MidEast Focus

NO PEACE YET IN

The end of the Cold War, the successful restoration of Kuwaiti independence in Operation DESERT STORM, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord have undeniably cooled some of the tensions in a region that for many years was dubbed a geopolitical "arc of crisis" by American planners. As compared with any point in the latter 20th Century, the U.S. today is less likely to be drawn precipitously into hostilities in the Middle East to defend its vital interests.

Who can blame Americans for feeling a greater sense of security when they compare the atmosphere of confrontation when 140,000 Soviet troops invaded southward into Afghanistan, in 1979, to the benign relations today between Moscow and Washington? Or when they see PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat — for decades Israel's terrorism 'poster child' — being helicoptered by the Israeli military back into Gaza, to a hero's welcome?

The Rise of Islam

The Middle East has made real strides toward greater stability in the past few years; but the "crisis" has not ended. Many observers are concerned over social and political changes within the Arab world, manifesting themselves in the increased political abuse of traditional Islamic symbols. In Algeria, Egypt and other secular, Western-oriented Arab states, the future of longstanding regimes and ruling circles is called into question by this rising tide of fundamentalism. Jordan, which has successfully opened its parliamentary system to Islamic deputies, is the exception to a generally troublesome trend in the region.

The United States, long a champion of democracy and freedom of religion, is torn over this issue. For the most part, the U.S. enjoys good relations with the *status quo* regimes — witness the coalition it organized to free Kuwait and the cooperation it achieved in launching a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process in Madrid in 1991. Of equal importance, the U.S. harbors legitimate doubts that ascendant political movements under the banner of Islam would respect democratic and international norms. Americans also have basic misgivings about a movement that, in large part, defines itself as a protest against Western and American values.

Conventional Threats to the Peace

Mass movements defined by social and spiritual qualities are hardly in the same category as hostile armies. If 'political Islam' poses a potential threat to American interests, it is not the kind of phenomenon against which the Pentagon has been conditioned to defend. Nor should it necessarily be viewed in adversarial terms. A persuasive argument can be made that by treating Islamic fundamentalism as the latest "ism" (following the collapse of Communism) to be accorded the status of national adversary, the United States would only elevate and crystallize anti-American passions in the Islamic world — to say nothing of the offense it would cause millions of patriotic, taxpaying Muslim Americans.

One need not theorize about new kinds of threats, however, to see that a traditional military conflict engaging American interests could again arise in the Middle East. Even if the Arab-Israeli peace process leads to a stable peace in the Levant, major security concerns will remain, centering largely on the traditional powers in the Gulf region, Iran and Iraq.

Iran remains a potent force against Western influence in the region, and a source of support to extremist elements. Iran's acquisition of Russian submarines and MiG-29 aircraft are raising concerns among the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The possibility that North Korea may plan to divert nuclear bomb materials

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to Iran is a real concern in Washington.

Iraq, even though it is presently restricted by the U.N. Security Council Resolutions imposed at the time of the Gulf war, will one day see the sanctions lifted, and again reap major oil revenues. Conceivably, post-sanctions Iraq will still be run by Saddam Hussein — head of a regime that has shown itself morally capable of brutalizing a neighbor (and its own people, for that matter), torching scores of oilfields, and launching deadly missiles into the population centers of Israel and Saudi Arabia. No serious observer believes Saddam has given up his nuclear ambitions.

In the meantime, the civil war in Yemen has raised concerns of a proxy confrontation in which Iraq (and perhaps also Iran and Sudan) have been backing the north and Saudi Arabia (with help from Kuwait) the south. Any hostilities reflecting the regional schisms of the Gulf war (not to mention the spectacle of Iraq and Iran backing the same side in a conflict) has to be cause for concern.

Curbing The Regional Arms Race

If progress at the Arab-Israeli peace table and with the United Nations Special Commission overseeing the dismantlement of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction should ever allow for serious consideration of region-wide arms control, there will still be major hurdles to surmount. Israel does not discuss its nuclear arsenal and missile delivery systems; but Arab states are very exercised about them. What with the unending concern over missile proliferation in Iran and Iraq, and the existence of missiles in Saudi Arabia and Syria that could reach Israel, it is clear that any real arms control regime in the Middle East will have to be far broader — politically as well as geographically — than American policymakers of any political stripe have been wont to contemplate.

Thanks to a some favorable turns of history, reflecting in no small measure the boldness and imagination of enlightened leadership here and abroad, the winds of war no longer blow as strongly in the Middle East. For the most part, the West has turned its attention away from the "arc of crisis," seeing no imminent danger to its interests. Traditional U.S. security partners in the Arab world, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, have learned that there are limits to Washington's attention span when it comes to more local security concerns.

As oil revenues have sagged, straining Arab economies, Western governments have shifted their own resources to domestic needs. The U.S. has developed new criteria for the provision of a shrinking foreign aid budget, and is contemplating further limits on its own transfer of defense goods and services to other countries. Should these trends continue, the net result would be that a threat to the peace, if it did arise suddenly, could find the armed forces of America's partners less ready to blunt an attack, and U.S. forces less ready to come to their aid.

American policy over time is often compared to a pendulum. From the most recent high point of international activism, under President Reagan in the mid-1980s, the U.S. now finds itself (as always) facing an array of international security problem cases, but this time without apparently endeavoring to reinforce its position by drawing assertively on traditional tools of influence such as declaratory security doctrines, forward troop and naval deployments, foreign assistance and robust military-to-military relationships. The pendulum is swinging, and appropriately so, toward a more modest post-Cold War national security posture for the United States. But the Middle East, alone, should serve notice that this time, we ought not let it swing too far.

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