The Middle East between Russia and America

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Local conflicts and tensions among States in the Middle East hold our attention because of their overt nature. Less conspicuous, but a conditioning part of Middle Eastern relationships, is the continuing rivalry between the two major thermo-nuclear Powers. While Western Europe could be the platform of East-West conflict, problems within the Middle East could be the trigger of such conflict.

1. The Contemporary World Situation

It is far from certain that East-West tension and conflict is, as popularly thought, a function of ideological differences. It could be that the significant source of tension among great Powers may be their greatness and, in particular, their relative stages of growth to greatness. All great Powers are or have been expansionist - expansion is a necessary prerequisite to greatness. Industrial, trade, communication and diplomatic expansion are inevitable features of growth. Rome, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union have gone through stages of growth that alter the relative pecking order in international relations. China will also. It is not difficult to hypothesize a systemic process. Changes in technologies, environmental conditions and political and economic structures, lead to uneven rates of development giving opportunities to lesser Powers to catch up to greater Powers in industrial output and political influences. To begin with there is a struggle for parity so
that there can be equal participation and an absence of domination. This struggle, for many reasons that are both psychological and systemic, becomes a struggle for superiority. There seems to be no decision-making process by which a halt can be called. In growth in industry and in social and political organizations, there is ample evidence that capabilities are exploited to the full, despite possible reactions and consequences.

At the international level a sphere of influence acquired by a developing State needs to be protected by extensions beyond the boundaries of this sphere. If there is the capability it will be so protected. Then these extensions require protection, until there are 'foreign bases' scattered far from the national boundaries. This expansion process, like all expansion processes, has inbuilt limits. Each extension is more costly than the last. There is the factor of distance; but more important in the modern world, there is the factor of political resistance in the penetrated regions. Once a State goes beyond what are regarded by world opinion as 'legitimate' security needs, political resistances are generated. In due course, it seems, competition between resources needed for expansion—armed forces, subsidies and foreign expenditures— and resources needed for the satisfaction of consumer expectations, gives rise to domestic resistances that can be suppressed only in the short term. Finally, contractions take place in the foreign field under such foreign and domestic pressures. The United Kingdom seems to have gone through such a process. This seems to have been the experience of the United States: post-war expansionism, Vietnam, domestic unrest and pressures for contraction. Are there some systemic processes, which relate to growth, at work in international relations which have very little to do with types of political systems and policies?
Whether such processes operate or not, it is clear that States, advancing in greatness, use their influence to alter the international system and to adapt it to their interests, while relatively declining Powers seek to retain existing structures, spheres of interest and linkages. As a consequence, there are and always must be at any one time, 'revolutionary' and 'status quo' powers. Are East and West, the Soviet Union and China, accusing each other of essentially the same behaviour — the behaviour of great Powers, the behaviour to be expected of States becoming powerful at relatively different rates, the behaviour associated with different stages of influence?

As part of this power politics struggle there are, especially in our present post-imperial world, local struggles engaged by great Powers in the promotion of their spheres of influence: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Cuba, Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Philippines, Salvador — to mention only a few. In the post-imperial world, in which there are many newly independent States, there are necessarily many internal 'liberation' movements and attempts to change from oppressive, sometimes corrupt, regimes to ones that are legitimized. Left to themselves these liberation movements would bring about change gradually, with a minimum of local violence. While both Powers could probably accept political change by indigenous processes, for strategic reasons each must oppose liberation movements that have the support of the other. The result is that both Powers support liberation movements in the spheres of the other, and both defend regimes in their own sphere that could not survive without external support. The levels of violence associated with change are high as a consequence. Each side in this power struggle perceives the behaviour of the other, not as the logical and inevitable consequence of their own systemic power struggle, but as intended threat to the other.
In this fear-promoting rivalry, the Soviet-Union is in a strategically disadvantaged position by reason of the unbalanced spheres of interest that existed before it became a major Power. The U.S.A. has virtually the whole globe outside the Soviet Union and its immediate neighbours, as its sphere of influence and location for bases. The Soviet Union senses threat by political intervention within its own immediate region, especially where there is internal unrest, in addition to the more general nuclear threat both share.

