

Global Threats and American Strategies: From Communism in 1955 to Islamism in 2005

by James Kurth

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America's current security threats—the insurgency in Iraq, Islamic terrorism, and Iran's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons—seem strange and unprecedented. Parallels can be drawn, however, between the security threats of 2005 and those of fifty years ago. The U.S. foreign policy developed to confront the communist threat offers lessons as we develop strategies to combat today's threat. Two contemporary perspectives on strategic issues—one conservative/realist, one neoconservative/idealist—apply lessons of the Cold War to today's U.S. foreign policy, but each has serious flaws. A third, neorealist perspective, suggests that by leveraging the divisions already present in the Muslim world, the United States can win the global contest against Islamic terrorism. However, this would require a transformation in American strategy that will not be easily achieved.

America today is facing threats to its national security which seem strange and unprecedented. The vicious and versatile insurgency in Iraq, the widespread and deadly transnational network of Islamist terrorists, the steady and relentless efforts by Iran to develop nuclear weapons—its own “Islamic bomb”—and the prospect that Islamist terrorists might themselves acquire nuclear weapons all combine to pose a truly momentous challenge to American strategy. Indeed, it would be reasonable to think that the challenge is so momentous, strange, and unprecedented that any American strategy to deal with it will have to be strange and unprecedented, too. In particular, it might seem that past American strategies, however successful they might have been in their time, have little to contribute to addressing the strategic challenges of today.

As we shall see, however, the security threats America faces today do have important similarities with those it faced in the past. In particular, the global Islamist threat of 2005 can be compared with the global communist threat of 1955, the then-momentous, strange, and unprecedented threat that the United States confronted fifty years ago. The strategies the United States developed and deployed against that global threat, and with which it ultimately defeated the

threat, may have something to teach us about how to deal with, and perhaps to ultimately defeat, the global threat of the current era. For in both 1955 and 2005, three interrelated elements had come together to pose a global security threat.

The Global Islamist Threat of 2005

1. *Iraq and Islamist insurgents.* At least judging by media coverage, the most prominent security threat to Americans today is the war in Iraq and the Islamist insurgency that is going on there. And Iraq has certainly concentrated the minds of American strategists, as they have struggled to answer the question of what kind of strategy can deal with this particular problem.

2. *The transnational network of Islamist terrorists.* Before the Iraq war, of course, most Americans viewed Al Qaeda, author of the 9/11 attacks, as the number-one security threat. The threat of Islamist terrorism has not receded, as the London bombings of July 7 amply remind Americans. But U.S. strategists have yet to produce a coherent strategy for adequately dealing with this problem.

3. *Iran and nuclear weapons.* A major threat for the near future emanates from Iran and particularly from its drive to acquire nuclear weapons. A similar threat is posed by North Korea, which has already acquired nuclear weapons and which has a record of providing Iran and other Islamic countries, if not Islamist terrorists, with nuclear and missile technologies.¹

Together these three major security threats of 2005 form an interrelated ensemble, all representing some version of an Islamist threat.

The Global Communist Threat of 1955

At first glance it might seem obvious that the security situation at the time of FPRI's founding fifty years ago was very different.

1. *The Sino-Soviet bloc and nuclear weapons.* In 1955, the major security threat to America was the Sino-Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons. In the minds of most Americans, this was a very formidable threat indeed, and it certainly concentrated the minds of American strategists, such as the founders of FPRI. The Sino-Soviet bloc controlled one-third of the world's population, and it also controlled the great bulk of the Eurasian landmass (which English geopolitician Halford Mackinder had famously called "the World-Island").² The Soviet Union had at least caught up with the United

¹ James Fallows, "Will Iran Be Next?" *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2004; Scott Stossel, "North Korea: The War Game," *Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2005.

² Chris Seiple, "Uzbekistan: Civil Society in the Heartland," *Orbis*, Spring 2005, pp. 245-47.

States in the development of nuclear weapons (the H-bomb, intercontinental bombers, and, soon-to-come, intercontinental missiles) in terms of quality, if not in quantity.

The U.S. strategy at that time was to confront the rapidly growing Soviet nuclear threat with methods which seemed new and risky, such as the idea of then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that America had to confront Soviet challenges by “going to the brink.” The credibility of the United States’ nuclear deterrent was declining, and it had to compensate for this with an increasing resort to risk-taking behavior. As each of the two superpowers continued to add to its arsenal of nuclear armaments, this was obviously a very dangerous and difficult situation.

2. *The transnational network of communist parties.* In 1955, there was also an extensive network of communist parties and movements, which were allies of the Soviet Union and of communist China and which were active in several regions of the world, especially in Europe, the Arab world, and Southeast Asia.

