

# National Security Strategy: The New Look, 1953-1960

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**Overview** We study the Eisenhower presidencies from the end of the Korean War until 1960. This period was marked by significant changes in U.S. strategic doctrine, a shift from the massive conventional buildup recommended by NSC-68 toward the New Look strategy of a lean and mean military that would rely on nuclear weapons. However, even this policy required some adjustments after the Soviets acquired intercontinental missile capability in 1957. We also study the developments in the Soviet sphere in Europe, the Sino-Soviet split, and two American interventions.

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The Korean War had profound implications for US national security strategy, which we now address. First, recall that containment of communist expansion had become the bedrock of US foreign policy. However, until 1950 there had been no coherent plan of how best to accomplish it.

The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were both intended to correct specific problems but did not provide overall strategies that could be usefully applied around the world. The US consistently put Europe first on its list of priorities. But this is where it was also facing its major challenge. Congress did not want to send large numbers of American troops there, certainly not in the numbers required to at least match the Red Army. The administration then tried to reassure its Western allies through NATO but even this antagonized the French once the US started pushing for German rearmament (it was on September 12, 1950 that Acheson dropped “the bomb at the Waldorf” in New York City when he told the incredulous Berin and Schuman that the US intended to create 10 German divisions).

Seeing no way out of the impasse, Truman based deterrence of Soviet aggression in Europe on SAC’s capability. Even though the US could not stop a conventional military invasion by the Red Army, SAC’s bombers would be sent to the USSR to destroy population centers and military installations. Since invasion meant an all-out war, nuclear strikes were acceptable and because the USSR did not have nukes at the time, the Red Army was deterred from marching into Western Europe.

## **1 The New Look**

However, with the August 1949 explosion of its first nuclear device, the USSR shattered the precarious balance on which this deterrence relied. NSC-68 accounted for the new power relations and, although it did not develop the argument explicitly, it presented a new logic to deal with the situation.

Deterrence based on threat of nuclear retaliation upon Soviet invasion could not work anymore because a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union would be answered in kind with a nuclear strike against the American homeland and Western Europe. There were two problems with this. First, the Europeans were unhappy—every wargame that analyzed this scenario ended with most of Central Europe as a heap of smoldering radioactive ruins. Second, it was not clear that the US would retaliate to save Europe if it meant the destruction of major American cities. The two nuclear powers would balance and mutually deter each other, producing a nuclear stalemate, in which neither would dare use nuclear weapons against the opponent.

But if both were deterred from using nukes, what’s then to stop the Soviet Union from launching a conventional war? NSC-68 concluded that a conventional military buildup in Europe was necessary to deter the Soviets at this “lower” level of violence. This multi-level concept of deterrence, however, had to wait through the two Eisenhower presidencies before it became the official strategic doctrine.

Ike did not bother with multi-level deterrence because at the time it was unnecessary. Although the USSR had the bomb, it had no means of delivering it reliably and it would take years before it could build up a substantial arsenal to be able to threaten the US effectively. In contrast, the US had procured quite a few of the fission nukes and when in 1952 it exploded the first hydrogen (fusion, or thermonuclear bomb), the destructive potential increased thousands of times.

On August 8, 1953 Malenkov announced that the USSR had also entered the thermonuclear era. While with fission bombs the rival can wreak significant destruction, the arrival of the H-bomb ushered in the era dubiously distinguished by humanity's ability to obliterate itself. Still, it would take time before the USSR could effectively threaten the US. Ike made full use of the **first period of American military superiority**.

Recall that Eisenhower campaigned on a promise to end the Korean War (which he did because Stalin conveniently died). He was also determined not to get the US involved in any more "Koreas." In fact, several high-ranking officers had formed the "Never Again Club" for this purpose (no ground war in Asia). Ike promised not to send any more US troops to die but also wanted to balance the budget. He was determined to slash military spending to stem inflation which he perceived as the greatest threat to the national economic health. High deficit spending on the military would fuel inflation and cause irreparable harm in the long term, and apparently the US was in for the "long haul" competition with the USSR. Cutting the budget, however, would make maintaining a large conventional army impossible. But now that the communists had shown willingness to engage in expansionist conventional war, how could Eisenhower stop them without the large Korean War-style standing army?

Congress would not approve sending many troops to Europe and despite the German rearmament, the conventional strength there was much weaker than the Red Army. Still, when Eisenhower entered office, US had enormous strategic superiority with a huge stockpile of atomic bombs and the new hydrogen bombs. Eisenhower decided to exploit this advantage to the full.

To deter Communist aggression without spending too much, he relied on the new lean and mean military, which would emphasize technological prowess over conventional manpower. Bombers and nukes were cheaper to produce and maintain than a regular army. This became the **New Look** (or "more bang for the buck") policy, which remained the official US policy throughout the two Eisenhower presidencies.