A straightforward competition for allegiance and spheres could be manageable. However, whether they support one type of regime or another, both sides have found that they lose control over their client States once they give support. The U.S.A. pressed the Saigon Government to modify its policies and widen its support; but Saigon knew that it was strategically important to the U.S.A. and did not have to prejudice its authoritarian position. In Afghanistan, where political stability was important to the Soviet Union in view of events in Iran, the Soviet sponsored regime was deaf to pleas for policies that would broaden the political base. Several governments currently are inflexible in their domestic and foreign policies knowing that one or other great Power is finally committed to them. Thus, the major power rivalry has its consequences throughout world society, creating increasing instability and situations that cause serious tensions, crises and wars. The major Powers cannot control the consequences of their power rivalries.

There are underlying this power confrontation serious domestic problems. As observed above, imperialisms appear to crumble once they over-extrude their spheres of interest, once costs escalate to the point at which the 'middle class' suffer and the internal infra-structures are weakened. Both the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union are feeling these effects of their imperialisms. In addition both political systems have their own sources of
internal dissent and disintegration. However, in a bi-lateral power struggle the result is not a progressive withdrawal on the British model. These internal consequences are readily blamed on the other side, and, faced with internal defeat and, therefore, with nothing to lose, one side or the other is likely to try to solve its internal problems by promoting the perception of external threats and by the consequential external interventions.

In sum, the world situation is currently one in which both major Powers are locked into a confrontation which is not under their control. There are processes operating that are dysfunctional to both that are inherent in the power policies which both pursue. Neither can give way in their escalating deterrent strategies and in their rivalries.

2. The Fallacy of Deterrent Strategies

The contemporary thermo-nuclear rivalry, which is the symptom of this systemic process, is even more serious and more threatening than is supposed. The reason is that there are two misconceptions in policy, one relating to deterrence and the other to negotiation.

Deterrence strategies, which are the main means by which major Powers endeavour to control their power rivalries, have been shown by past wars not to be an effective instrument. Indeed, they probably have built into them processes of escalation that render them self defeating. The reasons why they fail are now becoming clearer.

Threat of punishment, threat of costs greater than satisfactions to be gained, has an influence on the decisions of individuals and groups. The rules of the road, parking rules, are obeyed in many cases because of threat. Often a deliberate costing is undergone; sometimes there is a calculated preference for a fine that is less costly than the gains to be made from
defiance of the law in particular circumstances. It might be that some crimes are deterred by deterrents more costly than any gains, subject to calculations as to risks of being caught and the level of punishment. For the most part crime is not deterred. Societies are as harmonious as they are, not because of threats and deterrents. Coercion is not the explanation of social order.

At first thought the assumption that deterrence deters is one that is axiomatic. Its validity is fundamental to our notions of social organization and law and order. When in practice deterrence fails it must be argued, on the basis of this view, that this is merely because the amount of deterrence and coercion and of risk of detection are less than required or that some different form of deterrence and detection is needed. No other explanation of the failure of coercion to contain deviance is possible within the framework of conventional wisdom: to recognize the failure of deterrence as a control instrument would jeopardize a whole set of conventional notions involving rights, obligations, morality, values, the socialization process and the justice of institutions and legal processes.

The assumption that deterrence deters is clearly articulated at the strategic level. National defence strategy is merely a special case of the belief that adequate negative sanctions prevent the 'rational' decision-maker being 'aggressive'. NATO officials argue that if it had not been for NATO there would have been aggression in Europe from the East. Warsaw Pact officials probably use a similar argument. 'How do you know' is regarded as an irrelevant or unnecessary question. In practice there cannot be an answer because there cannot be a test.

In the pre-nuclear age the empirical evidence was clearly that strategic balances and military threats did not deter 'aggression'. There is no evidence that the nuclear threat is any more of a deterrent than was the
mighty power of the United States against Japan when the latter bombed Pearl Harbour. The failure of capital punishment as a deterrent to those engaged in organized fighting and killing in a communal conflict would suggest that 'rational behaviour' includes in some circumstances the acceptance of the risk of paying the highest possible price — which means that there is no deterrent. On these purely formal and logical grounds the assumption needs to be questioned whether deterrence is, in any but the most trivial circumstances, an effective control mechanism.

