Divining the secret of Carter's foreign policy

The Third Alternative

Does the Carter administration have a foreign policy? All we have heard from it so far has been an unsorted collection of single-issue declarations, often contradictory. We have been told for example that nothing is more important than SALT, but we also have been told that nothing is more important than the Atlantic Alliance. The new President has been loud in his criticism of the late policy of detente, and equally loud in proclaiming the urgency of its prompt resumption with goals more ambitious than ever—the abolition of nuclear weapons, no less.

But perhaps one can after all discern the outlines of the Carter foreign policy in the fragmentary evidence of certain slogans insistently repeated, and in the known views of some of the President's men. A major clue is the explicit rejection of the Republicans' "balance of power" policy in favor of a new and undefined policy called "world order." Of course the policy followed intermittently after 1969 was in some sense a balance-of-power policy, but it was never regarded by its protagonists as their *chosen* policy. Rather it was viewed as the second-best policy imposed by circumstances—Indochinese circumstances that is. The policy of the Republican years, in fact, can be seen as the second in a triad of foreign policies imposed by changing historical circumstances. Carter's emerging policy, if my theory is correct, would be the third.

A great capital of public support for an activist foreign policy accumulated during the tranquil years of the 1950s. President Kennedy set out to use this inheritance to preserve the third world for the first. Johnson was the wastrel who exhausted what the rhetoric of Dulles, the authority of Eisenhower and good fortune all had earned. In a logical progression,

the continued activism of Richard Nixon could lead only to bankruptcy. Kennedy, Johnson and the early Nixon all tried to pursue the same foreign policy, whose dominant characteristic was unilateralism: the United States was to assert its benevolent influence and its leadership of the non-Communist world in order to defend American values and American interests, largely through American power alone. So long as public opinion was willing to pay any price, to bear any burden, there was no need to compromise American values and no need to abandon American interests anywhere.

It was not to be. The policy of unilateral activism required the abundant use of power. All the power that could be needed could still have been extracted easily enough from a society so highly productive, but when the essential sanction of popular opinion was gradually withdrawn the policy had to be abandoned. Dr. Kissinger was called upstairs and given effective control of foreign policy. Reverting whenever he could to the more ambitious policy of the 1960s, but mostly deprived of the means to carry it out, Kissinger's second-best alternative was a balance-of-power policy in which the less central values must inevitably be compromised, and the more marginal interests must inevitably be abandoned, in order to protect what is vital. Under the earlier policy of unilateral activism, the main antagonists were to be squarely opposed, and the power of lesser enemies was to be crushed. In the unhappy circumstances of the early 1970s, the lesser powers instead had to be managed, by a whole series of compromises and a whole network of special arrangements. In this way it could be hoped that Chinese power would curb the Russians, while the Russians in turn were constrained by the Chinese. At the same time, the United States tried to moderate the conduct of both by offering inducements more attractive than what these opponents might achieve by adventures that the paralysis of American power had made possible. One recalls for example how vivid the threat of a new Korean war seemed, A.D. 1970, and how effective was the remedy the good doctor prescribed. On the other hand the attempt to synthesize real power out of the economic strength of Europe and Japan, and the invocations of "multipolarity," could not suffice to make players out of those who so richly enjoyed the role of spectators; and after the 1973 oil crisis it became very clear that the sheep would remain sheep.

While refusing to sanction a return to unilateral activism, a growing proportion of the intelligentsia took to criticizing the compromises that the new policy inevitably required. These critics would allow Dr. Kissinger neither to confront the Russians with power, nor to seduce the Russians with trade and friendly talk.

This is the background. Is President Carter's foreign policy going to be one or the other, or will it indeed be a third—a truly new alternative? If only by a process of elimination, it is possible to define a new alternative, and it appears that Carter truly intends to pursue it. A third answer to the enemy's military power is not to confront it or to balance it, but actually to reduce it. This is by far the most difficult thing to achieve. By relentless declaration, by the example of an America that would itself avoid both the use of force and the threat to use it, by the active promotion of all institutional machines (and chiefly the UN with it myriad affiliates), it may be possible to raise the political costs of any use of force on the part of others. Once this is achieved, the value of military power as a diplomatic weapon will be correspondingly downgraded. As it is, the awesome destructive potential of thermonuclear warheads inhibits the use of force among the most powerful nations; and the use of outright force is much more difficult to legitimize nowadays than ever before. Hence their hope that a "world order" foreign policy might achieve further inhibitions and more complete restrictions.

The great difficulty of course is that nothing can alter the ultimate supremacy of force over other manifestations of national power. The general mood of the world, the inhibitions of mutual deterrence, and America's own "world order" policies may all transfer more and more of the world's business to the court of a softer diplomacy in which armed threats play no role. But the court of force will inevitably remain, and those who lose in the lower court will still be able to appeal, using coercion and even war to avert diplomatic defeat. This being the case, every move in the lower court of non-coercive diplomacy will be influenced by the active knowledge that the other court remains in permanent session, as it always will in the absence of general and complete disarmament.

A reversion to unilateralism or a balance-of-power policy—or more likely a combination of both—is only a matter of time. But when the reversion does take place, the world's refusal to live up to Carter's best intentions should not be attributed to the general amorality of politics, or to the particular temptations of military power. A closer scrutiny of the "world order" policy reveals an essential ambiguity: it *may be* a humanist exercise in self-restraint by a great military power, but it also could be viewed as a cynical attempt to change the rules of the game at a time when Soviet military power is becoming superior to our own. For it is clear that the successful downgrading of military power and coercive diplomacy must inevitably result in the increased importance of economic power and economic diplomacy. And the Soviet Union is a super-power only in the military dimension; it is no more than a middle power in the arena of the international economy.

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