

1969

Challenge

Richard G. Colbert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Colbert, Richard G. (1969) "Challenge," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 22 : No. 7 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol22/iss7/1>

This President's Forum is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

CHALLENGE!



The observation has been made often and by many in recent months that the United States has reached a point of transition in the evolution of its foreign policy. If it be true that our attitudes on international affairs are presently in a state of flux, then it seems scarcely necessary to add that our strategic thinking may well require revision.

At the end of the Second World War, this country was swept by a wave of optimism and relief. It was a common feeling in the country that after having been drawn unwilling and unprepared into global conflict, we could at last set aside the heavy burden of international responsibility, and turn our attentions and energies toward the pressing problems of domestic needs and internal adjustment to the post-war world.

This luxury, however, was not to be permitted us. The two compelling realities of the dramatic and rapid communist take-over and consolidation of Eastern Europe and, at the same time, the destitution and weakness of practically all of the countries of the new Free World precluded American introversion. On the one hand, we perceived in Stalinist totalitarianism and its absorption of a substantial portion of Europe a menace to our own national security and that of our former allies. Simultaneously, even the most superficial survey of Western Europe and Asia yielded a depressing picture of nations economically prostrate and politically weak and unstable. Moreover, the only country remaining in a position of sufficient strength to provide significant assistance in economic reconstruction and military security was the United States.

So it was that, instead of the withdrawal and disengagement hoped for, this country launched itself on a long series of overseas commitments, exemplified by the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, the International Monetary Fund, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Western European Union, and NATO. These efforts were undertaken in the confidence of the rightfulness of our position, and with the assurance which sprang from a global position of unrivalled power. Their acceptance by the American people was general, with few overtones of adverse criticism.

The situation today, though, is scarcely comparable with that of twenty-five years ago. If our military and economic position in the world remains unsurpassed, it can certainly not be said to be unchallenged. In the next decade, it may no longer be unequalled. In one of his last official utterances as Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford expressed his mounting concern over the astonishing increase of Soviet ICBM's, which, he said, had nearly quadrupled over the preceding two years. Shortly afterward, Secretary Laird voiced similar apprehension not only about the Russian ICBM production but also about the accelerated capacity of the Soviet Union to produce nuclear submarines comparable to our own polaris submarines. Finally, our stated national goal is now sufficiency

2 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

and parity, rather than superiority, in strategic nuclear weapons. In short, the days of unmatched U.S. nuclear pre-eminence in the world may well have passed.

Beyond the nuclear offensive area, it is abundantly clear by now that the Soviet Union hopes to establish itself on the world's oceans not just as a power equivalent in every respect to the United States but rather as the world's greatest seapower. This is documented in the lightning development of their merchant marine, oceanographic, and fishing fleets, as well as their navy. Soviet foreign trade is growing dramatically on a worldwide basis, largely carried in Soviet merchant bottoms. Their economic goals may well parallel their military goals, in a longer time frame.

The USSR is increasing its economic and military assistance to key countries of the Third World, voicing political/military support for those countries and dramatically expanding its naval operations into all the sea areas of the globe. On 12 November, 1968, party leader Brezhnev voiced the new doctrine of Soviet intervention where necessary within the "Socialist Commonwealth." On 7 June of this year, he called for an "Asian security system," comprising countries such as Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Formosa, India, and Pakistan. Although the long range Soviet objectives of this policy are as yet somewhat obscure, the purpose seems to be to form a collective defense arrangement in the Far East, presumably to defend against the Chinese Communist threat and presumably to be sponsored and supported by the USSR. As one observer stated, "As Americans more and more contemplate the delights of neo-isolationism, Russia reverts more and more to the kind of neo-interventionism familiar under the Czars."

Nor is there any similarity in the status of our allies today with that of two decades ago. No longer are they lacking in political and economic viabil-

ity. West Germany and Japan are examples which demonstrate the advances made both in Europe and Asia over the last two decades. The protective, paternalistic assistance of the kind long provided by the United States is no longer necessary in these and other Free World areas. In some cases, it is met with outright opposition.

Perhaps even more important than either Soviet advances or the reconstruction of war torn countries, however, is the internal alteration of U.S. sentiments and attitudes. The bitter fruits of Vietnam do not comprise the agonizing loss of men and treasure alone; they apparently also include a general frustration and disenchantment on the part of many with the fundamental concept of U.S. foreign involvement and its ramifications.

Ironically, as Soviet interests expand, powerful voices are being raised in the United States calling for reductions in foreign economic assistance and military aid (The U.S. has now dropped to seventh place among the technologically advanced nations in the percentage of GNP devoted to foreign aid), a lessening of defense commitments abroad and a reduction in our worldwide defense posture.

An entire generation has grown up in the shadow of an omnipresent tension produced by the distinct possibility of a nuclear holocaust—which could ensue from any of a myriad of minor confrontations, each of which is communicated instantly to public attention. Young people are more interested in, knowledgeable about, and hence critical of our foreign policy than any generation before them.

At the same time, disorders at home seem to cry out for remedy. Crises of race, inflation, urban renewal, and student disorders have generated a powerful impulse in many quarters toward isolationism, which reinforces that stimulated by Vietnam. At the beginning of this summer, on 25 June, the

U.S. Senate overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling on the executive branch not to undertake any foreign commitments without the express approval of Congress. In this context, it is interesting to speculate as to what the legislative reaction would be if a modern Truman Doctrine or Marshall Plan might be introduced.

It is important to emphasize that these changes just described, both in the international position of the United States, and in the trends in our society at home, are anything but incipient. They are well underway. President Nixon has assured us that our combat troop commitment to Vietnam is to be reduced further and more radically. The climate among the American people, the public media, and the Congress is such that the assumption of any further overseas commitments is currently most doubtful, if not politically infeasible.

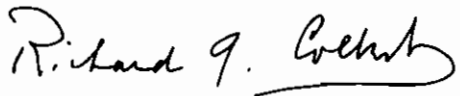
Whether or not we should maintain those responsibilities which have traditionally fallen to us seems to be a different question. President Nixon has admonished us about posing "a false choice between meeting our responsibilities abroad and meeting the needs of our people at home. We shall meet both or we shall meet neither." The real question turns on the method and manner in which these commitments are to be fulfilled.

In view of the stability and strength which now characterizes a large number of our allies, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that any viable strategy of the future must include their participation on an enlarged—and in some cases, dominant—scale, in the various regions of the world. It appears clear that the U.S. can no longer support a strategy where U.S. Armed Forces would continue to police the world

unilaterally. Various senior spokesmen in our government, including Senator Pastore in his graduation address to the Naval War College in June, have called for new or altered defense arrangements where other countries will share the load with us in maintaining the peace and stability of the world.

But regardless of what specific innovations are developed in U.S. strategy, the need for reassessment is clear. Now, at the beginning of a new academic year at the War College, it is to be hoped that some serious and original thinking can be produced in this vein. Secretary of Defense Laird has only recently called on the senior service colleges to search and come forth with new ideas and thinking that could be useful in addressing problems at the national level.

Academic freedom has always been a basic characteristic of the Naval War College. It is my belief that analysis and debate over important issues of national and military strategy are intrinsically beneficial in the educational process. And with the wealth of talent within our student body and our military and civilian faculty, it is logical to assume that we might well produce valuable studies and group research papers in response to the call of the Secretary of Defense. This could be one of the principal areas in which the Naval War College can make a truly significant contribution to U.S. national security in the years ahead.



R. G. COLBERT
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy
President, Naval War College