The effective control of behaviour is not coercion or threat to observe legal norms, but a value attached to relationships which would be threatened by antisocial (legal or non-legal) behaviour. It follows that if circumstances occur which deny to the individual or group in any area of its behaviour the opportunity to interact, there are decreased incentives to conform. It may be that threat and deterrence are subject to limited boundaries of effectiveness, being relevant only in relation to the daily rules of social relationships that rest on mutual convenience, such as rules of the road. The degree of social harmony that societies do experience may be due mostly to different influences, such as values attached to transactional relationships. If this were to be the case, quite fundamental changes would be required in policies designed to promote harmonious social relationships.

This reasoning is applicable to the inter-State level. In a great Power rivalry the tendency is to isolate, to withhold recognition, to resist parity, to withhold technology and needed supplies as threat or punishment. As was the case with Japan, ultimately there is nothing to be gained and everything to be lost by observing the norms of international society if these constraints threaten important national interests. The ending of 'détente' undermines any influences imposed by deterrent strategies. If the Soviet Union or the United States are seen to be
experiencing internal problems that take time to resolve, or problems in their spheres of interest, this requires co-operative and not threatening responses, if power rivalries are not to lead to war.

3. The Fallacy of Negotiation

A study group was set up in 1963 by the David Davies Memorial Institute for International Studies to examine the peaceful settlement of international disputes. They argued that there was nothing fundamentally inadequate in judicial procedures; the problem was a lack of willingness on the part of States to submit to voluntary or compulsory third-party determinations. This begs the main question: if States are unwilling to adopt judicial and formal procedures that take decision-making away from them, then these procedures are irrelevant to the circumstances. It is of no avail to bemoan the condition of world society and blame States for the lack of success of some techniques. The intellectual difficulties experienced in considering traditional means of peaceful settlement of disputes cannot be overcome by impressing upon States their moral obligation to fall in with behavioural patterns suggested by intellectuals and idealists. The reality is that both judicial procedures and the less formal processes of mediation or third-party interventions deny to responsible authorities their final freedom of decision.

Techniques for the resolution of conflict need to reflect the felt needs of all those concerned. Procedures that postulate conflict as a zero-sum game in which the gain of one party is the loss of the other, cannot lead to a decision that satisfies all parties. Judicial processes are of this kind. Arbitration and conciliation, and indeed even more informal procedures such as bilateral bargaining and negotiation, hold that bargains and compromises are desirable and possible, and that external pressures can
help to make them acceptable. The techniques fail because their objective is settlement by third-party decision-making, or by compromises that do not fully and equitably satisfy the needs and aspirations of all parties. Deterrence, not being a means of control, and traditional means of negotiation and conflict settlement being ineffective, what can be the basis of order?

4. Problem-Solving Approaches

This is a complex subject, not because the answer proves to be complex, but because of the traditions and assumptions that have to be brushed aside before the obvious answer is internalised. For example, we assume that conflict is zero sum — that there must be winners and losers. Underlying this assumption is another, that conflict arises over disputes about finite resources. This is our conventional wisdom. It is certainly how parties to a dispute view their conflicts. In practice the assumptions appear not to be justified.

Empirically, conflicts involve many values and costs. Hierarchies of values alter according to circumstances and knowledge, making conflicts subjective in character. Pay-offs and trade-offs, alter options. There are, also, problems of perception and interpretation of the behaviour and motivations of others, adding to the subjectivity of conflict. Furthermore, goals are usually ill-defined in that tactics and goals become mixed. A piece of territory may be important as a strategic tactic in the seeking of military security; but real security might be unattainable by these means and attainable by other means. Furthermore, conflict between nations is typically not over material goods in short supply. It is in relation to goods that increase with consumption: the more security one side experiences, the more others experience. It is the denial of identity, recognition and participation that lead to conflicts and these are not in short supply.
However, the process of transforming a conflict perceived as zero-sum into one that is seen to have positive sum outcomes cannot be the conventional bargaining one. Institutionalised means are required to enable States to reperceive and to obtain information about the motivations and goals of each other. States are not in themselves a cause of conflict; they respond to their environment within the limits of the knowledge they have available about their interests and the responses of others. Given perfect knowledge of responses of others, or tested theories and rules of conduct that could act as a substitute for perfect foresight, States would avoid any conflicts that were more costly than alternative means of achieving their goals.

