

Superpower Conflict Resolution: Lessons for the Future

By MARK N. KATZ

ABSTRACT: Despite the significant progress that the United States and the USSR have made in cooperating to resolve regional conflicts, many of these conflicts continue. One reason for this is that the Soviet and American governments have had differing expectations regarding what the outcome of superpower conflict resolution efforts should be. Yet even when Soviet and American aims are similar, there are other obstacles to conflict resolution. Among these are the lack of commitment to democracy on the part of one or more of the local antagonists in regional conflicts, and involvement by other external parties in the conflicts. There is no guarantee that the superpowers can successfully resolve regional conflicts even if they adopt a common approach to conflict resolution, but adopting a common approach may at least allow Washington and Moscow to unlink their overall relations from those conflicts that cannot be resolved.

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THE present era of Soviet-American relations is unique in that, unlike the Cold War period, both superpowers now see their interests as being better served through disengaging from and resolving regional conflicts. Yet, despite dramatic agreements to resolve some regional conflicts, fighting rages on in several parts of the Third World.

Can any lessons for the future be drawn from recent superpower efforts to resolve regional conflicts? Attempting to draw generalizable lessons from different cases is a difficult task. Each conflict is unique in terms of its causes and evolution. Each conflict is also unique in terms of the nature, strength, and motivations of both the local antagonists and their external supporters.

Since such a high degree of variability exists between different regional conflicts, the most obvious generalization that can be made about them is that there is no generalizable resolution formula applicable to them all. Another generalization that can be made is that a mutual desire on the part of the superpowers to resolve regional conflicts is not a sufficient condition to bring about their peaceful conclusion.

These two generalizations do not provide a hopeful basis for drawing lessons about superpower conflict resolution in the future. To assume that no lessons at all can be drawn from disparate cases, however, may lead us to overlook genuinely useful experience and to commit avoidable errors in the future.

One way to examine whether generalizable lessons for the future of superpower conflict resolution exist

is to analyze the applicability of superpower expectations or models regarding conflict resolution as well as the applicability of successful instances of conflict resolution to other conflicts. For whether generalizable models of conflict resolution actually exist, it is clear that Soviet and American leaders have expectations—which, of course, are evolving—regarding what the outcome of superpower conflict resolution efforts should be. In addition, the successful or partially successful experience of conflict resolution efforts in one country or region raises the question of whether a similar solution is applicable more generally. What these expectations and experiences are, as well as their realism and general applicability, will be examined here.

BEFORE GORBACHEV: UNILATERALIST MODELS

Until the Gorbachev era, neither Soviet nor American leaders seriously envisioned superpower cooperation as a means of resolving Third World conflicts, especially insurgencies. Instead, each viewed these conflicts in zero-sum terms; a loss for one superpower was a gain for the other. The maximum goal was to help one's own allies achieve victory over the other's allies. The minimum goal was to prevent the other's allies from defeating one's own.

From the late 1940s, the model guiding American foreign policy was one of containment. This worked well with regard to strategic nuclear weapons and Europe. The variant of containment envisioned for the Third World was successful counterinsur-

gency warfare. By the early 1970s however, the American public, Congress, and the executive branch had reached the conclusion that large-scale American counterinsurgency efforts were too unpopular within the United States to be sustained after the Vietnam experience. In other words, this model was seen by the American public to have failed in Vietnam and to have no applicability elsewhere. Hence the United States did little to prevent pro-Soviet Marxist guerrillas from seizing power in several Third World countries during the 1970s.

In the 1980s, when it became clear that pro-Soviet Marxist regimes were vulnerable, the United States supported anti-Soviet rebels in many countries, a practice known as the Reagan Doctrine. This policy was generally effective: although no Third World Marxist regimes were overthrown, none completely defeated their opponents, and no Marxist regime came to power in the 1980s.

The Soviet approach to Third World conflict was virtually the mirror image of the American approach in the years before Gorbachev. Moscow supported a series of so-called national liberation wars after the end of World War II through the Brezhnev era. This policy was especially successful in bringing Marxist regimes to power in the 1970s. When anti-Soviet insurgent activity increased in a number of them, Moscow adopted a counterinsurgency policy. Moscow was not successful in suppressing rebel forces, however, despite costly, long-term efforts to do so.