3. *Southeast Asia and communist insurgents.* In 1955, there were also several communist insurgencies underway. At the time, the principal theater for insurgency was not the Middle East, but Southeast Asia. In particular, there were active and extensive communist insurgencies in Malaya and the Philippines, and although the communist insurgency in Indochina was temporarily suspended in 1954, it would resume on a very large and effective scale five years later.

Today, the ensemble of three interrelated Islamist security threats seems to be the gravest security threat imaginable. Likewise, in 1955, the ensemble of three interrelated communist threats also seemed to be the gravest security threat imaginable. For the most part, American strategists of the time were sure that the United States had never faced a threat of such magnitude before.

There are certainly obvious differences between the global Islamist threat today and the global communist threat of fifty years ago. But as we shall see, there are also important similarities. These differences and similarities have implications for what the American strategies of the past can contribute to American strategies for today and for the future.

National Strategies and Military Strategies

Washington could not and cannot meet security threats as grave as the communist threat in 1955 and the Islamist threat in 2005 with only a reactive response. Rather, these threats must be met by a proactive response and by taking advantage of the favorable conditions accruing to the United States and the unfavorable conditions accruing to the adversary. This kind of proactive response, one that takes initiative and takes advantage, in turn requires a well

thought-out strategy that identifies which initiatives will best deploy which advantages and in which circumstances.

In normal usage, the term “strategy” refers to what might be called the general’s conception—i.e., military strategy. But there is also a grander understanding, which refers to what might be called the statesman’s conception—i.e., national strategy (which is indeed sometimes called grand strategy).

American Military Strategies in 2005 and 1955

The Rumsfeld transformation project. Today, a leading example of military strategy is Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s “transformation” project.³ This seeks to bring about a transformation of the U.S. military, especially the U.S. Army, by taking advantage of America’s superiority in the high technology of the information age—e.g., total battlefield information; instantaneous communication, command, and control; and perfectly precise weapons. A central idea of this transformation project has been that these American technological advantages will enable much smaller U.S. forces to employ much greater fire-power to achieve much quicker results; “lean-and-mean” will “shock-and-awe” the enemy into disorientation and defeat. This new U.S. military strategy worked very well in the first two months of the Iraq War. Since then, however, when it has had to deal with an increasingly innovative insurgency, rather than with a conventional army, it has hardly worked at all.

The Eisenhower administration’s New Look. In 1955 there was also a strategic transformation project under way. The United States had established nuclear deterrence as its military strategy as early as 1948–49. However, this strategy only became crystallized, rationalized, and formalized in the early years of the Eisenhower administration, with its “New Look.”⁴ The purpose of the New Look was to focus U.S. defense policy principally—indeed almost exclusively—upon nuclear deterrence. The Air Force (the high-technology military service of the time)—not the Army and not even the Navy—would play the principal military role, because it would provide “more bang for the buck.”

The project of strategic transformation then—from an emphasis on the Army to a strategy focused on the Air Force—and the project of strategic transformation today—within the Army itself—have much in common. In particular, both are based on the belief that America’s high-technology weapons can solve its military-strategic problems.

³Peter J. Boyer, “The New War Machine,” *New Yorker*, June 30, 2003; James Kurth, “Iraq: Losing the American Way,” in Royce Flippin, ed., *The Best American Political Writing 2004* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004).

⁴Samuel P. Huntington, *The Common Defense: Strategic Programs in National Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), ch. 6. This early book by Huntington presents a classic analysis of U.S. strategic issues in the 1950s.

American National Strategies in 2005 and 1955

The Bush Doctrine. National or grand strategy normally seeks to use not just military instruments but also diplomatic, political, and economic ones when deploying the advantages of the United States vis-à-vis the threats which confront it. The current national strategy was published by the Bush administration in its well-known *National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS)* in September 2002. Two of the major concepts of this particular national strategy were (1) the use of *preemptive* military action, if necessary, against the threats of terrorism and nuclear weapons (and especially against the threat of these two combined), and (2) taking *unilateral* military actions, if necessary, against these same threats. These particular concepts have often been termed “the Bush Doctrine.”⁵

Events over the three years since the *NSS* was developed have not been especially kind to the Bush Doctrine. Since there has been no obvious increase in the threats of terrorist attacks upon the U.S. homeland, the need for preemption against terrorists has not yet arisen, and therefore the Bush Doctrine has not yet been tested in this particular respect. North Korea might be a case for it, yet the Bush administration has engaged in neither preemptive nor unilateral military action against North Korea’s nuclear program. In this respect, the Bush Doctrine has been tested, and it has failed. Furthermore, Iran, which has an extensive record of working with Islamist terrorists, is moving steadily toward acquiring nuclear weapons. Here, too, the Bush administration has engaged in neither preemptive nor unilateral military action. Iran may become an even greater test of the Bush Doctrine, and an even greater failure.