The administration pursued a two-pronged policy to accomplish this, one diplomatic and the other military. On the diplomatic front, Dulles created an immense network of mutual defense pacts over the globe. In addition to NATO (Europe) and the Rio Treaty (the Americas), the US signed military assistance treaties for the Middle East (Baghdad Pact, subsequently CENTO, Central Treaty Organization), in 1952, SEATO (Southeast Asian Treaty Organization: US, France, UK,

Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan, Philippines) on September 8, 1954, as well as treaties with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, all designed to encircle the Sino-Soviet Bloc. The policy of **pactomania** linked the US to over 50 countries.

The military part was trickier. First, Eisenhower turned loose the CIA in places like Iran and Guatemala. Second, he sent US advisers to train native troops (i.e. “Vietnamization” long before Nixon). Third, and most importantly, he shifted emphasis from conventional military power to the huge hydrogen bombs.

## 1.1 Massive Retaliation

When Ike entered office, the US had a clear strategic superiority: it had a pretty decent atomic stockpile and the H-bombs would be coming into the arsenal before long. In contrast, due to technology and industrial backwardness, the Soviet Union was lagging far behind. The administration decided to capitalize on this advantage. The New Look policy would stress technology over manpower—it would be the lean and mean military that relied on nuclear bombs, jets, and air defenses—all of which would be far less costly to develop and maintain than a conventional army. While the budget during Ike’s two terms remained higher than before Korea, it was lower than what NSC-68 demanded. By pouring the available money into SAC, Air Defense Command, and the nuclear weapons program, the administration was saving on taxes while maintaining the deterrent threat, thereby preventing another Korea.

How did the threat work? While the alliance network was supposed to impress the Communists with the unassailable barriers it erected, the New Look policy also relied on a direct threat to use superior American strategic firepower against the USSR in case of an attack.

In a speech in January 1954, Dulles announced that henceforth the US would set the terms of its fights and would, in the event of communist aggression, retaliate instantly and massively by “means and at places of our own choosing.” Dulles appeared to be threatening that in the event of another Korea, the US would launch nuclear strikes against the Soviet and/or Chinese heartland. This policy came to be known as **Massive Retaliation** and remained the official US policy until JFK became president in 1961. The policy was not quite so primitive despite appearances and the administration deliberately left its most important detail ambiguous.

They never specified what would qualify to trigger the massive retaliatory strike. It was emphasized frequently that small “brushfire” wars would not result in the invocation of the doctrine, and left unspecified how large a brushfire war had to become before it triggered the response. The administration was betting that having faced this ambiguity, the Soviets would err on the side of caution, and so the overwhelming US power would never have to be actually used.

In only three instances did the US make a direct threat under the doctrine, all three at China—the first was to compel them to restart the negotiations and was

delivered upon assumption of office in early 1953 (Stalin's death makes the verdict on its efficacy problematic); the second was on the armistice day warning China not to resume the war; and the third was meant to deter them from intervening in Vietnam. Since China was not a nuclear power, these threats carried little risks. There were no threats against the USSR.

## 1.2 Critiques of Massive Retaliation

The strategy had many critics. One challenge was mounted by frustrated army officers whose forces suffered the worse cuts in the budget. General Maxwell Taylor argued that the US would still need sizeable conventional forces, for otherwise the US and its allies would be unable to check a communist aggression like Korea and then the US would have to either accept defeat or resort to nuclear weapons.

The administration came up with the idea of **graduated deterrence**, which espoused the view of a limited war, according to which, should the US find itself in the bind imagined by Taylor, then it would resort to a limited number of strikes with tactical (i.e. kiloton range) nuclear weapons against enemy troops in strictly localized zones and still win without expanding the war geographically or having to resort to massive retaliation. Critics didn't like that the new version again had the US make the agonizing move from conventional to nuclear warfare.

At any rate, the debate became moot once the USSR finally caught up with the US. From 1957, the Soviets had the capability to deliver their nuclear weapons to the US. Massive Retaliation lost the credibility of the deterrence threat. Since the Soviets could now threaten US cities with destruction, it became less likely that the US would risk such destruction by launching a nuclear war over a crisis in Asia or elsewhere. The problem was not whether it was worth doing so and whether the administration really intended to do it, but that the Soviets would not believe it. As we saw during the first part of the course, in deterrence, it is the opponent's expectations that are critical. And, for obvious reasons, as the Soviet ability to devastate American cities grew, the Soviets would simply stop believing that the US would sacrifice New York for Korea (or Paris or London for that matter).

As we have discussed before, the US tried to overcome some of its credibility problems by stationing some troops in Europe. The "trip-wire" or "plate glass" idea was (a) to put enough troops to force the Soviets into an unambiguous massive invasion, and (b) to get enough US soldiers killed in a Soviet attack that the US would have to respond. This, by the way, was still not quite credible: would the US retaliate for the loss of 20,000-40,000 of its soldiers with a strike if doing so automatically meant losing New York, San Francisco, and Boston? On the other hand, losing Western Europe could be perceived as threatening enough to risk it.