Just as American leaders did in the early 1970s, the Gorbachev lead-

ership in the mid-1980s concluded that counterinsurgency was an unproductive and costly means of preserving one's influence. As early as 1987, it became clear that Gorbachev sought to disengage the USSR from several Third World conflicts. Prospects arose for genuine Soviet-American cooperation to resolve a number of Third World disputes. Nevertheless, each side at first had very different expectations concerning the outcome of these conflict resolution efforts.

AMERICAN EXPECTATIONS: THE SOUTH VIETNAM MODEL

The USSR, Cuba, and Vietnam had sent large numbers of troops to protect weak Marxist regimes in Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia. Because of the expense and the fruitlessness of their efforts, all three intervening states decided to withdraw their troops as part of a settlement process in these three countries.

In the United States, foreign policymakers expected that Communist troop withdrawals would lead to certain consequences. In its most optimistic form, the expectation of American policymakers was that the withdrawals would lead to the collapse of the Marxist regimes that these soldiers had previously defended. This expectation was based on the American experience in Indochina, where U.S. troop withdrawal was followed shortly by the overthrow of the regimes that Washington had previously supported in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. This expectation was widely held with regard to the future of the Najibullah regime

immediately after the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 1989.

These optimistic—from the American point of view—expectations have not been met so far. Are they likely to be? In other words, is the South Vietnam model a generalizable expectation with regard to conflict resolution now? The answer to both questions is, probably not.

There are three reasons why the South Vietnam model is probably not applicable now. First, with regard to Afghanistan, the opposition forces are not unified and their factional infighting has increased following the departure of Soviet troops—a phenomenon that only helps the Kabul regime.

Second, the Marxist regimes in all these countries enjoy some degree of internal support, partly because significant sectors of the population view the opposition groups as less desirable than the existing government. In Afghanistan, many fear that the overthrow of the Kabul regime will mean that the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist *mujahidin* groups will come to power. In Cambodia, the most powerful opposition group is the murderous Khmer Rouge, compared to which the Hun Sen regime's rule is far more benevolent. In Angola, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) is led by mesticoes and Mbundus; these groups prefer it to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which is dominated by the Ovimbundu.

Third, the withdrawal of American forces from Indochina in 1973 was followed by the congressional cutoff

of arms transfers to U.S. allies there in 1974. It was shortly after this, in 1975, that these regimes collapsed. Despite the withdrawal of Communist armed forces from Third World countries recently, however, the Soviet Union continued to provide arms to its allies.¹ Unlike in America in the 1970s, domestic pressure to end arms transfers to Third World clients is still ineffective in the Soviet Union. Nor is cost a deterrent to continued Soviet arms transfers: with the drawdown of Soviet armed forces in both the USSR and Eastern Europe, Moscow has a huge excess of weapons that it can provide to others.

A dramatic regime change clearly took place in Nicaragua, but this is hardly an example of the applicability of the South Vietnam model. The regime change took place only after American funding to the contra rebels had been ended and the contras had virtually been driven out of the country. Further, the Sandinistas defeated the rebels without large numbers of foreign Communist troops participating in combat operations as in Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia. If there is any lesson that can be drawn from Nicaragua, it may be that dramatic regime change is more likely to occur only after external as-

1. Soviet arms transfers to certain Marxist Third World regimes have continued at least through 1990. Holman Jenkin, Jr., "Oil, Two Armies and Time," *Insight*, 1 Oct. 1990, p. 14; Sheila Taft, "As Arms Supply Winds Down, Afghan Rebels Close Ranks," *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 Nov. 1990. See also U.S., Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power, 1990* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 17-19, 101.

sistance to the rebels and the rebel insurgency itself have effectively ended; this is a proposition that will be examined later.

If the South Vietnam model is to work, it would do so only if the United States and its allies beefed up their military support for rebel groups to the point where the latter could seize power. Such an achievement, however, seems highly unlikely. While a certain amount of aid is needed to assist a rebel group to avoid defeat, a much greater amount is probably necessary to enable it to seize power from a government still enjoying substantial external support. At present, it is doubtful that current levels of American support will be maintained, much less increased, to rebel groups in Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia. In Cambodia, the United States ended its minimal support to the two non-Communist opposition groups for fear that this aid would ultimately serve to benefit only the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge.²

Earlier American expectations that the South Vietnam model could serve as a pattern of conflict resolution, then, appear unrealistic. The one country, Cambodia, where this model has a better chance of being implemented than anywhere else is also the one case in which the success of this model would be least desirable, considering which group is most likely to come to power there.