One of the main reasons why the Bush administration has been so non-preemptive and non-unilateral in North Korea and Iran is the ongoing Iraq War—i.e., because the administration was so preemptive and so unilateral with respect to Iraq. Its failure to find any nuclear weapons (or any weapons of mass destruction at all) in Iraq and its failure to find any connection between the Saddam Hussein regime and Islamist terrorist networks have gone a long way to discredit the Bush Doctrine and the administration’s national strategy.

In addition, the long war against the insurgency in Iraq has stretched the U.S. Army—the lean-and-mean, or perhaps small and starved, product of the Rumsfeld transformation project—so thin that there are no reserve ground forces to undertake any new military action, be it preemptive, unilateral, or anything else, against North Korea or Iran.⁶ As a result, three years after its promulgation, this Bush Doctrine seems to have become a dead letter. Its first

⁵ Donald C. F. Daniel, Peter Dombrowski, and Rodger A. Payne, “The Bush Doctrine is Dead; Long Live the Bush Doctrine?” *Orbis*, Spring 2005; Neta C. Crawford, “The Road to Global Empire: The Logic of U.S. Foreign Policy After 9/11,” *Orbis*, Fall 2004.

⁶ Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Weighs Strategy Change to Deter Terror,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2005.

implementation, the Iraq War, rendered it incapable of subsequent implementation. The Bush Doctrine has thus been eviscerated by the Rumsfeld transformation project.

The third major concept of the Bush administration's national strategy has been democratization. The administration presumes that the spread of freedom and democracy (more concretely, liberal-democratic political institutions and free-market economic institutions) throughout the world and especially throughout the Muslim world will go a long way toward "draining the swamp," removing the political and economic conditions which produce Islamist terrorists. The upside of globalization—the global democratization movement—is supposed to counter and prevail over its downside—the global Islamist insurgency, which is promoted by Al Qaeda and related Islamist groups throughout the Muslim *umma* around the world. The Bush administration points to recent political changes in Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt as examples of positive moves toward such democratization in the Muslim world. However, the Iraq War itself has brought about sharp divisions between the United States and most of its traditional democratic allies in NATO over the right ways to bring about democratization.

The Containment Doctrine. In 1955, there was also a predominant national strategy for the United States: George Kennan's strategy of containment. This strategy was criticized and contested by some political elements (notably rightwing Republicans, who wanted a strategy of "rollback," and by some conservative Republicans and progressive Democrats, who preferred a strategy of defense of the Western Hemisphere and therefore non-intervention in Europe and Asia), but was supported by a broad national consensus. The Truman administration had originally promulgated the containment strategy with the Truman Doctrine of 1947, and it institutionalized the strategy with the Marshall Plan, the NATO alliance, and the military build-up that was proposed in the national security document, NSC-68. The Eisenhower administration extended the containment strategy with a series of major alliance treaties and intentional organizations, such as the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), and bilateral treaties with nationalist China (Taiwan) and South Korea.

The containment strategy addressed each of the three elements of the global communist threat. It explicitly sought to contain the vast Sino-Soviet bloc to that area of the European landmass which it already controlled. The containment strategy also addressed the threat of communist insurgencies. The Truman Doctrine itself was explicitly directed at the communist insurgency in Greece. By 1955, the United States had given aid to the French in their failed effort to put down the communist insurgency in Vietnam, but it was working successfully with the local government to put down the communist insurgency in the Philippines. In order to address the threat from the transnational network of communist parties, there was also a 1955 version of the democratization project. Both the Truman administration and the Eisenhower

administration sought to spread democracy, at least to the “free world”—that is, U.S. allies. By building-up liberal democracies, economic prosperity, and, if necessary, even welfare states in its allies, the United States sought to counter the communist parties in these countries.

Successes and Failures of the Original U.S. Anticommunist Strategies: The Verdict of 1975

Eventually, the United States decisively won its long struggle against the threats of the Sino-Soviet bloc and the transnational communist-party network. However, it did not so decisively win its struggle against communist insurgencies in the third world. Its most dramatic failure was in Indochina, but the United States and its allies did succeed in suppressing communist insurgencies in the Philippines, Malaya, Thailand, and in several countries of Latin America.

The containment strategy. The national strategy of containment had a mixed success record. It was especially successful in Europe and in Northeast Asia. For the most part, the nations in these two regions were modern, industrial countries or capable of becoming so relatively early and quickly. In other regions, however, the containment strategy experienced a number of failures. This was the case in the Middle East (Gamel Abdul Nasser’s Egypt, where his brand of Arab nationalism persisted until his death in 1970); Latin America (Fidel Castro’s Cuba); Southeast Asia (Indochina); and Africa (where, in 1974–75, several countries went over to Marxist regions and became Soviet allies).

