

The Nixon Doctrine of Bargains

Whittle Johnston

More car for less money" might be the salesman's pitch for the diplomatic bonanza promised in the Nixon Doctrine. The focus on partnership with friendly nations will lower America's cost in meeting her obligations, we are told, but the saving is *not* at the price of an inferior product. On the contrary, it assures a superior one. There is, to be sure, a reduction of America's load, but without damage to our vital interests or to world order. Indeed, the reduction is intended to further those interests and that order.

Nixon's first State of the World message outlines a bold sequence: through partnership, strength; through strength, negotiation; through negotiation, peace. In a long-term partnership of strengths, America and her friends will be able to negotiate the outstanding difficulties with the adversaries and thereby lay the foundation for enduring peace. "Twice as much for a nickel too." It may be too good to be true.

The terms of this peace-producing partnership deserve a closer look. "First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments." "Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security." "Third, in cases involving other types of aggression we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense."

Since items one and two promise to maintain American commitments, and item three looks to their reduction, the Nixon Doctrine involves at its heart a compromise between "commitment maintenance" and "load reduction."

WHITTLE JOHNSTON, a member of the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Virginia, is completing a study of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy.

This compromise is deeply rooted in domestic politics. That the dominant national mood calls for a winding down of America's role few can doubt, most particularly Mr. Nixon. After all, it was American "over-involvement" that cut short his predecessor's tenure, tore apart the Democratic Party and opened the White House doors to the Republicans. The Nixon Doctrine is clearly responsive to domestic political imperatives.

A comparison of today's mood, especially on Vietnam, with that of a generation ago, after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, is instructive. Three factors then led Americans to assume great responsibilities willingly. First was the reality of the threat: American territory had been attacked directly by a powerful foe. Second, alternative barriers to the threat were almost non-existent. Britain and Russia had their backs to the wall, and the United States was the only great nation *not* involved in the conflict. Finally, there was in America a pervasive sense of guilt about under-involvement in the inter-war years.

In contrast to this, today's mood, particularly on Vietnam, is marked by enormous uncertainty about the threat. In what sense is a small underdeveloped state, half-way around the world, a threat to the mighty United States? As for alternate buffers, the situation is completely reversed. In 1941, we were the only great nation not directly involved; in 1971, we are the only great nation that is directly involved. And, if yesterday's mood was one of guilt about under-involvement, today's is one of guilt about over-involvement.

The shift is signalled by the different symbolic status of Pearl Harbor from Tonkin Gulf (its nearest equivalent). Pearl Harbor gave virtually unanimous legitimacy to our involvement, while Tonkin Gulf is, to put it mildly, an ambiguous symbol.

The Nixon Doctrine, if it simply promised a reduced American role, might be easily understood, but the compromise between commitment maintenance

and load reduction complicates the matter. In domestic politics, there are those—generally to the President's right—who question the reduction of America's role at all. Others—generally to his left—are restless with the promise to honor our commitments. One thinks of Senator James Buckley and Senator Mike Mansfield as examples.

On the whole, Mr. Nixon has been successful in dealing with his right flank. To those who argue that the cold war is still very much with us and that there should be little change in former policy, he has said, in effect, "Nothing doing." While facing sharp criticism from a handful of Congressmen, and while many young Republicans have given their political hearts to Mr. Agnew for '72, the real powers on the Right (e.g., Reagan and Goldwater) have been brought along to support their President.

The pressure on Mr. Nixon's left is stronger and there is more trouble ahead. His critics call for a load reduction more rapid and more general than Mr. Nixon proposes. Pressure assumes various forms: the Congress tries to impose a date certain for withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam, proposes a massive reduction of troops in Europe, and urges the abandonment of Taiwan in favor of a one-China policy. Other tactics are readied to sustain the pressure.

Given this pressure and his obvious concern for load reduction, why hasn't the President given more ground to his left? One answer seems to be his desire to keep down the thunder on the Right. Mr. Nixon has frequently expressed his anxiety over the domestic effects of a precipitate abandonment of American commitments. Remembering the early '50's and looking at the early '70's, his fears seem well-founded.

Beyond this, he no doubt has external considerations in mind. An essential precondition for the envisaged partnerships is the integrity of American commitments. If we so lightly abandon old partners, it will not be easy to enlist new ones. Further, the development of partnerships takes the time that would be cut short by sudden withdrawal. Finally, Nixon's view emphasizes reciprocity in dealing with foes; they must not think they can get something for nothing simply by outwitting the United States. Here Vietnamization is a crucial test case.

The compromise between commitment maintenance and load reduction involves an effort, if not to square the political circle, at least to straighten out its sides a bit. To succeed on the domestic scene, Mr. Nixon has used three devices among others. The first is timing: he must reduce America's burdens rapidly enough (i.e., by election time, 1972) to pull the rug from under his critics on the Left, but not so rapidly as to provoke a revolt on his right.