All of these arguments also revolved around the ability (both American and Soviet) to actually bring all their ferocious power to bear. But if the strategic forces were vulnerable to a surprise attack, then the other side had an incentive to pre-

empt and launch a nuclear strike in order to eliminate the threat to its own cities. The vulnerability of strategic forces became a matter of increasing concern.

As we have seen, both sides could be victims if either side's strategic forces were vulnerable to a disarming first-strike: the dynamics of mutual alarm could make both sides trigger-happy. The world would be a dangerous place indeed. If each side could destroy the other's nuclear forces depending on which side struck first, then the world would depend on an ever more "delicate balance of terror" that could unravel quickly and disastrously.

What was needed then, was second-strike capability, that is an ability to deliver a punishing nuclear attack after absorbing (riding out) the first attack by the enemy. If both sides had secure second-strike capability, then mutual deterrence would be stable because neither side would have an incentive to launch an attack first. Therefore, it was in the interest of the US (and the Soviet Union) that both sides have strategic forces that were invulnerable to a surprise attack.

It was to secure second-strike capability that the US began dispersing SAC bombers (so Soviets would have more targets to hit), putting a portion of the bomber fleet on "ground alert" at all times, as well as the other measures we have studied.

## **2 Two Successful Interventions**

Contrary to popular perception, the Eisenhower presidencies were not completely free of dramatic and important events. We shall look at four: the Iranian coup, the intervention in Guatemala, the Suez War, and the Hungarian Revolution.

One of the innovations of the Eisenhower administration was to unleash the CIA, and when this happened, it enjoyed considerable success for a while and, as usually happens, produced too much faith in the covert approach, even in the face of mounting evidence that it would not work quite that well if the circumstances were not right.

We now look at the two successful U.S. interventions in Iran and Guatemala. The first is especially important because it left lingering resentment that exploded in the revolution that brought the anti-American Islamic clerics who still wield power there. In both cases (a) leaders elected constitutionally were deposed; (b) coups succeeded because leaders lost support of the army; (c) leaders were nationalists, not communists.

### **2.1 Iranian Coup**

Iran, you should recall, was governed by the Shah. However, in 1951 a nationalist movement headed by Mohammad Mosaddegh succeeded in undercutting that rule and then proceeded to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company whose tax remittances to the British government had exceeded the income Iran was getting from its own resources! The British demanded compensation which the Iranians could not

pay, and negotiations deadlocked as the Iranian economy, heavily dependent on oil revenue (30% of total income, 60% of foreign exchange), tanked. The US refused to help.

### **British request for help**

Dulles had concluded that this was an excellent moment to rid the Middle East of British and French colonialism and replace it with American “influence.” The opportunity came in July 1953, when the State Department became convinced that Mosaddegh was moving toward the Soviets: rumors of a Soviet loan circulated. The US, which had already refused to help, now cut off all aid. It then provided the shah with guns, trucks, armored cars, and communications for a coup by the shah.

This was very successful and the new government quickly began negotiations with the oil company but this time under US guidance. When the dust settled, the Shah (quite unpopular in Iran) was restored, and a new international consortium controlled Iranian oil, splitting profits 50-50 with the Shah. The five US companies had 40%, the British another 40%, and the French the other 20%. This was a happy ending for the US: the British/French colonialism was replaced by a more “multicultural” one and the pro-US shah was secure. . . at least until 1978 when the Iranians got rid of him but this time they became bitterly anti-American.

## **2.2 Intervention in Guatemala**

A similar success occurred in Guatemala, a small country in Central America. The country was poor, the population illiterate and mostly agrarian. The government was struggling with land reform and labor reforms: 2% of landowners own 60% of the land. In 1951 Colonel Arbenz came to power through constitutional means. The politics became polarized—on the left, Arbenz supporters, including communists, demanded further reforms against the conservative opposition.

Everything was going fine until in 1953 Arbenz had the audacity (and lack of political acumen) to confiscate 170,000 acres of land owned by United Fruit Company. United Fruit employed more than 40,000 Guatemalans, held a monopoly on shipping, railroad, and communications, and frequently interfered in politics. It also had many friends in high places in Washington. When Arbenz refused to pay compensations for the very good reason that he didn’t have the money and because if he borrowed it, he’d have to assume obligations that would endanger the land reform, Dulles swung into action.

In March 1954 he pushed through a declaration at the 10th Inter-American Conference that because “international communism. . . is incompatible with the concept of American freedom,” the American states should take all measures to “eradicate and prevent subversive activities.” This was clearly targeted at Guatemala, which cast the single dissenting vote.

On May 15, 1954, Guatemala unloaded a shipment of Czech arms and the US airlifted arms/supplies to Nicaragua and Honduras, to CIA-trained Guatemalan exiles

for an invasion. On June 18, Colonel Castillo Armas moved with 150 people across the border from Honduras. The CIA bombed the capital and several key cities. Arbenz lost the support of the army and the supposedly communist-controlled labor unions defected as well. By the end of June Armas ruled the country.

