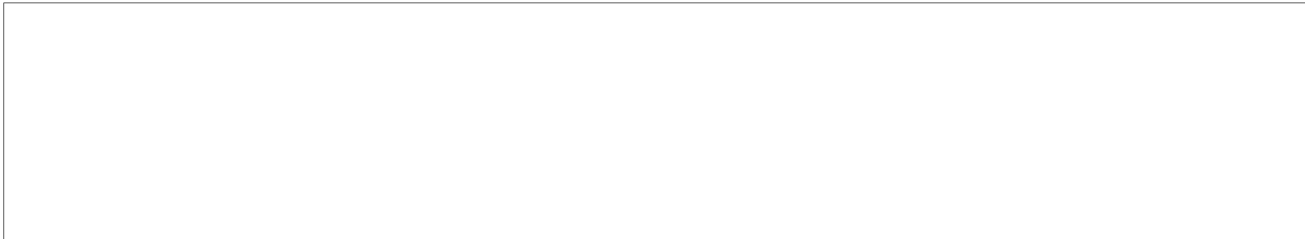
2. The Executive Branch must do more to educate the public, the Congress, and Third World governments about Soviet strategy in the LDCs generally. This requires low-key, factual briefings and meetings on a sustained basis--keeping people up to date on developments and sharing as much of our intelligence as we safely can. One or two media campaigns or Presidential speeches are not the answer. A continuing information program designed to inform and tie together developments in areas widely distant is needed and must be pursued intelligently over a long term.

3. The US Intelligence Community, and especially CIA, must continue to give priority to learning more about developments in the Third World and creating analytical methods to provide early warning of economic, social, and political problems that foreshadow instability and opportunities for exploitation by the USSR or its allies. Policy agencies should then use this information in developing approaches to LDC governments that are aimed at dealing with these problems promptly (though the solutions may take years) when the cost often will be modest. We should serve as a clearing house of information useful to threatened countries, for example, seeing to it that lessons learned in successful anti-insurgent campaigns in Malaysia and Thailand are brought to the attention of the El Salvador and Philippine Governments.

4. The US can provide some help to many countries (and does) but 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 address this ahead of time so that we do not expend political and other assets on places of marginal importance because we must decide such matters in haste and lacking perspective. Also, we should choose 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--as for Angola and El Salvador--played out on the world stage and at critical times represent devastating setbacks for the US with ramifications going far beyond the affected country. Even politically bloody success--e.g. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan--can result in the costs outweighing or offsetting the gains.

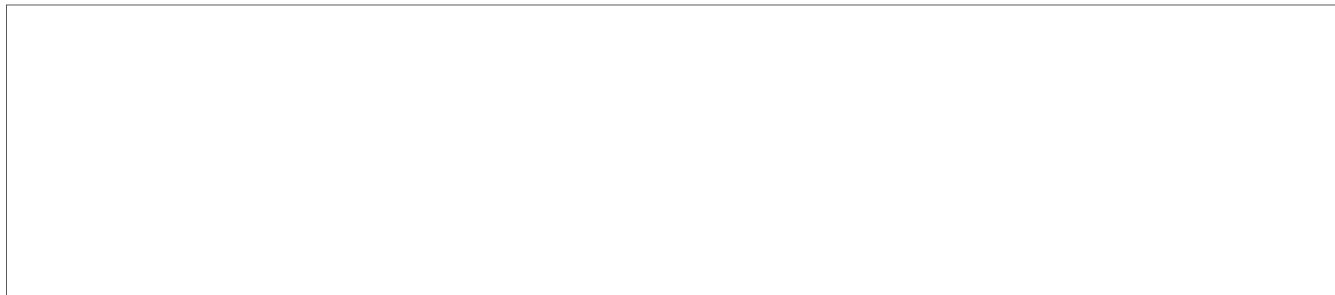
5. We must be more demanding in private of those who seek our help. Public criticism of sovereign governments may be spiritually satisfying but it is the surest way to policy failure. The human rights campaign in the first two years of the Carter Administration is a case in point. By the same token, the very great numbers of Jews permitted to emigrate from the USSR between 1971-1976 as a result of private pressure from the US demonstrates that we can affect the behavior of even our adversaries. 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. We should also point out how policies in other areas, such as nuclear proliferation, undermine Congressional support. In sum, we have a right and a responsibility to condition our support--but must do so in ways that make it possible politically for the recipient to comply.

6. We must press for changes in our foreign military sales laws to permit the US to provide arms more quickly to friends in need and to do so without hanging out all their dirty linen for the world to see. It does not serve any rational purpose to humiliate those whom we would help. We also need to change our military procurement policies so as to have stocks of certain basic kinds of weapons more readily available. Telling a requestor we can get him a weapons system in several months or even two or three years from now is not satisfactory when he wonders whether he will be in power in six weeks. Nor is it satisfactory to be forced to take weapons out of the inventories of our own forces. Finally, we need to be tougher with requestors when they seek weapons--such as F-16s--for prestige but their military needs and economic well-being would be better served by less sophisticated, less expensive weapons.



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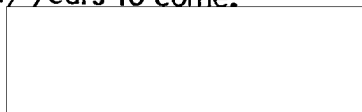
8. We must find a way to mobilize and use our greatest asset in the Third World--private business. Few in the Third World wish to adopt the Soviet economic system. Neither we nor the Soviets can offer unlimited or even large-scale economic assistance to the LDCs. Investment is the key to economic success 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.



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10. Finally, the Executive Branch must 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, often by last minute, poorly thought out or poorly explained initiatives from the Executive. 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. This is anathema to Constitutional purists in the Executive who see foreign policy as the necessary preserve of the Executive (and I am one of those), but it is reality and if we do not accommodate to it we will have no success against the Soviets in the Third World. In the same vein, support for a Third World policy must be bipartisan and stable. The flip-flops and zig-zags of the past eight years have led to confusion and uncertainty among our friends and neutrals who doubt our constancy and our reliability. It may be naive to call for this at this point in our history, but without a sustained, constant policy applied over a number of years, we cannot counter the relentless pressure of the USSR in the Third World.

As I warned, none of these measures are new. What would be new is linking them in a well-thought out strategy applied with consistency and keeping in mind that they are all related and must be applied as a package. Above all, 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.



/Robert M. Gates
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