Related to this, the alliance treaties and international organizations the United States had constructed in Europe and Northeast Asia (NATO and the U.S. bilateral treaties with Japan and South Korea) were very successful. However, its treaties with third-world countries (CENTO and SEATO) largely failed. This meant that by 1975, it seemed that the communists had been successful in splitting the free world, as it existed in 1955, into a first world—characterized by liberal democracies, market economies, and social stability and where the U.S. containment strategy was successful—and a third world—characterized by dictatorial politics, undeveloped economics, and considerable instability or even insurgency, and where the containment strategy was not working very well.

The deterrence strategy. In 1975 the military strategy of deterrence remained very successful in preventing nuclear war. It was also, for the most part, successful in preventing armed aggression by communist states with conventional armies. A major exception had been the North Korean conventional invasion of South Korea in 1950, and this is why the Eisenhower administration sought to make the nuclear deterrence strategy more explicit and formal, so that never again would a communist country misunderstand

U.S. intentions and think that it could launch an aggressive attack with conventional military forces. Another exception was the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam in 1975 (a third would be the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979). But for the most part, the deterrence strategy succeeded in preventing both nuclear and conventional attacks by communist states.

As we have seen, however, the strategy of nuclear deterrence was not successful at preventing communist insurgencies, also sometimes called unconventional or subconventional warfare. Just as the communists were successful in splitting the free world into the first and the third worlds, with the United States much more successful in the first than in the third, so too were they successful in outflanking the U.S. nuclear-deterrence strategy by developing their own strategy of subnuclear and subconventional warfare, an early version of what is now called asymmetrical warfare.

Thus it was that as of 1975, in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. failure in Indochina, the communists' strategies had garnered two major successes vis-à-vis America's strategies. At the level of national strategy, the communists had split the free world and thus subverted the U.S. containment strategy, and at the level of military strategy, they had outflanked (or undercut) the U.S. nuclear and conventional strategies. From the perspective of 1975, the original U.S. national and military strategies each had some gratifying successes, but clearly they had some serious problems.

Successes of the Transformed U.S. Anticommunist Strategies: The Verdict of 1995

Yet by 1995, the Soviet Union and the transnational network of communist parties had been left "on the ash-heap of history," as President Reagan had predicted they would be in 1982.⁷ How did this happen?

The transformation of U.S. national strategy in the 1970s. As it turned out, the containment strategy was so successful in Europe and Northeast Asia that it built up firm alliances, stable democracies, and economic prosperity to a level and in such a way that these structures strongly flanked the Soviet Union on both its European and Northeast Asian ends. By the early 1970s, the Soviet Union was in effect boxed in by political systems and, perhaps more importantly, by economic systems that were much more successful than its own. And by the late 1970s, the Soviet Union had entered into a long, and eventually terminal, period of bureaucratic sclerosis and economic stagnation.

It happened that even if the United States could only box in the Soviet Union with the first world, this was sufficient to box in the Soviet Union overall. That is what George Kennan had understood originally when he helped to

⁷ Ronald Reagan, Westminster Address, June 8, 1982.

compose the containment strategy as early as 1946–47. It soon became clear that a crucial part of the strategy was the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction and development of Europe. Kennan believed that, in the long run, a U.S. strategy of political democracy and economic development would prevail over its counterfeit Soviet counterpart.

In addition, a major transformation had occurred in the U.S. containment strategy, based upon a new way of dealing with the Sino-Soviet bloc. As early as the late 1950s and the early 1960s, scholars of Sino-Soviet relations had argued for this transformation, but because of partisan politics within the United States, it was delayed until the early 1970s. The strategic transformation proposed was to take advantage of the Sino-Soviet split that had begun under Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev and to use the communist powers to contain each other. This strategic innovation was initiated by Richard Nixon and his national security advisor (and later secretary of state) Henry Kissinger. It was continued and further developed by President Carter's administration and his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Indeed, not long after communist North Vietnam invaded and conquered South Vietnam in 1975, it invaded and conquered communist Cambodia in 1978. In turn, communist China then invaded, although rather unsuccessfully, communist Vietnam in 1979. Clearly, by 1979, the U.S. strategy of using communist states to contain each other was beginning to work rather well. This transformation of the containment strategy would become a major contributor to America's eventual winning of the Cold War against the communists, especially against the Soviet Union.

The transformation of U.S. military strategy in the 1980s. A second strategic transformation that contributed to the ultimate success of the United States in the Cold War was in military strategy. This transformation occurred in the 1980s, under the Reagan administration. It was composed of two distinct elements, the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and the Reagan Doctrine.

The Revolution in Military Affairs. Like the Rumsfeld transformation project, the RMA was based upon new developments in military high-technologies, especially precision weapons, information dominance, and rapid command, control, and communication (C³). Indeed, many of the central ideas of the Rumsfeld project were already present twenty years ago in the Reagan administration's own transformation project.

