

Tuesday, December 23, 2003

'Bleeding Strategy' Comes Home

By Nicholas Berry

Back in the days of the "Evil Empire," the United States pursued what was called the "bleeding strategy" toward the Soviet Union.

Reacting to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Reagan administration, like the Carter administration before it, decided to bankrupt Moscow as the best way to win the Cold War.

The Soviet Union would be financially bled.

Economically isolating Cuba and Vietnam would force the Soviets to pump considerable sums of money into these clients to prop up their regimes. Supplying weapons to the mujahedin fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan would put heavy costs on the occupation.

And Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) would force the Soviet Union to devote ever-increasing shares of its national wealth to its military forces.

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of its Communist rulers, many American conservatives hailed the bleeding strategy as the main reason for winning the Cold War.

Reagan won it. Although simple minded, this belief lingers among Reagan's champions in America. The existence of the strategy is also widely known abroad, especially among Russian officials and intellectuals.

Now, the shoe is on the other foot.

Conversations with Russian, EU and Chinese officials strongly suggest that the bleeding strategy is now being used against Bush's America.

It is no secret that the leaders of these major players view Bush's preemptive use of force, his pre-occupation on the war on terrorism and on challenging axis-of-evil regimes, his disdain for the UN and international law, and his highly threatening military buildup, including the U.S. missile defense system, as contrary to their interests. Presidents Vladimir Putin, Hu Jintao, Jacques Chirac, and others favor multipolarity, not American unipolarity.

Finding it difficult to re-direct Bush to a wider, more internationalist orientation, these leaders are taking advantage of what they see as an opportunity to blunt and eventually change the direction of U.S. foreign policy. They appear to have adopted three ways to do it.

First, Bush's narrow focus allows them to appease the United States by joining the war on terrorism and to step back by tacitly approving the Iraq war.

Bush then is free to pursue his narrow agenda. And that leaves the rest of the world free to pursue their agendas without much U.S. interference. Russia moves to reestablish its sphere of influence and rejoin Europe. China advances its economy and regional influence in its pursuit of great power status. The EU concentrates on expansion, unity and even military cooperation.

Second, major powers in Europe and Asia see Bush's grand strategy as weakening American power almost daily -- power that they see as misguided and harmful. This weakening is good.

Noting that the United States employed a bleeding strategy to debilitate and fracture the Soviet Union, major powers are now content to let the United States bleed itself. Little help is given to the expensive occupation of Iraq.

Objections to Bush's costly (and dubiously effective) missile defense system are muted and it proceeds. China, EU countries, Russia and Japan are lending money to the United States to the tune of \$2 billion daily, thus aiding and abetting huge budget deficits that will eventually squeeze Washington's financial ability to maintain its imperium. Interest payments overseas mount. The dollar weakens.

This bleeding makes the United States less able to engage in militarism elsewhere, such as toward North Korea or Iran. It burdens the United States, thereby lessening its international economic clout. It reduces Bush's opportunities to interfere in their domestic affairs, whether on human rights, elections or economic restructuring, thereby giving

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them wide policy latitude.

Third, because Bush's strategy is unsustainable because of its enormous costs, its failure to deal with a wide variety of important issues and its dramatic denigration of diplomatic influence, major powers know that Bush's grand unipolar design cannot last long.

Eventually, either Bush changes or he and his policies will be repudiated at the polls. Bushism, like Bonapartism, is not forever. The United States will eventually return to normal diplomacy, military moderation, multilateral operations, and to support for international law and organizations.

There is no need to advertise the bleeding. Bush is doing the bleeding pretty well all by himself.

Nicholas Berry, director of ForeignPolicyForum.com, contributed this comment to The Moscow Times.