

Completing the Grand Strategy

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President Nixon's Moscow trip completes the grand strategy of his first term in office. All the pieces are in place now, more or less as he planned, and it remains to be seen what results his concept for the world will bring.

It is a concept based on history, most particularly 19th-century history. The phrase at the heart of it is balance-of-power, by which the Nixon administration means using the power of the United States as leverage in disputes around the world so that the scales weighing other countries' conflicts cannot be tipped against American interests.

This is quite different from the concept which dominated American policy from Pearl Harbor in 1941 until Nixon took office. For over a generation, the central idea was to combine American power with that of friends and allies so as to resist upheavals threatening world peace.

The shift reveals itself in the administration's own explanation of the decision to cut North Vietnamese supply lines by mining and bombing. That was an old plan, repeatedly considered and rejected many times since 1964.

But, in the administration's view, the circumstances are entirely different now than they were before Nixon took office. Therefore, senior presidential aides argue, the same action can be expected to have quite different effect than it would have had earlier.

Again, giving the White House rationale, three major factors are considered firmly changed as a result of deliberate administration effort.

The first is American-Chinese relations. It is felt that Nixon's Peking trip has created a Chinese interest in reducing conflict with the United States, and therefore removed any Chinese interest in prolonging the Vietnamese war.

This is a subtle calculation, for while it is clearly true that Peking is willing to seek some accommodations with America, there is no sign that it intends to try imposing any kind of restraint upon Hanoi. The Chinese leadership told Senate Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) that until the Vietnamese war is settled, nothing else of importance could be achieved between the United States and China.

Nixon did change America's China policy, very much for the better, but that in no way guarantees that America's unchanged Vietnamese policy will work better.

The second change is in American-Soviet relations. The Russians had wanted the President to visit Moscow much earlier in his

term. He decided to take the opposite approach to summitry with Russia from the plan of his China encounter. Instead of making his journey at the start of some eventual negotiations, he chose to wait until a series of agreements had been worked out ready for the final flourish of signatures in Moscow.

This, evidently, has had the planned effect of creating greater Soviet interest in avoiding conflict with the United States and moderating Soviet reaction to crises, such as damage to Soviet ships in Haiphong harbor. But there is no reason to think it will change the Soviet position on Vietnam or the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent.

The third change claimed by the White House is Hanoi's understanding of American politics. The argument is that Hanoi now sees any hopes for a great American upheaval sweeping Nixon away and changing American policy will not be fulfilled. Therefore, the White House planners believe, Hanoi will come to terms this fall because the alternative is four more bloody, inconclusive years.

That is the grand plan. It is sweeping, the kind of thesis any academic would be proud of. It is based on the belief that, at bottom, power is a game and the players can calculate all their moves. But it leaves out the mentality of the men of Hanoi, their dedication and conviction, just as it leaves out the mentality of the men of Saigon and the frailty of South Vietnam's sense of nationhood.

In a larger sense, the grand strategy leaves out the yearnings and aspirations of people, in weak countries and even in strong ones. Its goal is stability, which isn't quite enough in a rapidly changing world, though it is necessary if change isn't to mean ruin. It lacks any vision of what should be achieved by the manipulation of power, beyond not losing pieces to other players.

Still, this is essentially what Nixon has used his first term to do. The ceremonies in Moscow climax the preparations for the end game. If power really is a game, it may work and produce the peace and prosperity which are at stake. I can't get away from the nagging, unhappy feeling that it isn't a game at all, though; that it's about people, and that power is a tool.

A tool can be used in many ways, but when people don't know what they want to make with it, what purpose it must serve beyond its own existence, then it isn't likely to produce anything. Or worse, it can do great harm.