In the early 1980s, each of the three main U.S. military services underwent a strategic transformation. The U.S. Army developed its Air/Land Battle Doctrine, a new conception of how the Army could use U.S. technological superiority to fight and win a conventional war with the Soviet army. Similarly, the U.S. Navy developed its Maritime Strategy, a new conception of how the Navy could not only fight and win a conventional war with the Soviet navy, but also decisively contribute to the defeat of the Soviet army. At the same time, the U.S. Air Force developed its version of the Strategic Defense

Initiative (SDI), an elaboration of earlier conceptions of using high-technology to defend the United States against Soviet nuclear missiles.⁸

Each of these three innovations were ways of trying to transcend the original American military strategy of relying upon nuclear deterrence, either by developing and deploying conventional capabilities that could outmatch the Soviet conventional forces or by developing and deploying antinuclear capabilities that could neutralize the Soviet nuclear forces. Each relied upon America's superiority in high-tech information, C³, and precision weapons.

The American leadership in the RMA and the Reagan administration's transformation of U.S. military strategy certainly captured the attention of the chief of the general staff of the Soviet army, Marshall Nikolai V. Ogarkov. They also alarmed the head of the Soviet KGB, Yuri Andropov. Together, they realized that the Soviet Union, with its economic stagnation and bureaucratic sclerosis, would not be able to compete with these new innovations and transformations in American strategy. The Soviet Union itself would have to change, and so Ogarkov and Andropov took the lead in building a reform coalition within the Soviet communist party. Eventually, in 1985, this coalition brought Mikhail Gorbachev to power, and he in turn promoted *perestroika* to restructure the economy and *glasnost* to restructure the bureaucracy. However, the actual result of these two reform policies was not restructuring but deconstruction. By 1991, the Soviet Union had deconstructed to the point that it collapsed. A good deal of the credit for the Soviet collapse and the U.S. victory in the Cold War can therefore be attributed to the Reagan administration's exploitation of the RMA and its transformation of U.S. military strategy.

The head of the Chinese communist party, Deng Xiaoping, intently watched this Soviet deconstruction process. The lesson he learned was that economic restructuring was indeed necessary, but that bureaucratic restructuring was dangerous. For economic restructuring to succeed, Communist Party authority—i.e., a communist authoritarian regime—had to be preserved. China therefore instituted its own version of reform, one that was far more successful than the Soviet Union's. China's version, which has been called market-Leninism, was much more *perestroika* and much less *glasnost*.

The Reagan Doctrine. In 1975 and the years immediately thereafter, there had been a series of dramatic victories (about eight in all) by communist insurgencies over anticommunist regimes, in Indochina, in Portuguese Africa, and elsewhere in the third world. The Reagan administration sought to reverse this pattern by supporting anticommunist insurgencies against communist regimes. This policy became known as the Reagan Doctrine, and it represented another kind of transformation in U.S. military strategy: the use of allied subconventional military forces against communist conventional military

⁸James Kurth, "Clausewitz and the Two Contemporary Military Revolutions: RMA and RAM," in Bradford A. Lee and Karl F. Walling, eds., *Strategic Logic and Political Rationality* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

forces. The Reagan Doctrine did have a few significant successes, at least in weakening and containing the new communist regimes in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Angola. However, the final collapse of most of the third-world communist regimes resulted more from the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Without a steady infusion of Soviet aid, communist regimes, and even communist parties and insurgent movements, in the third world largely withered away.⁹

Thus, by 1995, the new situation in world politics had rendered a new strategic verdict, one that was very different from that of 1975. The American national and military strategies had now decisively won the Cold War and the long struggle against the global communist threat. However, the final victory was not so much the result of the original, classic strategies of containment and nuclear deterrence as it was of the transformed strategies of the 1970s and 1980s: using communist powers to contain each other, U.S. high-tech conventional forces to deter Soviet lower-tech conventional forces, and anti-communist insurgents to depose communist regimes.

From the Global Communist Threat to the Global Islamist Threat

Can the American national and military strategies that won the war against the communist threat help us now in our new war against the global Islamist threat, and particularly against the three-part, interrelated threat posed by Islamist insurgents, terrorists, and weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons? On this question, it is useful to discern three different perspectives on contemporary strategic issues: (1) the conservative, or realist, perspective; (2) the neoconservative, or idealist, perspective; and (3) the neorealist perspective.

The Conservative/Realist Perspective

The most obvious application of the old, anticommunist strategies to a new, anti-Islamist purpose has been put forward by those who identify themselves as conservative, or realist. They propose that the United States directly apply the original, classic strategies of containment and nuclear deterrence to contemporary threats. In 2003, they argued that Saddam Hussein's Iraq could be adequately dealt with by a combination of containment and deterrence, and in 2005, they argue much the same thing with respect to Iran. If containment and nuclear deterrence worked against such a formidable nuclear superpower as the Soviet Union, the strategy surely could work against much smaller states with much weaker nuclear capabilities.

