

The Decline of U.S. Military and Diplomatic Involvement

At Home, a Decision for 'Non-Exercise of Power' . . .

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HAVING suffered the pains of exercising great military and diplomatic power in Vietnam, the people of the United States now are feeling the pains that come from not exercising military and diplomatic power in India.

The United States government in 1971 had less influence on the developments on the Indian subcontinent than the tiny American republic of the 19th century had on the Napoleonic wars in Europe.

In the course of these South Asian developments, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians died. There has been no such

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ghastly loss of life and property since the dreadful disorders of partition in which millions perished. A new nation, Bangladesh, has emerged, under circumstances reminiscent of those that brought about the separate existence of Texas and in a situation that is likely also to lead to annexation or something very close to it. In addition, India, in order to acquire the power with which to achieve this result has given to the Soviet Union a mortgage on its independence and separate diplomatic existence the terms of which are unknown, but the effect of which is a profound redistribution of power in South Asia.

THE PRESENT administration in Washington is not to be wholly blamed for these dire effects, involving the erosion and diminution of American power throughout Asia and probably elsewhere in the world. No doubt the policy of the government reflected faithfully the wish, impulse and instinct of the overwhelming majority of Americans. Their chief reaction to one of the decisive political and military events of the 20th century was a deep upwelling of satisfaction, relief and gratification at the bloody events of the Bangladesh separatist insurgency and in the bloodier calamities of non-involvement of their country in the Indian intervention.

Whatever the attitude of American citizens, the United States probably could not

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have influenced decisively the events in East Pakistan. The United States, in the past few years, has taken the decision not to employ its diplomatic and military power. The decision has been taken in full view of the whole world. It was made long before the crisis arose in Pakistan. It was made in the 1968 riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. It was made in the smoking slums of Washington, Newark, Detroit and Los Angeles. It was made on disorderly campuses of colleges and universities. It was made at peace demonstrations in Washington. It was made by mobs that stormed draft boards and recruiting offices.

THE FIRST pains of the non-exercise of power may be anguishing but they will not be protested by marches, mobs, riots or draft resistance. More lives were lost in two weeks of war between Pakistan and India than were sacrificed in the last year of the war in Vietnam. More people were made homeless, more people were killed and more property destroyed in the Bangladesh suppression and the subsequent Indian intervention than in Vietnam. But there will be no demonstrations against non-intervention, non-interference and the non-exercise of power which contributed to the calamities on the Indian subcontinent.

People may riot and demonstrate with some effect against a government that is taking unpopular actions; but they surely would be foolish to demonstrate against a government of inaction when that inaction is clearly an expression of the national will. There may be a few Americans who do not relish this spectacle of American impotence. There may be a few Americans who look with apprehension to a future world situation devoid of the influence of American power. There may be some Americans who would rather have the United States be a world policeman than to have the world without a policeman, or a world in which the Soviet Union is the policeman. If such there are, their influence is not much felt. They have little political power. They have no national spokesman. There is scarcely a political figure of the national scene who would dare even to intimate that events in South Asia might have been different if

there had existed at the time a powerful America, willing to use its power.

Would the results have been different? A nice question, since history, in Acton's eloquent phrase, "does not disclose its alternatives." Could the government of the United States have persuaded the government of West Pakistan to have granted Bangladesh a degree of national autonomy? Could it have induced West Pakistan to desist from its brutal military suppression of the insurgency? Could it have insisted that India cease its incitement of rebellion in a neighboring country? Could it have insisted that India cease its policy of intervention.

Certainly it could not do it after months of a public retreat from the exercise of power. Maybe it could not have done it anyway. But the die was cast. The United States had thrown away the power to shape events on the subcontinent. It was already committed to a policy of not exercising political and military power; committed not by constitutional, legal and official decisions alone, but by the manifest will of a people wearied of the exercise of power and influence in international affairs.

ANY attempt at early influence or intimidation of intervention would have been doomed to failure. The words spoken by American ambassadors to the rulers and diplomats of the subcontinent would have been empty words. Voices from the streets, louder than those of the ambassadors, have been shouting to Asia and to the world, month after month, year after year, that the United States would not exercise its power in Asia. Even the blindest Asian politicians could see that whatever America had to say, there was nothing it would do. Intractable political circumstances in Asia and elsewhere do not yield to what is said when what is said is not related to what will be done. They are more influenced by what the sayer is willing to do, or, more importantly, by what he is known to be willing to do.

In Vietnam, Americans learned that the exercise of great power can be filled with pain and anguish. In India, they have learned that the failure to exercise great power also can be filled with pain and anguish. Unfortunately, that bloody instruction is likely to be repeated in many other quarters of the world where a precarious peace has rested on the knowledge of what the United States might do.