The traditional arbitrator or mediator makes orders or proposals and believes he is applying principles of justice and reasonableness. Whenever important interests are at stake he fails to bring agreement between parties concerned. Courts make judgments which purport to apply principles; but only after argument and disagreement as to what the principles are and how they should be applied. There is no certainty and, in any event, the decisions may be legal ones that do not reflect the motivations and interests of the persons concerned, resulting in outcomes that are not regarded by them as just or appropriate.

This is not to suggest that a third-party has no role. There are two types of third party. One is the court or mediator with power to arbitrate or to propose. The other is the zero-power facilitator whose role is confined to assisting parties to disputes in analysing their relationships. The professionalism includes an ability to articulate and to translate into terms that are relevant to a particular situation, the principles on which decision-making in behavioural relationships must take place; and, second, to ensure that all the actors concerned are involved and that their involvement is a problem-solving one and not one of confrontation, competition, bargaining or power.
This third party behaviour is the facilitating of decision-making by injecting knowledge into the communication between actors; it is the application of problem-solving techniques to decisions made by actors; it is the means by which is made possible the total involvement in the making of decisions of all those subject to decisions.

If this analysis is valid, there is a call for an organization not unlike the Red Cross, that is a non-governmental and impartial institution which is legitimized by its performance and is readily available to apply its experience and expertise in the resolving of problems, internal or international, as they emerge.

5. The Role of Independent Middle Powers

It is almost certain that such positive approaches to our major international problems are politically and technically impossible in the absence of some middle Power initiatives. We should consider seriously whether States such as Britain, France, Germany and other 'middle Powers' in other regions, such as the Middle East, could make a positive contribution to East-West and North-South relations by moving toward foreign and strategic policies of greater independence.

There are negative reasons for a policy of independence and unilateral actions, in particular to avoid being used by other Powers in their power struggles and to keep out of their conflicts. There are also positive reasons. Sweden has frequently implied that its neutralism is a positive one in the sense that it is in a position to suggest and to assist politically and to contribute to peace keeping. Switzerland's neutrality enables an organization, the Red Cross, to operate with more credibility than would be the case were it not based on neutral soil. The non-aligned States initially argued that their status would enable them to make policy judgments freely,
in favour of or in opposition to the policies of great Powers, according to the merits of each case. It was, in their view, an 'active neutralism'.

Both the negative and positive aspects of the neutralism of each country reflect both the interests and the history of the foreign policies of the States concerned. Neutralism in international affairs was the policy of the Indian Congress Party many years before India was independent. The policies of Sweden, Finland, Austria, Switzerland developed out of their geographic positions and relationships with other States. The non-aligned States were predisposed in this direction on attaining independence. Neutrality and neutralism, where they exist, are extensions of policies of States, not something alien or out of character and merely an ideological commitment on the part of a temporary ruling party.

If 'middle powers' were to be independent of alliances it would be because, and only because, this was a logical development of their policies in the altering context of world affairs. Each would adopt its own particular form of neutralism. Each would play its own distinctive role. Its independence would, inevitably, be a continuation of its past policies, reflecting past and present interests, relationships and values. It would not be a neutrality of the Austrian type, that is a defensive neutrality bordering on isolation or the cautious neutrality of Finland. It would be an approach to world affairs calculated to further these relationships in its own interests and in their interests. To the extent that it were a marked change in policy or a seeming discontinuity, it would be a change in tactics rather than purposes: It would be an approach calculated to strengthen weakened relationships, trading relationships generally and to take advantage of a long experience that each of the middle Powers have in world affairs, in the promotion of those conditions that appeared to be most in its interests.

If middle Powers were to become neutral for these reasons of interest, they would be obligated to go further than the positive neutralism of the
non-aligned, further than merely being in a position to make judgments on the merits of cases. They would be obligated to intervene as a third party, to prevent and to help resolve disputes. As a great military power Britain, for example, had a power and a balancing role. As a less powerful State, yet one that still has widespread interests, its role must remain one that contributes to law and order and peaceful relations by techniques that do not rest on military power. So, also, with smaller Powers in their own regions.

This approach takes the debate out of the deterrents-unilateralist disarmament framework. The issue is not whether a middle Power should, in its own interests, opt out of alliances and independent deterrents. It is whether it can make a more effective contribution to its own security and to the security of the international community by itself enacting a third-party role or, alternatively, by providing the environment in which an appropriate non-official organization could enact such a role.