⁹Frederick L. Pryor, "The Rise and Fall of Marxist Regimes: An Economic Overview," *Orbis*, Winter 2005.

In addition to the direct application of containment and deterrence, the conservative/realist position has embedded within it two cautions which grow out of its adherents' understanding of Cold War history. First, just as U.S. efforts to spread liberal democracy and the free market to the third world were rarely successful during that era, conservatives/realists do not expect such efforts to work very often or very well in the Muslim world, a new version of the third world, today. Indeed, they believe that the Bush administration's grand project to democratize the Muslim world is doomed to failure, with the fitful political developments in Iraq since 2003 being a forceful demonstration of the point.

Second, and similarly, just as U.S. efforts at counterinsurgency did not succeed in many third-world countries during the Cold War, conservatives/realists do not expect such efforts to work well in the Muslim world today, with events in Iraq since 2003 again, and amply, demonstrating the point. Indeed, just as Vietnam served as the most compelling example of the failure of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in the third world in the Cold War era, Iraq is well on its way to becoming a compelling example of the failure of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in the Muslim world in the current era.

However, there are serious inadequacies in this position. By itself, the application of the classic Cold War strategies of containment and deterrence would only recreate a new version of the world of 1975, as described above. Coming in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. debacle in Vietnam, this was not an encouraging world for the United States, and 1975 was one of the more dismal points in the history of the Cold War. The first world was more or less sound then, and it would be so now. However, the vast third world was subject to communist insurgencies then, and the vast Muslim world would be subject to Islamist insurgencies now. Dependent as it is upon the original strategies of containment and deterrence, the conservative/realist position has never been able to provide an adequate answer to the problem of insurgency. Nor has it been able to address the related problem of terrorism, which is far more grave now than it was during the Cold War, since the Islamist terrorists could potentially acquire WMD. In regard to this threat, the conservative/realist position has had no convincing strategy to propose.

The Neoconservative/Idealist Perspective

Given that the effective application of the original Cold War strategies to the current Islamist threat is largely limited to containing and deterring Islamist states (such as Iran), the conservatives/realists leave large parts of the Islamist problem unaddressed. An alternative set of strategic conceptions has therefore been put forward by the neoconservatives, who have a lot in common with the idealist tradition in American foreign policy. Indeed, the neoconservatives claim that their alternative strategies would actually be more

realistic, with respect to preserving and promoting U.S. vital interests, than those of the conservatives/realists.

The conceptions of the neoconservatives/idealists are largely presented in the *National Security Strategy* and the Bush Doctrine of 2002. Instead of containment, including close cooperation with U.S. allies within formal institutions such as NATO, the emphasis is on intervention, including unilateral U.S. military action. Instead of deterrence of existing nuclear powers, the emphasis is on preemption (really prevention) of emerging nuclear capabilities.

Like earlier U.S. strategies, the neoconservative/idealist position emphasizes democratization and creating a free world. But whereas conservatives/realists have thought that the democratic or free world would largely be limited to modern, developed countries—i.e., the first world—neoconservatives/idealists believe that it can be extended to the entire world. “Freedom on the march” will “shrink the gap” between the developed and the underdeveloped worlds.¹⁰

Iraq is therefore the great gamble and momentous case in which these two competing strategic perspectives—conservative and neoconservative, realist and idealist—are being tried and tested. Our Iran strategy may prove to be an even greater gamble and more consequential case in the future. The stakes in these tests are extraordinarily high, even higher than they were in the Vietnam War. The conservatives/realists think that the Bush administration’s strategy will end in a new version of 1975, the U.S. strategic situation after the Vietnam debacle, but that this new version will be even worse than the old, because the Bush strategy and the Iraq War will have aroused and inflamed most of the Muslim world. In contrast, the neoconservatives/idealists believe that the strategy of the Bush administration (and of themselves) will end in a new version of 1995, the U.S. strategic situation after the Cold War victory, but that this new version will be even better than the old, because the U.S. will have spread democracy and stability to most of the Muslim world. The stakes are great indeed.

The Bush/neoconservative/idealist strategy may win. But what if it fails? Are there alternative strategies available to the United States, other than merely going back to the conservative/realist strategy? As we have seen, that strategy is not a very convincing one for dealing with the total ensemble of the global Islamist threat.

As noted above, in addition to the original Cold War strategies of the late 1940s and 1950s—containment and nuclear deterrence—there were also important transformations in these strategies in the 1970s and 1980s, and that these transformed strategies contributed greatly to winning the Cold War. What might be the contemporary counterparts of these transformed strategies, and might they provide a better way of dealing with the global Islamist threat?

¹⁰Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2004).

The answers to these questions might compose the beginnings of a neorealist perspective.

