

THE POWER TO NEGOTIATE

Our Approach Should Be from the Standpoint of *Vital National Interest*

E. Raymond Platig

The Cold War objectives of both the United States and the Soviet Union are basic factors in any possible negotiation of differences. A third, perhaps more tangible, factor is the distribution of power between the two blocs. Ever since Sputnik I took to space there has been much speculation concerning the relative power positions of the Communist powers and the West.

One immediate but not too well-defined reaction to Sputnik I was that we ought to get down to serious negotiations with the Soviet Union immediately, since we seemed to have lost the race for military power. This approach to foreign policy is as dangerous as that of the crusading moralist. For the proposition which lies behind this position is that we can successfully negotiate with the Soviets from weakness. Successful negotiation from a position of weakness can be contemplated only if the nation with whom you are negotiating can be assumed to be magnanimous enough to grant you those minimum interest objectives you seek even though you do not have the power to demand them. It seems obvious that the present Soviet leaders are not capable of such magnanimity.

(This initial panic response has by now pretty much passed, though one wonders if it is not still present in the attitude of an Administration which seems more concerned with the cost of armaments than with the need for armaments.)

Most observers today seem to be in agreement that we have not yet lost the race for military power but are in some danger of losing it. Observers disagree as to how much national effort is required in what length of time to assure that we do not lose the military race. It is somewhat disturbing to note that a great many observers not committed to a defense of the Administration's actions are highly critical of those actions on the grounds that we are doing too little, not fast enough. Be that as it may, it seems

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to me that the most accurate description which can be given to the present distribution of power between the blocs is to say that we have a balance of uncertainty.

The scales in which statesmen and analysts weigh relative national power are never delicate instruments, and the weights which they put into the scales are never clearly marked. This constitutional uncertainty of the whole process of power calculation is exacerbated today by the uncertainty of the weights to be assigned to the rapidly developing weapons systems of modern military technology. The margin of possible error in current power calculations is thus quite large, large enough to make it unlikely that either side would commit itself to a policy which required a clear superiority of power. Thus we have the balance of uncertainty, a balance which may well continue for many many years. On the other hand, one cannot discount the possibility that the balance may be completely upset by some spectacular breakthrough in military technology by one side or the other, or by some decisive victory in the non-military aspects of the Cold War. In any event, there are only three conceivable positions of power from which we might negotiate. One is a position of weakness, another a position of balance, and the third a position of strength.

I have already indicated my belief that we cannot expect to have satisfactory negotiations if we find ourselves in a position of weakness. It is tempting to think that if we found ourselves in a position of strength we would still be willing to negotiate and that indeed we would display that magnanimity toward the vital interests of the Communist states which we cannot anticipate that they would display toward us. I would like to think that this is true. However, our own tendency to adhere to a crusading moralism and our lack of success in bringing about successful negotiations in the period when we had a clear superiority of military strength do not encourage this hope. It would appear, then, that the distribution of power which would be most conducive

to successful negotiation would be a distribution which puts the two sides essentially in balance, even though that balance may be a balance of uncertainty and a balance of terror.

It should be evident from what we have said that the one configuration of these three factors which would be most conducive to a negotiated settlement of the Cold War is as follows. First, the attitude of the United States would have to be a non-crusading, non-moralistic one that would permit the nation to pursue only those limited objectives which would clearly serve to assure the survival and reasonable well-being of the United States. Two, the attitude of the Soviet Union toward the Cold War would also have to be one which led it to pursue a policy of objectives limited by a concern for its vital interests. The same can be said for other Communist states, especially Red China. Three, the distribution of power between the blocs would have to be one of essential balance.

At the present time it is clear that the only one of these conditions which is met is the last one; that is, we are in a position of essential balance, although I must admit that I for one would feel a little more easy if the balance were a bit more clearly uncertain in our favor. My interpretation of Soviet objectives, as I have already indicated, is that they are not limited solely by a concern for the vital national interests of the Soviet state, and this is a highly discouraging aspect of the present situation.

We have, however, much more control over American objectives than we do over Soviet objectives and it is in this area that I think we most need to straighten out our thinking in order to prepare for the time when—assuming Soviet objectives do change—it will be feasible to enter into serious negotiations. There is, however, more to be gained from this process of defining American vital interests and deciding upon the objectives which will serve them than merely being prepared to negotiate at some future date with the Soviets. It seems to me that by the very fact of our engaging in such a process we would do a great deal to put pressure upon the Soviets to change their objectives, and also to make the balance of uncertainty less uncertain in our favor.