Both Iran and Guatemala were cases of successful intervention. However, the circumstances were unique and, if some of the factors were not present, the interventions would not have succeeded (as later ones did not). In both cases the existing regime fell because it lost the support of the military, a lesson taken to heart both by Fidel Castro and the Sandinistas, who merged the government and the army making such defections unlikely. Second, and most importantly, the US confused (yet again) nationalism with communism. In both cases, the CIA helped remove governments elected by proper means that headed reform—not communist movements. Also, in both cases the US won the battle but lost the war—I already told you about Iran. In Guatemala, Armas killed more people than the invasion. Three years later he was assassinated and even though the US poured more aid into Guatemala between 1954-65 than any other Latin American country, the result was a brutal repressive military dictatorship and the most radical revolutionary movement.

### **3 The Soviets On the Move**

#### **3.1 Reforms in the USSR**

However, both Guatemala and Iran were sideshows compared to the events in Europe and the Middle East in 1956. By early 1955 the political struggle for succession in the USSR was completely resolved in favor of Khrushchev. When in January Malenkov made a speech about the hydrogen bombs making peaceful coexistence between socialism and capitalism a necessity, Nikita Khrushchev accused him of intimidating the proletarian revolution with atomic weapons. This was a wisely calculated move for it brought Khrushchev the support of hard-line Stalinists. He demanded and obtained on February 8, 1955 Malenkov's resignation. It appeared that the USSR was sliding back into the abyss of Stalinist paranoia and bristling aggressiveness.

But appearances can be deceiving. After using the hardliners to gain control, Khrushchev, now ensconced at the top position in the USSR, adopted Malenkov's policies. He pacified the socialist bloc by working out a rapprochement with Yugoslavia by blaming the rift on Stalin and negotiating pretty good economic agreements. He then pronounced the USSR furthest along the road to communism (only god knows how he figured that one out) and thereby wrapped the Soviet Union in the mantle of a chief communist ideologist, a mantle that China coveted itself. The USSR also calmed down the suspicious Chinese by returning to their control Port Arthur and the Chinese Eastern Railway, long controlled by Russia and then the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev's foreign policy targeted third world noncommunist nationalist governments as potential allies against the West: (a) generous aid programs for development, (b) emphasis on peaceful competition with West to ultimate Soviet victory, (c) rocket-rattling to impress with military strength.

In the international arena outside the socialist camp, Khrushchev launched an aid program for newly emerging nations (not because there was economic profit to be made there or because he cared much about them—it was for political reasons—they were relatively cheap to “buy” for the cause and, if the USSR didn't do it, the Americans might). Khrushchev carefully targeted the recipients: North Vietnam, Indonesia, Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt. By banding with China in reaffirming the principles of peaceful competitive coexistence, the Soviets denounced the obsolete Stalinist two-camp view of the world and uncovered the non-socialist nationalists as potential allies against Western imperialism. While the US was still having trouble distinguishing nationalist from communist, the communists had no doubts about the preferences of state leaders in these “gray areas” between the two camps.

To encourage alignment and to attract the admiration and confidence of these third nations, Khrushchev embarked on a foreign policy that involved brandishing military prowess with considerable flair in a diplomatic offensive that emphasized the vitality, optimism, and strength of the Soviet regime. Unfortunately, most of the moves were interpreted, with good justification, by the US as the aggressive probing of a country bent on world conquest. It did not help when the USSR formed the **Warsaw Pact** on May 1, 1955 in a belated response to NATO.

In mid-May 1955, the US supported West Germany which formally regained sovereignty, commenced rearmament and entered NATO. These events derailed the Geneva Conference, where Khrushchev announced to the Western powers that there would be no free elections in East Germany until West Germany disarmed. Not only did the US succeed in arming West Germany and tying it to the Western bloc but it could now blame the USSR for blocking reunification through free elections. The Soviets did their best: in September 1955, they worked out formal relations with East Germany and transferred to it full powers in foreign affairs, ensuring that West Germany would have to go directly to the East German communist regime instead of through the Russians. This ensured the continued division of the country, which was sealed in January 1956 with the entry of East Germany into the Warsaw Pact. All hope for reunification vanished—the superpower rivalry had produced yet another artificial division that would last for 40 years.

The US had completely underestimated the vast scope of Soviet reform and the boldness of Khrushchev's reorientation program. Indeed, the Soviets themselves were stunned when in February 1956 Khrushchev denounced Stalin for his crimes against the Party and the national interest of the USSR. He discussed the purges (in this he was afflicted with the common selective amnesia that prevented him from recalling the purges he had participated in), the cult of personality, and everything else while carefully pointing out that while the leadership was at fault and to blame

for the mistakes, the system itself was fine, and especially the Party and the army. This was Khrushchev's attempt to loosen the restrictions so that the Soviet economy could improve while keeping firm control over society without resorting to repression.