The Neorealist Perspective: The Potential of Splitting Strategies

By drawing analogies with some of the United States' Cold War strategies, we can identify three possible strategies to divide and diminish the global Islamist threat. These splitting strategies are based upon three different divisions that can be found within the Muslim world: (1) moderate Muslims versus extremist Islamists; (2) Sunnis versus Shiites; and (3) Muslim ethnic militias versus Islamist terrorist networks.

1. *Moderate Muslims versus extremist Islamists.* The Bush administration has talked a good deal about distinguishing moderate Muslims from extremist ones and about allying with these moderates against the extremists. However, the administration has not been very efficacious with this notion thus far.

The history of the Cold War shows that, when dealing with an opposing political ideology, a strategy of separating moderate adherents to the ideology from its extremist adherents can in fact sometimes be successful. Particularly in Europe, the United States was very successful in separating moderate Marxists, such as socialists and social democrats, from extremist Marxists, i.e., communists, during the 1950s. This division largely persisted for the remainder of the Cold War. However, this splitting strategy was not very effective in the third world. There, the moderate, "third way" Marxists rarely existed, or if they did, they were soon marginalized by the extremist Marxists or repressed by authoritarian, anti-communist regimes that were allies of the United States.

Today's counterpart to separating moderate Marxists from communists would be separating moderate Muslims from Islamists. Once again, there are plausible reasons to think that a strategy of separating the moderates from the extremists might work in the political democracies, developed economies, and open societies of Europe. The European governments have many means available to them for composing bargains with moderate members of the Muslim communities residing in their nations.¹¹ However, the prospects for a successful splitting strategy seem less promising in Muslim countries. There, the features of authoritarian regimes, widespread poverty, and polarized societies combine to nurture extremist Islamism and extremist political actions.

2. *Sunnis versus Shiites.* During the Cold War, the most consequential splitting strategy used by the United States was that directed at the Sino-Soviet bloc, the result of the transformation in the containment strategy that was initiated by Nixon and Kissinger in the early 1970s. Of course, the Sino-Soviet

¹¹ Zachary Shore, "Can the West Win Muslim Hearts and Minds?" *Orbis*, Summer 2005.

bloc had already split into a serious Sino-Soviet conflict by the time the United States got around to recognizing and exploiting that momentous reality, but the Nixon administration did take advantage of it in 1971–73 in its efforts to bring an end to the Vietnam War. Later administrations made the Sino-Soviet split a major basis for their strategies toward the communist powers, and it was a major factor in the ultimate victory of the United States over the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

The contemporary analogy to the division between the Soviet Union and China in the communist world is the division between Sunnis and Shiites in the Islamic world. The ongoing sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq provides us with a daily reminder of the intensity of the division in that country, but the division, suspicion, and conflict between the two versions of Islam is a feature of many other Muslim countries also, especially Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

Once again, Iraq represents a portentous test case. Imagine the current sectarian suspicion and violence in Iraq devolving into an actual civil war between the Sunni Arabs and the Shiite Arabs (the Sunni Kurds would likely try to separate themselves from both Arab groups). What would the global Islamist movement look like then? It would have a rather different meaning and attraction than it does today. An Islamist identity might still appeal to some Muslims, but it could well become less salient than the conflicting Sunni and Shiite identities. This would be even more likely if the Sunni-Shiite conflict spread to Iraq's neighbors. Indeed, if the Sunni-Shiite conflict became intense, widespread, and prolonged, perhaps as much as the Sino-Soviet conflict was during the late Cold War, the global Islamist movement might have almost no meaning or attraction at all. In the Muslim world there might be Sunni Islamists and Shiite Islamists, but each might consider their greatest enemy to be not the United States, but each other.

3. *Muslim ethnic militias versus Islamist terrorist networks.* A third splitting strategy used by the United States during the Cold War was the Reagan Doctrine of supporting anticommunist insurgents against communist regimes. The contemporary analogy would be to use local militia forces—ethnic or tribal militias—against Islamist terrorist networks, with these local militias aided and guided by U.S. special forces. The United States has been engaging in this practice in Afghanistan since 2001, and it has done something similar with the Kurdish militias in Iraq since the early 1990s.

This particular strategy has some obvious drawbacks. It would contradict the Bush administration's project of establishing liberal-democratic systems within unified states in the Muslim world, a project that is supposed to have begun with Iraq. The strategy would pit Muslim ethnic or tribal groups against Islamist terrorist groups in a way that could be divisive to the society as a whole and that would devolve power away from the central government to local warlords, as has been the case in Afghanistan. However, in a number of failed or weak states, where there is no national

unity or central government and little prospect of them, this strategy might be one of the best available.

Each of these three splitting strategies for the Islamist threat is analogous to one of the splitting strategies the United States developed during the Cold War for the communist threat, the latter two growing out of the strategic transformations of the 1970s and 1980s. They can be seen as bringing additional dimensions of realism to U.S. strategy, and together they contribute to the neorealist perspective.