2. Despite Chinese government assurances that it had halted military aid to the Khmer Rouge in September 1990, the Khmer Rouge continue to receive Chinese arms. Steven Erlanger, "Khmer Rouge Get More China Arms," *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1991.

SOVIET EXPECTATIONS: THE NORTH YEMEN MODEL

Soviet statements during the 1986-89 period reveal that Moscow's notion of the outcome of conflict resolution agreements was very different from Washington's. The Soviets seemed to think that the withdrawal of Soviet, Cuban, and Vietnamese troops would not result in the fall of Marxist regimes in Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia. Instead, they expected opposition rebel groups to collapse. This would occur for two reasons: (1) in return for the withdrawal of Communist armed forces, the United States and its allies would end military assistance to the rebel groups; and (2) in some countries, rebel forces would begin fighting among themselves once foreign armed forces had departed. The type of internal settlement that Moscow envisioned for these countries and others was essentially a cease-fire, and amnesty for rebel forces—except the top rebel leadership—and permission for the former rebels to become part of the existing regime.³ Soviet relations with these regimes would remain close, and Soviet arms supplies would continue.

Moscow experienced a similar situation once before, in North Yemen. For five years in the 1960s, Soviet combat pilots and advisers helped 60,000 Egyptian troops try to defend a republican regime against Saudi-backed royalist rebels. The war proceeded miserably, and Egypt finally decided to withdraw in 1967. To encourage Egypt's withdrawal, Saudi

3. Mark N. Katz, *Gorbachev's Military Policy in the Third World* (New York: Praeger, 1989), chap. 4.

Arabia agreed to end its aid to the royalists. Even so, the republican regime seemed on the point of defeat and was barely being kept alive by a last-ditch Soviet airlift when the royalist opposition literally fell apart. Two years later, an agreement was reached whereby the royalists, minus their top leadership, were granted amnesty and allowed to hold office in the existing republican regime.'

Is this North Yemen model generally applicable now? Probably not. For while Soviet arms transfers can prevent Marxist Third World regimes from being overthrown, opposition forces are unlikely to be defeated so long as they continue to receive military assistance themselves.

So long as external support to anti-Soviet rebel groups continues, the internal aspects of insurgencies are unlikely to be settled along the lines of the North Yemen model. Thus earlier Soviet expectations that the North Yemen model could serve as a pattern of conflict resolution also appear unrealistic.

EAST EUROPEAN MODEL

Of course, superpower expectations at the outset of or during negotiations are not the only models of conflict resolution. As Soviet officials used to say, "life itself suggests other models. Particularly noteworthy among these are examples of successful political transformation, especially when they occur peacefully

4. Mark N. Katz, *Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Arabian Peninsula* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 24-32.

and even though they may have taken place without much advance planning. The peaceful transfer of power from Communist to non-Communist governments in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria during 1989-90 appears to be an especially desirable model. Is it applicable to the Third World?

Again, the answer is, probably not. The peaceful transfer of power in these five East European nations occurred under special circumstances. In 1989, Gorbachev signaled that the Soviet Union would not use force to ensure the continuation of orthodox Communist rule in Eastern Europe as the USSR had done in the past. The orthodox Communist leaderships in each of these five countries also concluded that the use of force against the opposition was no longer permissible. Indeed, these orthodox Communists basically lost confidence in both their ability and their right to continue ruling. In all of these countries, opposition forces enjoyed enormous popular support, while the Communist regimes had almost none. In addition, the opposition forces in each of these countries were committed to democratization—they did not seek to install their own dictatorships. As part of this democratization process, opposition forces were willing to allow the former Communist rulers to retain their parties and compete in elections. For the Communists, losing power did not mean losing their lives as well. In fact, they retained the right to participate in politics.

Most of these conditions are not present in the Marxist nations of the Third World. In Afghanistan, Cambo-

dia, and Ethiopia, the Marxist regimes are still prepared to use force against the opposition. In none of these countries is the opposition committed to democratization. For the Marxists in these countries, then, losing power could well mean losing their lives in addition to any meaningful right to participate in politics.

Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle to applying the East European model of peaceful transformation in the Third World is that democracy is highly valued generally in the former Marxist countries of Eastern Europe while it is not in the Marxist countries of the Third World. As long as this remains true, peaceful political change via elections is highly unlikely in the Third World. An obvious exception, though, is Nicaragua, where a Marxist regime did allow itself to be voted out of office. If this could occur in Nicaragua, could it occur elsewhere?

