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West-West Conflict and
the Middle East

by

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WEST-WEST CONFLICT AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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WEST-WEST CONFLICT AND THE MIDDLE EAST

There is fundamental disagreement if not outright conflict between the American and diverse European positions among the members of the Alliance with respect to the Middle East. This stems from diverse interpretations of both regional and global situations. Most important is the American globalization of conflict and rivalry with the Soviet Union. The extent to which the United States projects U.S.-Soviet rivalry into regional disputes, such as in the Middle East, Central America, Southeast Asia, etc., distresses Europeans who are preoccupied with their own problems. Globalizing conflict to the extent that all serious rifts are posited as attempts by international communism to sway events and men in distant places denies legitimacy to the substance of regional conflict.

Paradoxically, positing the Middle East situation as a principal area of East/West discord denies the Russians a legitimate role in resolving Middle Eastern conflicts. Thus, while the Russians helped end the fighting in the Yom Kippur War, they were denied any role in the evolving Israeli-Egyptian peace accords signed at Camp David. But not only the Russians were excluded, so too were the British and French.

It is not surprising that there is a lack of concordance among the allies with respect to the Middle East or any other extra alliance area. Indeed, it should be surprising to find concordance within the alliance. While it is convenient to refer to NATO as a bloc it is only a bloc in relation to a posture concerning a possible Soviet attack upon members of the alliance. As a multilateral alliance NATO is really a set of dyadic alliances some of which are more important than others. There are for example, two hundred and forty separate dyads within NATO; that is NATO is a set of two hundred and forty dyadic alliances which operate within the framework of the multilateral

alliance. When we talk in the loose form of usual discourse, we sweep under the rug all sorts of diverse conflicts and contradictions among the allied members. To cite just two examples; the Anglo-Icelandic "fisheries war" and the Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus and the islands in the Aegean. While the "fisheries war" has been long resolved, we should take note of the fact that Greece arms against Turkey and Turkey against Greece in the guise of erecting a defence against possible Soviet aggression. Is it any wonder that there is conflict within those diverse dyads with respect to policy affecting the Middle East?

Thus far we have been concerned with military security matters relating to the development of policy. Yet, military security issues are subordinate to political-economic concerns in the development of national policies despite the apparent preoccupation by major powers. The essence of relationships among nations is political, not military, and is preoccupied with the ambiguous goals of survival and well-being which are not necessarily achieved by military security policies. In democratic polities, such concerns are subordinate to conditions and perceptions of economic well-being on the part of the body politic. Questions concerning the political economies of individual countries take precedence even over the overarching question of security from attack. And the political-economic questions prompt increasingly difficult conflictual relationships not greater solidarity among allies in the foreign policy arena.

In the economic arena, conditions of conflict among principal allies have increased over the years at a more rapid and a more pressing rate than conditions of conflict between the superpowers. In the first two decades of NATO, intra-allied conflict was minimal because Britain and France were dependent upon American economic goodwill and Germany had no independent

policy; that is Germany adopted the very intelligent pose of not asserting any political leadership which would have exposed her to collateral attack. It was during this period that the United States, as the hegemonic power within the alliance, pressed for high levels of military cooperation but only provided rhetorical support for movements toward European economic integration. Real progress toward achieving true economic integration of Western Europe would have been threatening to the American economic position in Europe and elsewhere. It is not at all surprising that the United States helped to reinforce posturing rather than unification and is equally clear that the achievement of unification among the European states was unlikely because of essential rivalries. The developing events of the decades since World War II have witnessed the rebirth of an economic nationalism, of a neo-mercantilism that is more reminiscent of the 1920's and '30's than any other comparable period. Nation states engaged in competitive economic relations seeking to establish positions of competitive advantage do not develop policies that seek harmony; rather, they seek competitive advantage if not primacy.

It is not surprising that neither NATO nor the European community has developed a real energy policy particularly in light of the fact that few if any individual national governments have been able to arrive at a rational economic policy for their economies. What is left is a scramble for national advantage in establishing access to energy sources at "reasonable" costs which leads to competition that does not reinforce concepts of identifying collaborative policies relative to the Middle East. France and Germany, for example, seek to strike deals which assure access to adequate petroleum supplies. The British can adopt a somewhat more "farsighted policy" because of the development of North Sea oil.

The watershed for post-war economic policy is provided by the series of events running from late 1971-1973 when the U.S. devalued, demonetized and floated the dollar. The Nixon Administration yielded to a frustration that had been building for some years and had not resulted from policies largely of its own making. The U.S. dollar had been significantly overvalued and the Germans and Japanese particularly were perceived to be prospering at American expense. The American economic hegemony had been turned on its head yielding a U.S. administration first pleading for, then cajoling and ultimately demanding corrective action that has not yet taken place. The Bretton Woods economic system was scrapped in large part and no replacement is yet in sight. Economic policies among the allies came to be marked by a resurgent economic nationalism, neo-mercantilism and protectionism. The imposition of nontariff barriers has been accelerating since the end of the Nixon Administration and shows no signs of diminishing.

The enveloping disarray in international economic relations has been accompanied by discordant energy policies whose pressures are currently abated by what is likely to be a temporary oil glut. The present excess of energy supply over demand results in part from the impact of the global recession which is still underway in Western Europe and shows signs of returning to the U.S. and from American conservation efforts encouraged by high energy costs. But energy costs did not simply rise seeking some national level -- they increased in large part in response to U.S. policy. The rapid decline in the dollar's value from 1971-1973 was a factor since oil is priced in dollars. In October 1973 OPEC increased oil prices in part to "punish" the West for supporting Israel but also in order to recover value lost by the declining dollar. Further, the U.S. urged Iran to press for significantly greater increases in order to provide Iran with more foreign exchange to purchase

weapons and to promote conservation in the U.S. At its December 1973 meeting OPEC added approximately seven dollars to its price per barrel bringing the posted price to \$12.65. Kissinger was reported to have despaired at Congress' inability to adopt an energy policy raising prices adequate to promote conservation.

