

# The current crises: Mideast and Vietnam

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There are two major wars going on in the world. While it is understandable that the attention of the American people has been concentrated on Vietnam, it is entirely possible, as President Nixon belatedly stated on July 1, that the consequences of the war in the Middle East will be far greater. The positive responses of the Soviet Union, Egypt, Jordan and Israel to the United States peace proposals offer a glimmer of hope for an eventual settlement in that area. However, the direct combat involvement of the Russians on behalf of the Egyptians has raised the war from the realm of a local conflict.

To understand why the Soviet Union is extending itself to an unprecedented degree only in the Middle East we must consider the interaction of the United States involvement in Indochina. To blanket both situations with the labels "hawk" and "dove" is merely a simplistic device of the uninformed.

The two crises are very different, and in some respects diametrically opposite. When such situations go on from year to year significant changes are in danger of being overlooked by many people. The current changes in these two areas, gradual U.S. withdrawal and gradual Russian build-up, are in themselves quite opposite, but, perhaps not unconnected. It is easier to understand what is involved in each case if we try to dissect out the various levels of the conflicts: (1) The Basic Conflict: In Indochina this is the ideological clash between the Governments of North and South Vietnam, while in the Middle East it is the clash of two nationalities, Jewish and Palestinian, for the same land. (2) Local Hegemony: In both cases the largest and

potentially most powerful state (N. Vietnam in Indochina, Egypt in the Mid-East) seeks to extend its influence or control over its own region of the world. In both areas there are substantial historical precedents for this. (3) Big Power Involvement; In each case, one of the two world "super" powers is fighting an undeclared war on behalf of its "client" state in the area in order to prevent its defeat or the compromise of its position, and for its own purposes.

## Soviets position

While the nature of the involvement of the US in Indochina is by now fairly clear to most Americans, the Soviet position in the Mid-East is less familiar. I will attempt to describe this, returning to the question of differences afterwards. Initially Russia supported the foundation of Israel, seeing in its war of terrorism against the British, as well as its war of independence against the enemies of British and French-dominated Arab states, a potential ally in the area. When Israel remained true to the West, Russia turned its eyes to the ever unstable Arab countries and waited. Egypt with a population of over 30 million is by far the largest country in the area and has always dominated the eastern Mediterranean littoral. The existence of Israel, and its inability to destroy it, has been a source of embarrassment to the Egyptian Government, whether, it be the monarchy of Farouk or the dictatorship of Nasser. But, more importantly, Israel represents a barrier which denies a land bridge to the expansion of Egyptian influence eastwards and northwards to the other Arab lands.

The abortive war in Yemen, in which regular Egyptian forces savagely killed their fellow Arabs, was an attempt by Nasser to out-flank Israel and strike at the conservative Arab states. This war, and the treatment of the Palestinians by the Egyptians (they were kept in camps with the greatest restrictions of movement for 20 years) should make us view with Scepticism any claim to altruism on behalf of the other Arabs which the Egyptians make. Further, this drive for 'hegemony' derives from the fact that Egypt remains poverty-stricken, while Saudi Arabia and Kuwait derive vast wealth from their oil. Apart from the income, control of this resource would give Egypt much more leverage in the world.

International power politics is ruled by expedience, not principle, Russia, from the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact has been a past-master at this game. When the Egyptians threw out the British "imperialists" it was inevitable that

Russia would seek to step into the breach. By gradual stages--the financing of Aswan, the supply of arms, diplomatic support, the re-supplying' of arms after losses-- Russia has wormed its way into a commanding position in Egypt. This is a clear case of neo-imperialism. It should not be forgotten that Russia recently re-invaded Czechoslovakia in a brutal show of strength. The Brezhnev doctrine, the rationale for this takeover, is in itself the Communist equivalent of the 19th Century Monroe doctrine. Further, in the case of Egypt, there can be no excuse that a Communist state is threatened, since the Communist party is banned in Egypt and most known Communists are in jail.