If I am correct that vital national interests provide a level of discourse which is universally apprehended and understood, then I think it follows that we would find ourselves for the first time speaking to the world's statesmen and peoples in terms that they could understand. It is no secret that today Ameri-

can motives are much suspect in a large part of the world. Part of this suspicion can be laid to Soviet propaganda, but still a larger part of it can, I believe, be traced to the fact that the uncommitted nations and peoples of the world, and even our allies, are highly reluctant to be involved in a great American crusade which they see, and I think rightly, as ending in nuclear holocaust. If we could make it clear to these people that our objectives were limited, that we were willing to settle the Cold War on terms that would respect the vital interest objectives of the Communist powers, then it would become clear to them also that the Cold War had its roots in Soviet ambition and intransigence.

Such a display of genuine concern for arriving at arrangements which would protect the vital interests of the Soviet bloc countries would inspire more serious thought about the nature of Soviet objectives, thought which at once would be more serious and more critical of those objectives. I am convinced that such an approach by the United States would face the Soviet leaders with the necessity of defending what is really indefensible, and that is their expansionist ambitions. I am convinced that with such an approach we would at one and the same time greatly increase our prestige in the non-Soviet areas of the world and put increasing pressure upon the Soviets to take a much more reasonable approach themselves.

Now at this point it may be objected that this is nothing more than the old game of power politics. The objection is to the point. I would, however, defend myself, and power politics, on two counts.

First, I would insist that I am talking about power politics with a conscience; a conscience which is sensitive to the vital interests of other nations as well as to those of one's own nation. I have the concept of *vital* national interests rather than the bare concept of national interest because it seems to me there is an important ethical difference between the two.

Mr. Webster suggests that a suitable synonym for interest is advantage. If we pursue a policy dedicated to maximizing the national advantage in all situations, with no thought as to the impact of our policy upon the vital interests of others, and with no attempt to limit our own objectives to those necessary for protection of national security and the integrity of our national way-of-life, if, in other words, we pursue a policy designed to serve the national interest in its narrowest meaning, we will be in the position of identifying any self-serving national be-

havior as morally acceptable. To do so seems to me to deprive ethics of its key role as a factor limiting self-serving behavior.

I do not mean to imply that a foreign policy conducted by a statesman whose conscience is sensitive to the vital interests of other nations is a foreign policy which is ethically perfect. I think there is always an unbridgeable gap between the morally perfect and desirable act, on the one hand, and the real and possible act on the other hand.

Morally sensitive men live their lives in the tension created by this gap. In neither his private nor political role can man perform the totally good act; the best he can hope for is the wisdom, the moral sensitivity, and the courage to choose the least evil of the alternatives open to him. And in his foreign policy acts the statesman cannot forget that he acts not on his own behalf but rather on behalf of a nation of many people, a nation whose vital interests he is sworn to defend. He cannot forswear success for his own nation—defined in terms of the vital interests of that nation—in favor of a morally more satisfying but nationally disastrous course of action.

I do not, therefore, mean to leave the impression that this approach to the ethical problem in foreign policy assures the peaceful solution of all problems among states. It clearly does not. Even if all of the world's statesmen adopted this approach there would still surely be instances in which the vital interests

of State A would conflict with the vital interests of State B. In such instances, victory would go to the more powerful and astute state. There would also still be instances in which the vital interests of two large powers could be protected only by sacrificing the interests of a smaller power—Korea and some of the nations of Eastern Europe may well be examples of this.

My point is not that this approach dispels all of the tragedy of international affairs. Rather, my point is that such an approach provides a base from which we can understand the tragedy, and from which the morally sensitive statesman can judge the extent of his inevitable guilt.

The second count on which I would defend my position on power politics can be more briefly put. I would claim that only power politics informed by conscience provides us with an approach to international relations which maximizes the use we can make of such elements of social control as exist in international society, namely the reason and moral insight of statesmen. To discredit the need for rational power calculations and for a conscientious recognition of the vital interests of all parties concerned in a headlong effort to save the world with grandiose schemes for world law, world government, world public opinion, or a codification of the moral law, is to ignore the problem and comfort ourselves with our own good thoughts.



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