### **3.2 The Polish October**

It backfired badly. The satellites were first shocked to learn that the supposedly unalterable truths of "capitalist encirclement," "inevitability of war," and the world division into two camps, were all unsound doctrines. Then, two of the most important satellites, Poland and Hungary, began rapid de-Stalinization programs. Khrushchev soon lost control of the process.

When Władysław Gomułka, the head of the Polish Communist party, purged the party of faithful old revolutionaries (some of them still holding Soviet citizenship), the Russians engaged in some military "maneuvers," which provoked an outburst from the Poles who resented this blatant infringement on their illusory sovereignty. Khrushchev flew to Warsaw on October 19, 1956, delivered a speech against the Polish changes, and demanded their reversal. He ordered the Soviet army to striking positions along the border. Gomułka was undeterred and responded by threatening to call out the Polish people to resistance. He bluntly told Khrushchev: "Turn your tanks around or we'll fight you."

But despite all the bluster, the Poles were not actively trying to break the communist monopoly on power; they seemed to be demanding more equitable position for Poland in the communist camp. For example, supplying coal to the USSR at excessively low prices had resulted in lack of sufficient supplies in Poland. Add to that the catastrophic shortfall in grain, and Poland was in a really bad economic shape. The Poles even asked the USSR for a loan. Gomułka ended up giving a speech in Warsaw where he affirmed the Soviet determination to let the Poles decide whether the continuing presence of the Red Army in their country is desirable. He then proceeded to say, to great applause, that it was in Poland's interests for them to remain there, because of NATO and of American troops in West Germany. He then denounced all those who claimed that the Polish Army was under Soviet control, and urged everyone to go back to work for the good of the people.

The "Polish October" had been successful—Gomułka promised every Pole something (e.g. normalizing relationship with the Catholic Church) and a move to a new relationship with the USSR. (This, by the way, was a sham—once secure, Gomułka began renegeing on most of the promises knowing full well that their implementation would cause the communists to lose their grip on power.) Khrushchev was reassured that Gomułka wanted reforms that would not threaten either Soviet presence in Poland or communist rule there, and so he gave in, hoping that this would be the last of this unpleasant affair.

### 3.3 The Hungarian Revolt

He was wrong. The “Polish October” was infectious. Once the Hungarians got wind of Soviets’ failure to come through on their threats, the students took to the streets on October 23 demanding that the Stalinist leader be replaced with Imre Nagy, a reform-minded politician, who used to be prime minister. In his anti collectivization, consumer production oriented mind-set, he was Khrushchev’s analogue for Hungary, so caving into the demands of the population would not have been terrible.

At first, the Hungarian secret police attempted to suppress the students and fire upon them, killing many, but this only caused the workers to join the demonstrations. The hardliner Ernő Gerő requested Soviet help in suppressing the nascent rebellion, but the Russians demurred and asked for the request to be made in writing. However, events overtook the planned “legitimization” and Zhukov was ordered to occupy Budapest before it could happen. The Soviets relented and agreed to the election of new members to the government. Nagy himself came out on the 24th to call for order and threaten reprisals against anyone who would resist. This earned him the label of traitor, and it was widely believed that he had called in the Soviets too.

The Budapest citizens ignored Nagy, demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Hungary and the creation of a party in opposition to the communists. The Russian delegation told Moscow that Budapest was calm while having the embassy itself be encircled by 30 tanks for protection. Unrest continued apace and threatened to sweep aside Nagy for more popular leaders. Over the next few days Nagy himself underwent a remarkable conversion, and emerged as the leader of drastic political and economic changes. On October 28, the Soviets began withdrawing the tanks they had encircled Budapest with.

It might have worked had not Nagy and events in the Middle East conspired against the Hungarians. As the Hungarian Communist Party was losing its grip on the country, the British and the French (with the possible connivance of the Americans) were on the move in Egypt (as we shall see, the Suez War had begun on October 29). If the Russians allowed Hungary to slide from behind the Iron Curtain, that would be yet another loss after Egypt. Khrushchev believed that any hint of weakness would further embolden the West, and this may lead to changes in the USSR itself because “our party will not accept it if we do this.” In other words, this may occasion a split in the party, and internal turmoil, which would probably cause “fraternal” squabbling between the various communist friends in the Eastern bloc. Just as *Pravda* was printing promises that the USSR was prepared to negotiate new and more equitable relations between the Soviet Union and its satellites, the Presidium of the USSR reversed its policy toward Hungary and decided to suppress the rebellion (October 31).

The Soviet estimates turned out to be correct. Nagy was a patriot but he had

badly misjudged the Russians. He took the reforms much further than the Poles had by announcing the withdrawal of Hungary from the Warsaw Pact (the country was supposed to stay neutral), and the creation of a multi-party system. This was not anything the Soviets would calmly tolerate: the first was a threat to their security belt, and the second was an overt challenge to communist rule in Hungary. The Poles had carefully limited their reform goals and managed to calm Soviet suspicions enough, and the very boldness of the Hungarians spelled their doom.