Czarist Russia had always sought to expand into the Mediterranean, and it seems that Communist Russia is in the profess of achieving this goal. They have a lot to gain, and their aims probably run parallel with those of Egypt mentioned above. With the present dependence, any expansion of Egyptian influence will mean an expansion of Russia into the Arab world. Control of the Suez canal would provide direct access to the pro-Russian states of Yemen and South Yemen (formerly Aden), and thence to the Persian Gulf, East Africa and beyond. Control of Middle-Eastern oil would put Russia in a powerful position, since Western Europe and Japan are dependent upon this source. Strategically a significant Russian military presence in the Middle East, with possible bases in Algeria, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, would outflank both NATO and China.

#### **Even-handed policy**

It has been the attitude of some Americans, notably the oil-lobby, to say that U.S. interests require a so-called "even-handed" policy towards the Arab Israel war. This argument is based mainly, on financial considerations, in view of the American capital tied-up in the conservative Arab oil states. While such countries are no doubt anti-Israel, they cannot look with favor on the likelihood of a Russo-Egyptian expansion into their region. This "even-handed" argument also presumes no Soviet involvement, or at the very least, good will on her part. There can be no doubt that a military defeat of Israel or a Russian-imposed solution, would lead to such an expansion.

Thus, we see that Russia has a great deal to gain from its expansion in the Middle East, and, in fact has already gained much with the minimum loss of Russian life and material. By contrast, the U.S. does not appear to have much to gain, by continuing its involvement in Vietnam.

Whatever were the original aims; the protection of the democratic rights of the South (does anyone still believe that), the building of a bastion to prevent the further, spread of Communism, the chance to show China that the U.S. was capable of fighting an Asian land war, in any case, the U.S. remains the greatest Pacific power. The strategic importance Indochina is peripheral. Further, if all the countries in the area cannot fight for themselves the U.S. has been wasting its precious resources. Since the initial involvement, the myth, of monolithic Communism has been exploded with the Sino-Soviet rift. Vietnam has a history, before being colonized by the French of exercising independent control of this region, and has played Russia and China off against each other. Yugoslavia, and now Rumania, are other examples of relatively independent Communist states. Thus, whatever the fate of South Vietnam U.S. withdrawal (representing a tactical defeat) in no way represents a basic threat to the future of the U.S. and the West. On the other hand, direct, Russian presence in the Middle East could present such a threat.

It cannot be viewed as chance that while the U.S. seeks to Vietnamize, the war in Indochina, the USSR is Russianizing the war in the Middle East. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the situation, the majority of the American people have decided that the sacrifices required in Vietnam no longer justifies the U.S. presence. With no need to worry about their internal public opinion the Soviets authorities have chosen just this time to expand elsewhere. They may feel that the "peace lobby" is enforcing a period of appeasement on the U.S. administration. However, one can be for peace without being completely isolationist. In the case of the Middle East, Israel has shown that it is capable of fighting for itself (unlike S. Vietnam).

Responsible Israeli leaders have repeatedly declared that they do not want U.S. manpower involved directly on their side (unlike the Indochina nations). They have requested the right to buy from the U.S. the sophisticated planes, and equipment that modern warfare requires (particularly when outnumbered 10 to 1). The U.S. should supply them with this material, and should also continue to explore all other channels to persuade the Russians to change their dangerous policy. This is not inconsistent with a policy of withdrawal from Vietnam. In fact, the U.S. foreign policy of all eggs in the Indochina basket has seemed extremely inconsistent to many observers.

It is fervently to be hoped that the current peace moves will eventually lead to negotiations in the Middle East, since in the final analysis peace can only come through a compromise agreement by both sides. For the proposed temporary ceasefire to be effective, however, Russia and Egypt must not seek to improve their military situation. President Nixon, in his statements of July 30 and 31, has seemed to promise backing to Israel should the ceasefire thus break down. The pessimistic view is that Russia and Egypt need just such a respite to ready themselves for a further extension of the war, possibly a planned thrust across the Suez canal. Should the situation deteriorate will the U.S. be "neutral in thought, word and deed" as the State Department delicately put it in 1967, while the Vietnam war was still escalating? A snake strikes the more effectively when its prey is obsessed and transfixed.