THE NICARAGUAN MODEL

It is not clear why the Sandinistas agreed to hold free elections in February 1990 after ruling in an undemocratic manner since they came to power in 1979. Perhaps they thought they would win. To the surprise of most observers, the elections were fair and the Sandinistas lost. What is perhaps most remarkable is that the Sandinistas acknowledged that they had lost and agreed to transfer power to the victorious United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) party, led by Violeta Chamorro. Part of their grace in defeat may have been due to the fact that Mos-

cow had cut its direct supply of arms to the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas probably realized that had they tried to remain in power despite the results of the election, domestic opposition would have arisen, the United States would have supported it, but Moscow would not have supported them.

In addition, the Sandinistas understood that, as in Eastern Europe, losing power did not mean that they would lose their lives or be eliminated from politics. Indeed, the Sandinistas remain the largest single party in the National Assembly. If the UNO coalition of 14 parties breaks up, the Sandinistas will play a key role in the assembly. In addition, unlike the Communist parties of Eastern Europe, the Sandinistas appear to enjoy a credible chance of being reelected to power in the future.

One of the underlying prerequisites for the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Nicaragua was that each side in the election agreed to respect the election results even if the other side won. They did not agree to this simply through idealism but because both sides understood that the electorate demanded it. This should not be surprising, though, considering that, unlike some other parts of the Third World, Latin America has increasingly valued republican democracy. With the exception of Cuba and Guyana, Latin American states either are democracies or are making significant progress toward democracy. Indeed, Latin America has had greater experience with democracy than Eastern Europe.

Can the Nicaraguan model be applied to other conflicts? As with the East European model, it probably cannot be in countries or regions where governments, opposition forces, and populations generally do not value democracy. Indeed, free elections would be difficult to conduct if any one of these groups did not agree to respect the results. Conflicts where a consensus to respect election results appears doubtful include Afghanistan, Cambodia, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East.

THE GULF MODEL

An unprecedented level of Soviet-American cooperation occurred in response to the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Most notably, this cooperation involved Soviet support for 12 American-sponsored U.N. Security Council resolutions directed against Baghdad, including one allowing the use of force against Iraq if it did not fully withdraw from Kuwait by 15 January 1991.

It is highly doubtful, though, that Soviet-American cooperation in the gulf crisis can serve as a model for superpower collaboration in similarly extreme cases involving the complete conquest of one country by another. While the United States and the USSR would both oppose such conquest or attempted conquest, it is highly unlikely that the Soviet or the American government would consider its interests outside the gulf to be so threatened that either of them would be willing to commit its own armed forces to the task of liberating the conquered nation. Nor is it likely that Soviet or American public opin-

ion would now tolerate protracted military intervention in any other part of the Third World. Probably the most that the two countries would be able to do in such a situation is to jointly isolate an aggressor and work to contain it from further expansion.

CONCLUSION

Can any lessons for the future be drawn from recent superpower efforts to resolve regional conflicts? The preceding analysis suggests that there may be relatively few. Nevertheless, there are some.

One lesson is that despite the progress in superpower conflict resolution that has been made so far, superpower diplomacy is unlikely to fully resolve conflicts if Washington and Moscow adhere to differing models of what the outcome of their conflict resolution efforts should be. It must be remembered that differences over the Third World played a large role in contributing to the breakdown of detente in the 1970s. Important differences over the outcome of conflict resolution could lead to both superpowers' remaining militarily involved in regional conflicts, the breakdown of their efforts to resolve conflicts, and negative consequences for detente.

Can these negative consequences of differing superpower expectations be avoided? They might be if the superpowers modified their expectations so that the other's interests were not threatened, or at least agreed on a common approach to conflict resolution. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze

made considerable progress toward such a common approach in 1990 with regard to Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Angola.

But even if the superpowers could agree on a common approach to conflict resolution, could they hope to devise and implement an effective one? A second lesson that can be drawn from the preceding analysis is that even successful examples of conflict resolution have, at best, limited applicability to other conflicts. To be successful, then, any joint superpower approach to conflict resolution would have to be flexible enough to encompass a wide variety of conflicts as well as accommodate each other's interests.