A second device involves dual tactics of what might be termed "commitment modification" and "commitment transfer." By commitment modification

one makes a commitment less burdensome to bear, as, for example, by shifting from the promise to support an independent South Vietnam to the much weaker commitment to give South Vietnam a reasonable chance to survive on its own. Through "commitment transfer" one shifts the commitment as much as possible to *other* institutions, where the burden of bearing it or the blame for breaking it is no longer America's. The U.N. was useful in this connection where it clearly eased our problem to have the failure of our two-China policy occur under its auspices.

Then there is the "personnel" device. In frequent cases it is the Vice President who has been Mr. Nixon's most valuable tactical weapon. Since he is the hardest target to hit from the Right, Mr. Agnew is often asked to break news that will be most painful to the Right—for example, the reduction of force levels in Korea.

While Mr. Nixon has been relatively successful in meeting the domestic challenges to his complex compromise, the international challenges are far more formidable. He has made it clear that the Doctrine is a response not only to the changed position of America but to the changed role of other nations as well. Had the relative decline in American power not occurred, the Doctrine would not be necessary; without other changes, it would not be possible. The opportunity for "the bargain" would have disappeared, and we would face the highly unpleasant alternatives of either reducing the American role at the expense of American interests or protecting those interests at ever-mounting cost to America. But it is one thing to realize that changes in world politics may make a good bargain possible and quite another to show the sustained skill to exploit these trends in a way that serves the promised end.

The happy promises of the Nixon Doctrine are made possible by the development of major tensions between Moscow and Peking and by the emergence of new centers of power, chiefly Japan and the nations of Western Europe. However, Mr. Nixon faces serious obstacles to taking advantage of these trends. Insofar as he is successful in utilizing one trend, he will find it difficult to capitalize on the other. Since the trends themselves, in their effect on the American interest, are in conflict, he runs the risk of getting the worst, not the best, of both. In addition, it is doubtful that American opinion (on the basis of past performance) has the diplomatic sophistication to give sustained support to any administration in such a difficult and ambitious enterprise.

Whatever the sources of the Moscow-Peking conflict—geopolitical, doctrinal, or other—there can be little doubt of its continuing severity. As Chou En-lai recently remarked: "There are one million [Soviet] troops on our border—army, air force, naval units in the coastal areas, nuclear weapons, and guided missiles. They have sent 300,000 troops into the People's

Republic of Mongolia, including missile units. The Mongolian government did not behave like the Czechs, so what is the purpose? It obviously is against China, to create a state of tension along our borders."

To realize the compromise promised in the Nixon Doctrine it is above all necessary that there be a displacement of "the line of major tension" in world politics; the tension between Moscow and Peking must come to have priority over that between Washington and the two Communist states. The precondition for this is the opening to Peking. Without China, the Nixon Doctrine can't work.

This shift in the line of major tension requires a very different vision of America's world strategy. In the high cold war, the United States was at the very center of the stage; success was measured by effectiveness in frustrating the advances of a "unified" opponent. Under the new alignment, America will move somewhat to the sidelines and success will be measured by an ability to stay on better terms with Moscow and Peking than either does with the other.

Since the whole is greater than its parts, a shift of this magnitude will affect a number of related, lesser issues. Clearly, the view of Vietnam from the two perspectives will be different. In the old view it is the cutting edge of the antagonist's advance; in the new, it may be seen as a stake in the rivalry among the antagonists. In the former instance, massive intervention is justified in order to keep the territory out of enemy hands; in the latter, a low profile may be the most effective way to assure that enemies direct their hostility at one another and not at the U.S.

Such a shift would also have major implications for each of the divided countries—divided, after all, because they were caught along the old line of major tension. Now that the greater old line of division has been crossed by Nixon's opening to Peking, there will be increased pressure for contact across the lesser lines of division. A possible revival of the Mixed Armistice Commission for talks between North and South Korea is a revealing case in point.

Another consequence of this shift of tension lines is to throw the American system of alliances—so central under the former view—into great uncertainty. Insofar as the old line of major tension is replaced by that between Moscow and Peking, the rationale for alliances is imperiled. America is in a rather unpromising diplomatic position when she must make ever-larger demands upon her "partners" at the very time the rationale for these claims grows ever more conjectural. After all, the basic justification for partnership has been that others share with us an interest in meeting a common threat—a threat defined largely in terms of the cold war. When it has become major American policy to play politics across the lines of

the cold war, can we be surprised at the reluctance of others to bear greater burdens in the waging of that cold war? They may well wonder why they are asked to be more Catholic than the Pope.

A quick survey of some of America's "partnerships" shows the toll these uncertainties are taking. To what end and against what threat is the "partnership" with Pakistan to be directed, for example? Against a China that is Pakistan's foremost backer in world politics and is now being warmly courted by the United States? Or how does one legitimize the demand for Germany's increased contribution to the NATO "partnership" at the very time Brandt's *Ostpolitik* (not uninfluenced by Russian-American talks over Germany's head) works toward an easing of tensions with the East? However, it is in Japan that one sees the most serious consequences of this mixture of strategies.