As the world was watching the lightning war Israel, in cahoots with Britain and France, was waging on Egypt, the Russians moved in on November 4-5 and drowned the rebellion in blood. Having regrouped beyond the borders, 15 Soviet divisions with 6,000 tanks (almost twice the number the Germans had when they attacked the Soviet Union), artillery, and air support fell upon the Hungarians. Artillery fire pounded all major cities. After four days of continuous shelling, Budapest was reduced to rubble. Soviet tanks dragged around dead bodies through the streets as a warning to others.

The Hungarians desperately resisted by throwing Molotov cocktails at the tanks, but were helpless—the last resistance teletypes from newspaper offices transmitted frantic pleas for help to the United Nations telling them that the Hungarians were fighting but were outgunned. “Give us a little encouragement. . .,” “Nagy and the whole government and the whole people ask help. . .,” “Any news about help? Quickly, quickly, quickly. . .,” “They brought us a rumor that the American troops will be here within one or two hours. . . We are well and fighting at 9:20 am.” Then everything was silenced.

More than 30,000 people were killed and more than 200,000 fled to the West, mostly through Austria until the Russians blew up the main bridge to stem the exodus. Nagy sought refuge in the Yugoslav embassy but came out when the puppet Hungarian regime of János Kádár promised him safe conduct. He was immediately captured by the Russians who shipped him off to Romania. The Russians actually tried to get him to renege on the rebellion and endorse the new regime, but he refused. He was then returned to Budapest, where the faithful communists tried him, executed him, and buried him in an unmarked grave in June 1958. By November 14, the Kádár government was in place, and order was restored. Soviet rule had been reestablished.

Despite public expressions of sympathy by Eisenhower and Dulles, the U.S. did not move to help the Hungarians. It is not that the Americans stood by calmly watching the Russians bathe in blood their dreary order, but that simply there was nothing the U.S. could have done. The geographical location of Hungary is such that the only way to help its people was to risk a major war with the Soviet Union. When your opponent has nuclear weapons, such an undertaking is not pursued lightly. The dangers of an all-out war with the Russians were simply too great, and the resulting conflict, too costly and dreadful to confront them militarily. Even though it was desirable to “eventually encourage the establishment of freely elected

governments in the satellites as a disruptive device and not as an end in itself,” the U.S. had to do so very carefully and assist said nationalists only where “U.S. and free world cohesion would not be jeopardized”.<sup>1</sup>

#### **4 The Sinai/Suez War**

In addition, the Suez War was considered the more important event. This war was the second major armed conflict between Israel and the Arabs, in this case, Egypt. The Egyptian leader Gamel Nasser was a charismatic nationalist who dreamt of creating a huge pan-Arab state where Egypt would play the greatest role. As any good nationalist, he soon found out that he could exploit the US-Russian rivalry to his own advantage. He opened arms negotiations with both sides and when the communists offered a better deal, he signed an agreement with the Czechs (September, 1955). The U.S. tried to regain some influence by agreeing to finance the building of the Aswan Dam, a huge (and expensive) project that Nasser was hoping to use to harness the upper Nile to economic advantage.

In April 1956, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen formed a military alliance obviously aimed at Israel, triggering a war scare in the region. The Arabs (including Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan) had refused to recognize Israel. At the time, the US was still supplying Saudi Arabia with tanks, while Egypt and Syria were getting weapons from the communists. Nasser’s deal with the Czechs now looked ominous and when in May Nasser recognized Communist China, Dulles came under increasing domestic pressure to halt financing of the Aswan Dam. On July 19, he announced that the U.S. was backing out of the deal.

Dulles thought that this would reduce Nasser’s prestige, and would force him to come around because he could not finance the project by himself and he wouldn’t turn for help to the USSR because that would make him too dependent on the communists. The US had miscalculated. One week after the announcement (July 26) Nasser seized the Suez Canal by nationalizing the British-controlled company that ran it. Nasser had outmaneuvered the U.S.: he had recovered his prestige with a bold action, and he gained a handsome annual profit of \$25 million that he could use for the dam.

However, Nasser also now controlled a passage vital to Europe: over 67 million tons of oil had moved through the Canal to Europe in 1955 alone. This put him in a dangerous position for this power made Britain and France uncomfortable. Although Nasser compensated the shareholders (so the seizure was legally justified) and promised to keep the Canal open to all former users, Britain and France demanded shared control—they were unwilling to place such important imports in the hands of the Egyptians. Nasser refused.

Britain and France then worked out a clandestine plan with Israel, which was

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<sup>1</sup>Quotes from Appendix to NSC 5608/1, July 18, 1956.

getting jittery about the crystallizing hostility of its neighbors and was looking for ways to diffuse the growing threat. The plan would work as follows: Israel would launch a preemptive strike against Egypt and would seize the Sinai Peninsula to secure its borders. Then Britain and France would sponsor a U.N. demand for a cease-fire as soon as the Israelis achieved their goals. The demand would be issued to both sides and would be justified by the disruption of shipping through the Canal. Since Nasser was expected to refuse, Britain and France would use this as an excuse to invade Egypt and seize the Canal under the pretext of restoring peace.