The Three Splitting Strategies Applied to the Three Security Threats

Let us return to the three elements of the global Islamist threat and consider what an application of the three splitting strategies might mean in practice.

1. *Iraq and Islamist insurgents.* If the Bush administration's objective of a democratic, unified Iraq proves unattainable, that country could become an arena for the application of both the second (Sunnis vs. Shiites) and the third (Kurdish militias vs. Sunni terrorist groups) splitting strategies. Shiite and Kurdish militias, if well-trained and well-armed by the United States, would be fully capable of destroying Sunni insurgents in the Shiite and Kurdish populated areas of Iraq, although their methods would indeed be ruthless and would probably reach the point of expelling much of the Sunni inhabitants from those areas, in a way reminiscent of the ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. The Sunni population might be reduced to a rump territory in central and western Iraq, along with sections of Baghdad and Mosul.¹²

Even if the United States does not adopt a strategy of using Shiite and Kurdish militias to defeat the Sunni insurgents, the Shiites and the Kurds, driven to exasperation by Sunni support of the insurgent attacks upon their communities, may bring about this outcome through their own efforts alone. In the end, Iraq, like Yugoslavia, is likely to split into several hostile ethnic states. But the Islamist insurgency would have been eliminated.

2. *The transnational network of Islamist terrorists.* This challenge also could be addressed with a combination of splitting strategies. In Europe, as suggested above, the first splitting strategy (moderate Muslims versus extremist Islamists) might be effective. But in the Muslim world more generally, especially in failed or weak states, the third splitting strategy (Muslim ethnic militias vs. Islamist terrorist groups) might be the most effective of any strategy available.

3. *Iran and nuclear weapons.* This last challenge may be the most intractable of all. It is further complicated by the challenge of Pakistan, also a

¹²James Kurth, "Ignoring History: U.S. Democratization in the Muslim World," *Orbis*, Spring 2005.

state with strong Islamist elements and its own nuclear weapons. In some ways, Iran and Pakistan are mirror images of each other. In Iran, the government is hostile to the United States, while the people are more friendly to it. Conversely, in Pakistan, the government is often cooperative with the United States, while the people are often hostile to it. In Iran, the large majority of the population is Shiite, but there is a significant Sunni minority. Conversely, in Pakistan, the large majority of the population is Sunni, but there is a significant Shiite minority.

The first splitting strategy (moderates versus extremists) will probably be ineffective with respect to these countries' nuclear weapons. Moderates and extremists alike in both Iran and Pakistan want their nations to be nuclear powers. The third splitting strategy (Muslim ethnic militias versus Islamist nuclear regimes) will probably not only be ineffective with respect to Iran's and Pakistan's nuclear weapons, but dangerous as well. Both countries have aggrieved minorities in their border regions, who historically have engaged in separatist resistance whenever the power of the central government has abruptly weakened. However, although these minorities can indeed cause turmoil in provinces on the periphery, they can not take power at the center or seize control of the nuclear weapons. Nor indeed would the United States want these minorities to seize these weapons. A strategic solution such as this would really be a massive aggravation of the nuclear problem.

The remaining splitting strategy (Sunnis vs. Shiites) has the greatest potential, but for both good and ill. The Shiite majority in Iran and the Sunni majority in Pakistan both engage in abusive practices against a minority that is affiliated with the other country's majority. This situation provides ample potential for conflict between Iran and Pakistan. In addition, the two countries share a contested border, which divides Baluchistan. If both countries are nuclear powers, the potential rises for nuclear threats and crises between them. The likelihood of conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iran and Pakistan will be heightened if the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq descends into an intense and prolonged civil war. This would likely accentuate and energize Sunni and Shiite identities and hostilities in Iraq's neighbors, including the countries to the east, i.e., Iran and Pakistan. Thus this particular strategic solution might issue in an ever greater nuclear problem—a confrontation between a nuclear Iran and a nuclear Pakistan.

Conclusion

The history of American strategy, and particularly the strategic history of the past fifty years, provides useful suggestions and guidance for how the United States can deal with some of the major security threats of the present and the future. However, even the Sino-Soviet conflict, in which two communist nuclear powers confronted each other over a period of a quarter-

century (1964–91), did not reach the level of nuclear instability and danger which could result from an Iranian-Pakistani, Shiite-Sunni, conflict in which two Islamist nuclear powers confront each other. To deal with that potential strategic condition, the United States will have to undertake yet another strategic transformation, but for now the shape of that transformation is very difficult to tell. Most likely, it will be found on the other side of some nuclear catastrophe which lies in the future. For in the end, it has not been the great strategic debates that determined the great strategic transformations, but rather dark and bloody events that have acutely concentrated the strategic mind.