Such an approach would need to include four elements. The first is the reduction or elimination of superpower arms transfers. The experiences of Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia have demonstrated that the withdrawal of interventionary forces alone is not sufficient either to resolve conflict or to end superpower involvement in it. A serious obstacle to the achievement of both these goals is the continuation of arms supplies by the superpowers to the warring parties in regional conflicts. It is the continuation of these arms transfers that allows the warring parties to avoid negotiations and seek military victory over their opponents. A mutual superpower arms cutoff—or at least reduction—might convince them that military victory is not possible and therefore they must negotiate a peaceful settlement.

There are, of course, problems with an across-the-board formula for a superpower arms cutoff to the pro-

tagonists in all regional conflicts. The United States and the USSR are not the only arms suppliers. Each has allies that might for their own reasons continue arms transfers to the local antagonists. Each superpower, however, might well interpret this as proxy activity carried out at the behest of the other superpower. Both Washington and Moscow must be willing to reduce their support to any ally in order to reassure each other that neither is attempting to subvert an arms cutoff agreement. In some cases, a government over which Washington and Moscow have little influence may heavily arm one side in a regional conflict. Under these circumstances, the United States and the USSR may have little choice but to jointly arm the other side in order to create a stalemate that may in turn induce all parties concerned to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict.

The second element to an effective approach to conflict resolution is sustained diplomatic initiative. A cutoff or reduction of superpower arms supplies to the warring parties in a regional conflict is important for signaling to them that the superpowers will not back their military efforts indefinitely. This action by itself, however, will not serve to end the conflict. What is needed in addition is a sustained diplomatic effort to convince the warring parties and their backers that their interests would benefit from conflict resolution, while they would be harmed if the conflict continued.

This diplomatic initiative might occur in any number of ways. The two superpowers might work on it jointly, or the initiative might be taken by one. The warring parties might talk

to each other directly or through a superpower intermediary. Each unique conflict will require its own unique diplomacy to resolve it. What is important is that some form of sustained superpower diplomatic effort be undertaken.

The third element is neutralization. Since each superpower fears that conflict resolution efforts will result in the other one's gaining an ally, a way to avoid this—and hence avoid obstruction of conflict resolution—is for both superpowers to agree that neither will be closely allied to whatever government emerges from a conflict resolution process. In other words, even if the government emerging from a conflict resolution process seeks close military relations with one of the superpowers, both superpowers should eschew such relationships in order to avoid misunderstandings with the other superpower that could threaten their efforts at conflict resolution generally.

Finally, an effective joint superpower approach needs the promotion of free elections. With Gorbachev's encouragement of genuinely free elections in Eastern Europe and increasingly free ones in the Soviet Union, it is doubtful that Moscow would seek to block elections in the Third World. Indeed, Gorbachev's acceptance of elections and renunciation of the Soviet Communist Party's monopoly on power in the USSR is having a profound effect on Third World Marxists who based their political structures on the Soviet model.⁵ Thus there may now be a greater

acceptance of the concept of free elections in countries that have never had them before. The recent elections in Namibia and Nicaragua are proof that this can happen.

For such elections to be regarded as legitimate, it is important that no party be excluded from them. The people themselves should decide the extent to which Nsgibullah of Afghanistan, Jonas Savimbi of Angola, or even the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia should be represented in government. Attempting to exclude any leader or group from an election only gives those excluded an incentive to fight on. The superpowers, however, must undertake special efforts to isolate parties—such as the Khmer Rouge—that make clear that they will not respect the outcome of elections. The superpowers need to impress upon the warring parties that conflict is unlikely to end in any given country unless regularly held free elections are a fixture of its political life.

There can be no standard formula for how the initial elections should be conducted in each case. In Namibia, they were held under the auspices of the United Nations, though South African administration continued. In Nicaragua, the existing Marxist government carried them out. Other solutions have been suggested for other conflicts, including temporary coalition governments and full-scale United Nations control. As with diplomatic initiatives, the appropriate format for conducting free elections must be determined to fit the needs

5. For example, Joe Slovo, head of the South African Communist Party, recently de-

nounced the concept of a one-party state. Christopher S. Wren, "In Pretoria, Last Throes of Marxism?" *New York Times*, 19 Feb. 1990.

of the particular case. What is important is that free elections be held.

There is no guarantee that the superpowers can successfully resolve regional conflicts even if they adopt a common approach to conflict resolution. Adopting a common approach, however, may at least allow the su-

perpowers to unlink their overall relations from those conflicts that cannot be resolved. This alone would be a great benefit to them, one that will be far less likely to occur if the superpowers continue arming opposing sides in regional conflicts.