On October 29, the Israelis attacked Egypt. Within hours they demolished the Egyptian Army and conquered much of the Sinai Peninsula. The speed of their advance caught the British and French by surprise. In the confusion, the close coordination between the three came to light. Nevertheless, on October 30, Britain and France issued a joint warning to both sides to stay away from the Canal. When Nasser rejected the note, British and French planes began bombing military targets in Egypt. On November 5 the Anglo-French forces invaded Egypt and moved to secure the Canal. The Egyptians blocked the canal by sinking ships in it, which disrupted oil shipments. Saudi Arabia embargoed oil shipments to France and Britain, soon the two found themselves at the mercy of the U.S.: only American credit could ensure that vital imports continued to be bought.

But the U.S., having been kept in the dark by its allies, had problems. After crushing the Hungarian revolt, Khrushchev turned to the Middle East by suggesting that a Russo-American settlement be imposed. He also warned that unless the Anglo-French forces withdrew, the USSR would squash them with force. While pressing the allies to compromise, Eisenhower put the U.S. forces on alert: America would not tolerate blackmail and, more importantly, she would not tolerate Khrushchev weaseling his way into the good graces of the Arabs and succeeding in an endeavor where the Russian Tsars had failed for centuries.

While presenting the strong façade to the Russians, Eisenhower had a resolution passed by the U.N. General Assembly calling for a truce and then cut off all oil supplies to Britain and France from Latin America (the only replacements to the supplies they had lost). He further threatened to undermine the British pound by selling all American reserves of that currency, and causing it to plummet in value. The U.S. kept the pressure until the British and then the French agreed to withdraw their troops. With their forces only hours away from seizing the canal, the two governments agreed to pull back. A U.N. emergency force restored the canal to Egyptian control and although the settlement was not as bad as the Israelis claimed, it failed to secure Israel's position. The country, heavily dependent on American goodwill, could hardly challenge the terms arranged by the U.S. At the same time, the incident drove the Arabs further into Soviet arms.

## 5 The Dawn of the Missile Age

### 5.1 The Eisenhower Doctrine

As a result of the Suez War, Eisenhower (fresh from winning his second term) tried to strengthen the Baghdad Pact and curb Nasser's growing influence by getting "The Middle East Resolution," or the **Eisenhower Doctrine** through the House (January 5, 1957). It asked Congress for authorization to extend economic and military cooperation (and, if necessary, US forces) in the Middle East to any country that requested help against communist-instigated armed aggression (conveniently overlooking the simple fact that the last armed aggression was not quite done by Soviet puppets).

In March 1957, the Senate also passed the Eisenhower Doctrine, an interesting spectacle of a Democratic Congress formally surrendering the power to control the outbreak of war to a Republic President. Ike immediately put it to good use by sending money and the 6th fleet to help Jordan's King Hussein battle Nasserite elements (i.e. no communists involved, just pan-Arab nationalists; also, the Suez War was most certainly not result of communist aggression).

### 5.2 Soviets Acquire ICBM Capability

In early 1957, Eisenhower had won re-election, triumphed over Khrushchev, Britain, France, and even Nasser. But in the summer of 1957, Khrushchev finally gained supreme power by outflanking the army and ousting the celebrated war hero and head of the Red Army Georgy Zhukov.

And then, on October 4, the USSR launched *Sputnik*, the world's first artificial satellite. The missile age had arrived and the first era of American nuclear superiority came to an end.

Just as everyone was concerned with the potential vulnerability of SAC to Soviet bombers, the West was stunned by the ominous achievement. It wasn't the satellite itself (nor the two heavier and bigger ones that followed it), but the booster rocket that put Sputnik into space that was especially alarming—the Soviets had acquired the capability to deliver a powerful, probably nuclear, weapon to targets within a 4,000 mile radius (and so could strike targets in the U.S. by flying over the North Pole). In August 1957, the Soviets had also successfully fired the world's first ICBM and appeared ready to deploy ICBMs much sooner than the US could have hoped to do so itself.

At the same time Khrushchev began talking about **peaceful coexistence** defined as not only the absence of war between the two systems, but also peaceful economic competition between them, and concrete cooperation in economic, political, and cultural areas. The Soviet GDP had been increasing by 7.1% on the average annually since 1950, approximately 50% greater than the American rate. Khrushchev

was quick to exploit the situation. However, even though the economic growth was real, the Soviet lead in ICBM was not.

The Soviets had decided not to build the first-generation ICBMs but instead wait for the second, and even third generations. The Americans did not know that and when Khrushchev began bluffing and boasting about Soviet military superiority, many in the West worried about the **missile gap**—the situation in which the USSR would be deploying ICBMs well before the US could have its own missiles ready.