The nexus of economic and energy policies had enormous consequences for the West and provided no particular advantage for the United States. The political sophistication manifested by the Nixon Administration was not matched in the economic arena and contributed to allied determination to pursue economic and energy policies independent of the U.S. Confidence in American leadership was wanting; latent suspicions of American insensitivity and inadequacy were aroused, only to be compounded by dismay at Watergate, which was neither understood nor appreciated in Europe. Compounding European distress concerning U.S. leadership were the confusing alarms and signals emanating from Washington regarding Angola, Somalia, the War Powers Act, the Mayaguez Incident, etc., which were reinforced by more recent American gestures in Lebanon and in the Caribbean.

President Carter's signing of the SALT II agreement and subsequent withdrawal of it from active consideration in the Senate was not reassuring to Europeans who questioned the stability of American leadership. Neither was the handling of the neutron bomb issue, nor the Schmidt initiative regarding the development of intermediate range weapons to respond to the newly developed Soviet SS-20 missiles. Adding insult to injury was the handling of the concept "detente" by Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan and the flap that developed over the question of the Soviet gas pipeline to West Europe which was very badly handled by both the Carter and the Reagan Administrations. The net effect of all of these diverse factors was not to reinforce European

reliance upon American leadership but to encourage Europeans to seek to establish their own bargains and deals with respect to all of these issues.

In the economic arena we all witnessed the effects of the immense transfer of wealth from energy consuming countries to the energy producers. New holders of vast quantities of dollars brought their money into the financial markets and the sources of most of those petro dollars were Arab financiers. The New York and London financial capitals became dependent upon Arab dollars to transact their business. While the United States was somewhat immune to the impact of Arab financing, Western European countries were not. They now had a new economic giant to deal with and that giant was hostile to the American supported position of the Israeli's. Together with the impact of the new economic realities, the introduction by the U.S.S.R. of new and more threatening modes of nuclear blackmail aimed at Western Europe tied to the discrediting of detente by American political leadership also served as impetus to European states to establish their own policies. They now had to have independent economic policies which were both competitive with the United States and which but challenged the premises of American policy. The European publics began to raise serious questions about the increased danger of being linked to the United States. The increase in defense expenditures in the United States which began as a Carter Administration reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was accelerated even further by the Reagan Administration which has not yet demonstrated true resolve to deal with the Russians politically on the sensitive issues raised by the securities dilemma. The European members of NATO feel that they are in an exposed position which places them in the unhappy circumstance of being the most likely venue for the waging of a war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, unlikely as that eventuality remains.

What are the implications of all these factors for NATO and the Middle East? First, it is unlikely that there will be any coordination of policies by the European states and the United States with respect to the Middle East. The Europeans are increasingly going to be more receptive and supportive of Arab claims than Israeli claims to questions of territory, status and even survival because of the impact of Arab petroleum supplies.

While the United States has demonstrated an ability to refrain from intervening in the Iran-Iraq War, American posturing on the situation in Persian Gulf was not terribly reassuring to European political leaders. The danger of an American challenge to the Russians relative to intervention remains, even while it is unlikely. And were such intervention to occur, European access would be threatened.

A related aspect rests precisely in the area of establishing some distance from American policy. Particularly with the introduction of the Pershing II and cruise missiles into Western Europe, there is a developing need for European political leaders to demonstrate independence from and, to some degree, decoupling of European foreign policies from those of the United States. Relations with the Middle Eastern countries provides a very good opportunity for such an assertion of independence.

A third factor that develops logically from the first two rests upon the need for the maintenance of the discrete separation of regional from global conflicts. While this is related to the first two factors, it should be stated explicitly. The propensity of the super powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, to project their interests in regional disputes is destabilizing and unnerving to the European allies and to regional powers. The greater the extent of U.S.-Soviet confrontation, the more likely it will be for regional powers to seek to distance themselves from the superpowers.

To some extent this situation should exist among the middle eastern countries. But it is difficult to be achieved. Israel over the years has put all its eggs in one basket, not entirely of its own choosing, by becoming so inextricably tied up in the American relationship. While it likes to see itself in the role of "honest broker," the United States starts from a premise of commitment to the principal Israeli positions relative to status, territory, etc. In spite of disclaimers, the effect of the Reagan Administration's intervention into Lebanon was the promotion of Israeli goals in the region. Reagan may have convinced himself otherwise, but Arab states and European states were not blind to the effect of US policy.

A more difficult question is who are the legitimate actors who must be brought into any real attempts to establish regional peace. American policy to exclude the Russians from participating in any settlement makes sense in terms of positioning American interest as primary in the region. But it has consequences at the same time: it creates the opportunity for the USSR to impose a veto upon potential peace arrangements. Of course, the United States may oppose reentry of a Soviet diplomatic presence into the Middle East because, for the US, peace in the Middle East may be less important than the exclusion of Soviet interests and/or involvement.

Solutions to Middle East problems may be less likely than survival, which may be the best practicable outcome attainable in the foreseeable future. If we recall the wars and conflicts raging throughout Europe for centuries, and compare that history of turmoil and upheaval to the relatively benign current situation, we may glean some useful insights. It is likely that the sublimation of diverse competitive European claims to territory, status, and position may have been subsumed by the overarching conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. It is not until these two essentially European actors became

the most important European bloc leaders that indigenous European rivalries were suppressed. The lesson provided by that experience is not a terribly optimistic one to be projected upon the Middle East. But then Europe has had forty years of peace and prosperity. Forty years of peace and prosperity would not be such a bad thing for the Middle East.