6. Conclusion

It has always been widely accepted in Western political thought that violence, including warfare, is, in the last resort, a legitimate means either of bringing about change or of preserving existing orders. Power balances and deterrence strategies have always been pursued to decrease the incidence of violence of war; but they have never been relied upon to prevent it.

The view that war is a legitimate instrument of last resort stems from the belief that relations between nations are determined, finally, by the balance nations make between their own interests and the relative power, economic and military, at their disposal. A small Power has limited means to pursue its interests, a great Power has a dominating position. However, two great Powers, each with an 'over-kill' capacity, present an unprecedented relationship. In theory there should be assured deterrence. In practice, if
the authorities in one feel so threatened either internally or externally 
that they have nothing to lose by the gamble of war, then consequences of war 
do not necessarily deter. 

There is, consequently, a crisis in thought and in policy. A seemingly 
universal and rational philosophy and the policies based on it, appear to be 
dysfunctional. Where do we go from here?

Let us commence with the proposition that despite the logical consequences 
of a thermo-nuclear confrontation, no great Power will be diverted from its 
deterrence strategies. Let us assume that the disarmament approach is 
politically unrealistic: there will not be disarmament or even effective arms 
control measures at least until there is no felt need for arms.

If we accept this proposition then it is necessary to consider steps toward 
establishing peaceful relationships as an accompanying or parallel approach. 
By this is not meant a competing or opposing approach. On the contrary this 
proposition implies that security and peace are not necessarily opposites, as 
is implied by those who attempt to make a frontal attack on arms strategies.
This proposition implies that security and peace-making are both legitimate 
activities compatible, mutually supportive and, probably, necessarily 
inter-dependent. The two approaches can be perceived as being in tandem or on 
parallel tracks conveying governments toward the common goal of war avoidance.

This is a simple notion; but it needs to be spelled out a little because 
there has emerged a tradition of confrontation between the two approaches. 
It is as difficult for 'doves' to appreciate that 'hawks' no less seek peace, 
as it is for 'hawks' to realize that 'doves' are being no less realistic in 
their predictions of catastrophe. Furthermore, because it is governments that 
are responsible for strategic policies and because it is private people and 
organizations that are pressing for disarmament, government senses opposition 
and has to justify its stances and resist the 'doves'. The two tracks have
been perceived as going in opposite directions; there has been an adversary relationship. This effectively prevents government from pursuing the second track as an essential part of its power strategies. Not only is there an adversary relationship within States. The same opposing relationship is likely to develop within alliances as less powerful members perceive themselves as being the pawns or platforms to be used by one thermo-nuclear Power in its contest with the opposing one. For these political reasons it is in the interests of government to be seen to proceed along the second track.

This second track has to be, therefore, not just an attack on strategic policies; but part of those policies, part of the activities of government working with those not in government who may have some contribution to make. This includes scientists that can explore options as Pugwash explored the possibilities of a test ban treaty, political and social scientists that can explore solutions to problems emerging within and between spheres of interest, and the media that can try to promote accurate communication and analysis of events.

A second track would seem to include a set of related activities that require a close working relationship between government and others. Four such activities seem relevant. **One**, a continuing means of communication between the main protagonists at an unofficial level so that there can be exploratory discussions in private, without commitment, on all matters that give rise to tensions between the major Powers – internal conditions, problems occurring in developing States, energy problems, SALT and others. **Two**, a semi- or non-official organization, which like the Red Cross in relation to disaster situations, can offer a problem-solving service in relation to conflicts within and between nations. **Three**, a training centre for people undertaking such work. **Four**, a research establishment that provides the back-up for problem-solving techniques in all these three areas.
Such a strategy almost certainly would require an initiative and an active role by nationals of one or more middle Powers so that dialogue between nationals of thermonuclear States can be mediated by others. In addition middle Powers may have an important strategic role to play by being independent, by denying to thermo-nuclear Powers in their interests, both bases and targets.

It is in this wider context that regional problems must be analysed. The commencing point is with the nations and communities directly concerned. They will not allow greater Powers to use them as strategic powers: they must determine their own fate. However, they must do this having in mind that their fate is not unrelated to the fate of thermo-nuclear Powers. In their own interests they must arrive at resolutions of conflict locally so as to prevent external interventions.

One contribution middle and smaller Powers can make to their own and to world security is to give support to the international institutionalisation of problem-solving processes and to use such institutionalised processes in the resolution of their disputes.