Since it took less than 30 minutes for a missile to fly over the North Pole and reach the US from Russia, the possibility that the USSR could destroy all American targets before the US could even launch its strategic forces was real, and the vulnerability was frightening. As Wohlstetter’s “Delicate Balance of Terror” emphasized and as we have already discussed, the situation in which one side had credible first-strike capability was extremely unstable.

The US responded by accelerating development of its new radar system BMEWS (ballistic missile early warning system), which could give about a 15 minute warning of an incoming Soviet strike. Also, a portion of SAC was put on “air alert” in addition to the “ground alert” we’ve previously discussed. Here, a portion of the strategic bombers was kept in the air at all times—24/7—ready to strike targets in the USSR. This was enormously expensive but the only way to ensure that at least some bombers would survive a surprise attack.

While the public became alarmed and advisers urged Eisenhower to increase military spending, the President held back. He believed that the current US nuclear stockpile and its rate of increase sufficed: from 1958 to 1960, the weapons increased from 6,000 to 18,000. At the time, the Soviets deployed... 4 ICBMs! This fact, however, was unknown until 1961 when spy planes identified the installations.

### **5.3 Berlin Crisis, 1958-1959**

In the meantime, Khrushchev moved to exploit the bargaining leverage that this asymmetric information gave him. Some of the world’s most tense moments followed in 1958-59, when the Soviet leader challenged the West for control in Germany.

Recall that in 1956 West Germany began acquiring artillery and aircraft capable of delivering nukes. The Soviets watched with growing alarm and finally, after publicizing the ICBM advantage, Khrushchev began a series of moves on November 10, 1958 that climaxed with the demand that the US, Great Britain, and France withdraw their 10,000 troops from West Berlin, make it a “free city” and negotiate the rights to access with the East German government (which no one in the West recognized). This was an ultimatum: if agreement was not reached within 6 months, Khrushchev threatened to turn control over the land routes over to the East Germans. Dulles responded by threatening that should this happen and the East Germans prevented the West from using the roads, NATO would retaliate “if need

by military force.” Khrushchev replied that this would mean World War III.

The West adopted a wait-and-see attitude and it soon became clear that the Soviets would not risk war over Berlin. As the deadline approached, Khrushchev denied that he had issued an ultimatum and extended the six-months period so that negotiations could be conducted. In September 1959, Khrushchev visited the US and although nothing much came of the visit, he and Ike arranged for a summit conference in Geneva to be followed by Ike’s visit of the USSR.

By April 1960, the situation got colder again and on May 5, 1960, on the eve of the Geneva conference, Khrushchev announced that the USSR had shot down a U-2 spy plane. When the US denied that the aircraft had a spying mission, Khrushchev trapped them by producing the pilot, who had been captured by the Soviets. Ike accepted full responsibility and the conference was ruined both by Russian intransigence over Berlin and American lack of foresight in sending a spy plane during critical hours of diplomacy. In addition, the U-2s had revealed that the missile gap was a myth, a problem for Soviet relations with both the US and China.

## **6 The Sino-Soviet Split**

While Khrushchev was cautious in describing the ICBM as the “ultimate weapon” and (although trying to use it to wring concessions from the West) was interested in peaceful coexistence and some form of accommodation and even cooperation with the West, the Chinese were less restrained. As early as 1957 Mao claimed that “the international situation has now reached a new turning point. There are two winds in the world today; the East wind and the West wind. . . I think the characteristic of the situation today is the East wind prevailing over the West wind.”

The Chinese urged that the shift in the balance of power had “torn apart the paper tiger of American imperialism” and that the Communists should now deal with the West from a position of strength. Not accommodation with the West—which Mao believed impossible because the West was duplicitous and bent on the destruction of communism—but strong support of “wars of liberation” in newly emerging nations, which could now be done without fearing interference from the paper tiger. The West had been, Mao thought, neutralized.

Khrushchev refused to indulge these fantasies. He, of course, knew that his ICBMs were much more of a paper tiger than the very real American bomber force. On the other hand, he could not reveal this fact to the Chinese, who at first couldn’t understand why the Russians were not pressing their advantage, and then concluded that the Soviets were getting cozy with the West against Chinese interests.

In 1958, Mao launched “The Great Leap Forward,” which emphasized collectivization and infusion of the masses with revolutionary zeal. This was supposed to enable China to go from an agrarian to a communist society by skipping industrialization. Close to 30 million Chinese perished of starvation because of severe

economic dislocations caused by the reforms that lasted until 1961.

This policy was contrary to the Soviet line, which emphasized industrial production first and revolutionary zeal of the masses second. (In fact, by 1950 even Stalin had forgotten about the revolutionary zeal). The Chinese became critical of the Russian pro-consumer orientation of the economy at the expense of more military hardware. They were also livid at Soviet help of “bourgeois” regimes in the Third World. Mao continued to urge for wars of liberation.

By May 1958, the Sino-Soviet rift became so obvious that Dulles announced that USSR had been co-opted by the West and no longer posed the primary threat. As it turned out, he spoke too soon.