One sign of trouble in the air is the tension surrounding the reversion of Okinawa. As Selig Harrison recently reported: "China seems to be less of a threat now, and many Japanese are afraid that Tokyo will find itself thrust forward as an American-sponsored military buffer against Peking at the very time when the United States itself is easing tensions with China." In an era when Washington is racing to Peking and negotiating arms agreements with Moscow while both Moscow and Peking are vigorously courting Japan, the old rationale for partnership with Japan has collapsed. What is to be the justification for—and what the precise terms of—the new partnership?

The obvious hope in Washington is to create the new tie with Peking while preserving intact the old tie with Tokyo. Given the tension between these two approaches, and the uneven course of America's Japanese policy of late, a far less benign outcome is to be feared. America may then be left to ponder, in biblical pessimism, what it profiteth a nation to gain all of China if, in the process, it loses Japan.

External developments are difficult enough, but if Mr. Nixon is to succeed he must also secure sustained support from the American people for his complex strategy. If the changes proposed by the Nixon Doctrine are to be more than short-lived fads, the national attitude toward world politics must be fundamentally reshaped. The simple universalism dominant in national thought from Wilson through Roosevelt and Dulles to Johnson must give way to a balance-of-power approach. For Wilson and Roosevelt universalism implied the positive goal of transforming the world into a peaceful and just community. For Dulles and Johnson the case was more negative: the world must be saved from Satanic Communist transformation. Both views, however, shared the assumption that the world as a whole is on the verge of some massive turn of direction, for good or for bad.

Simple universalism was solidly rooted in the national experience. Through a monistic definition of the threat, it "solved" the problem of analysis with one stroke. An unreflective people was freed *from* the unpalatable burden of pondering the ends of action and freed *for* the congenial task of putting energies to work for a set goal. Then, too, the enormity of American power made it plausible to act on the assumption that some basic transformation of world politics was in the works. While necessity may be the mother of political invention, the political arts are often neglected where resources are vast. Now, however, America can no longer relate effectively to a world seen in terms of single-threat situation. Nor is her power sufficient to bring about basic transformation in the nature of world politics. The world's diversities are too vast and America's resources too limited. But if the massive diversities of world politics frustrate our hopes, they should also mitigate our anxieties. In this regard, the changed character of military action is of particular importance.

That in modern times there has been an increased mechanization of warfare is a commonplace: from the Gatling gun and the railroad through the tank and long-range artillery to the ICBM tipped with multimegaton weapons. Military mechanization moves through a three-stage cycle of advantage, dispersion and stalemate. Thus, the Prussian armies put mechanized warfare to use with devastating effect in 1871. In the following decades these techniques were dispersed, culminating in the stalemated trench warfare of World War I. One sees roughly the same cycle in the nuclear age: overwhelming American advantage in the '40's followed by dispersion and leading to the contemporary stalemate. Today's stalemate has reached as near an absolute limit as one is likely to see in world politics. The Nixon Doctrine is committed to maintaining this stalemate, coupling it with major efforts to scale down its cost. Thus SALT is the strategic weapons dimension of the load reduction-commitment maintenance compromise.

However, we have hardly begun to grasp the enormous consequences of this stalemate for strategic policy. For a time, increased firepower reduced the political aspect of warfare, as in World War II's un-

conditional surrender policy. With the imposition of an effective ceiling on firepower, the political element correspondingly increases. As technology tended to take the particularity out of war, the technological stalemate reintroduces it, and with a vengeance. Vietnam is the most revealing instance of this. In part because they were limited in their technology, the Communists have stressed the political dimension of war. This approach met with uncertain success until technology itself began to neutralize their opponents' technological advantage. In Vietnam, America was caught in a bloody beartrap, the lower jaw of which was the foe's shrewd understanding of politicized warfare, the upper jaw being technology's stalemated ceiling on firepower.

In politicized warfare, two dimensions are crucial: particularity and patience. General formulas drawn from different circumstances do more harm than good. What is called for is specific in-depth knowledge of *this* geopolitical terrain. The urge for definitive results on a given timetable is equally harmful. Where the job can be done at all, enormous reserves of time and staying power are required.

Just as the many demands on America make necessary a less urgent universalism, these military changes make it possible. The enormous military changes which fired the fears of our former universalism belong to a bygone era. Which brings us back to the balance of power. For it is balance-of-power thinking, skillfully applied, which enables a state to put the world's diversities to work in a way to serve its own interests. And, when successful, it is a relatively low-cost policy. That, of course, is the promise of the Nixon Doctrine.

Perhaps the closest historic parallel to America's changed role since Pearl Harbor is England's changed position between the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1713) and the assumption of leadership by Pitt the Elder in the Seven Years' War. In the former conflict, Britain was the bulwark of the coalition against the dominant continental power, Louis XIV's France. By Pitt's time, a new strategic constellation made possible a very different role for Britain. His genius was to sense the shift and capitalize upon it to Britain's great advantage.