

Revisiting America's Regrettable Strategic Errors in Foreign Policy



Iran's Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and first lady Rosalyn Carter , react to wafting tear gas as pro- and counter-shah demonstrators clash with police outside of the White House during a ceremony in Washington on Nov. 15, 1977. (AP Photo/File)

by Conrad Black

One of the important perspectives that is generally lacking in evaluating contemporary foreign policy crises is an adequate appreciation of the origins of these problems. There is general agreement that the wars in Ukraine and on the borders of Israel, and the tensions in the far Pacific, all meet the criteria of potential Great Power confrontations that must be

approached and managed with care and prudence, as well as the severe humanitarian problems of any use of sophisticated weapons in and around civilian populations.

Not even habitual critics of official Western policy such as John Mearsheimer in respect of Ukraine, or the intractable and imperishable Noam Chomsky, an unwavering critic of Israel, have, as far as I have been able to observe, focused on the factors that gave rise to these wars.

To deal with Ukraine, there has been a prolonged failure of all of the relevant major powers to try to get to grips with the future of the former non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin never unambiguously accepted the legitimacy of all of these seceded states. They were known in Russian parlance as “the near abroad,” and the leadership in the Kremlin throughout the post-Soviet era was studiously noncommittal and prone to sinister insinuations of future reunion in respect of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the six Baltic and Caucasus former Soviet Republics.

When Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan voluntarily gave up the nuclear weapons they inherited on the distribution of the USSR in 1994, their sovereignty was guaranteed by Russia, the United States, and the UK, implicating NATO as a whole. But these guarantees have been worthless. Russia claims that it has departed from them because of the West’s meddling in Ukrainian affairs and its on-again-off-again indications that it would welcome Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, as it has already done in respect of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and all of the former satellite countries, despite some suggestions of intended restraint.

For more than a decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there was ample opportunity and a favourable ambience for reconciling the ambitions of these states to be autonomous with the historic status of Russia on the frontiers of

Muscovy, dating back 250 years to Peter the Great. Instead of anything like that, we had the oscillations from George H.W. Bush's famous "Chicken Kiev" speech in 1991 urging upon Ukraine continued federal union with Russia, and George W. Bush's espousal in 2008 of Ukraine and Georgian membership in NATO. I yield to few in my criticism of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, but the West had for many years ignored the opportunity to work out durable arrangements for a compromise that would reflect the forces and national ambitions of the parties, as any war-ending strategy now will, but without the terrible death and destruction that have occurred.

Even more completely buried by collective amnesia are the consequences of some of the modern American interventions in the Middle East. President Eisenhower probably precipitated the Suez Crisis by reneging on his commitment to finance Egypt's Aswan Dam. I have not detected anyone but myself commenting on the fact that we owe the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah to President George W. Bush's crusade for democracy. He concluded that democracies do not wage war on each other and that therefore democracy should be encouraged everywhere, no matter how infertile the political soil.

Hamas gained less than half of the votes from a Gaza electorate of which fewer than half bothered to vote, but it thus gained absolute control of Gaza and has transformed it into an underground rattlesnakes' nest of vicious terrorists. Hezbollah lacks Hamas's suicidal instinct but poses a dangerous threat to Israel and a potentially mortal threat to the Lebanese Christians, a vital part of the Levant for nearly 2,000 years and the partial continuators of the great ancient maritime people of Phoenicia.

President George W. Bush and the normally sensible leaders of his national security team—Gen. Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice—had not considered the possibility that a democratic election could be won by an anti-Democratic Party, even though this is effectively what happened in the sophisticated country

of Germany in 1933, and more recently in less sophisticated countries such as Algeria.

A similar fate awaited Egypt after President Obama helped push out the Mubarak regime, and only sheer, dumb luck enabled America and the West to dodge the deadly bullet of the Muslim Brotherhood because of its own tactical ineptitude (which somewhat replicated that of the Chilean communist leader Salvador Allende in 1973). Another particularly lamentable episode in American interventions in the Middle East was President Jimmy Carter's role in driving out the Shah of Iran and delivering that critically important country to the irreconcilable anti-Western totalitarian theocracy that has now governed it for more than 40 years.

Instead, we have had the shameful and completely unsuccessful Obama-Biden appeasement of Iran and Obama's abject apology for the role played by Eisenhower in the Anglo-American disembarkation of the radical Iranian populist leader Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. The same inspiration caused Obama to apologize for President Truman's use of the atomic bomb, despite Japan's initiation of the Pacific War and the Allied powers' warning to Japan of the existence of such a terrible weapon. This was consistent with Obama's apology for the allegedly arbitrary manner which Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill managed the Western Allied effort in World War II, although the entire future of Western civilization depended almost exclusively on these two men for several years, and they were, with the sole possible exception of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, the two greatest war leaders in modern history.

We cannot complete this revisitation of regrettable American strategic errors without reference to George W. Bush's catastrophic invasion of Iraq, which effectively delivered influence over most of that country to Iran, or the current president's abrupt departure from Afghanistan. The latter put all of America's local allies and [billions of dollars worth](#) of

military hardware into the hands of the enemy it had been fighting for 20 years, and ditching its allies who had loyally joined the United States in the only invocation in the history of NATO of the stipulation that an attack upon one is an attack upon all.

It is enough to say of China here that Mao Zedong and President Richard Nixon agreed in 1972 that the Taiwan issue could be left alone for a century on the basis of one China but no reunification by force. We seem now to be settling back down to that, fortunately.

The United States has had its triumphs in the Middle East: the expulsion of Russia from Egypt, the Kissinger shuttle diplomacy, the Camp David agreement, the First Gulf War, and the Abraham Accords. But American leaders and American opinion should be mindful of the country's role in the unnecessary exacerbation of some of these problems. It won't do to plunge into an area, smash it up, leave, and blame everyone else for what happens, but sometimes that has been the American way.

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