

National Security Strategy: Flexible Response, 1961-1968

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Overview We study the strategic innovations of the Kennedy administration in the doctrine of flexible response, and the final flare-up over Berlin in 1961. We then look at two crises in the late 1960s: the Six Days War of 1967 and the Prague Spring of 1968.

We have seen that the New Look policy, although initially potentially useful, quickly became obsolete with the development of inter-continental delivery capabilities that undermined the credibility of its deterrent threat. The cornerstone of U.S. posture in Europe and around the world was therefore weakened because it appeared that the country could no longer rely on nuclear threats to provide security for itself and its allies. Although the Soviet Union had shown itself quiescent (at least since the death of Stalin), the Chinese were actively promoting their wars of national liberation and it was unclear for how long the Russians would sit behind their iron curtain.

The tumultuous 1956 saw discord in the Western Alliance when the U.S. had to force its British and French friends to abandon their collusion with Israel over the Suez Canal. Even though the problems were papered over and the alliance presented a united front to the Soviets, with the U.S. putting its forces on alert to compel the Russians to stop their rocket-rattling, the Soviets did score some victories around the globe.

First, the increasingly nationalistic Arab world turned to the USSR for its military equipment and training. The lightning Israeli invasion had shown just how weak the Egyptian army really was, and so the Russians quickly set about modernizing it. It was perhaps clear to everyone that the Arabs were not going to let the situation with Israel stand. Of course, from the Russian perspective, the enemy of their enemy was their friend, and so they paid little attention to the larger aspirations animating Nasser among others.

Second, the Russians have shown themselves determined to prevent any slide of a satellite from the defensive perimeter they had established. The Poles could have their October as long as they did not rock the boat too much. The Hungarians who nearly keeled it over, had to pay a dear price. For all its liberation rhetoric, the West was forced to sit by the sidelines and watch helplessly as Soviet tanks mauled the brave but unpolitic Hungarians.

Third, the Russians had also developed their missiles enough to make U-2 overflights of their bases a dangerous undertaking. When in May 1960 the Russians shot down an American spy plane on the eve of the Geneva conference, the diplomatic relations soured yet again precisely at the time when the Soviets seemed to be rapidly advancing their military technology and increasing capabilities.

However, the one thing that these overflights did reveal was that the missile gap was a myth: the Russians were all bluster and bluff but without actual capability. This proved to be a problem for the Soviets, both with respect to their enemy, the U.S., and their nominal friend, China. As we saw, Mao urged the Russians to make use of their enormous nuclear capability, which, as the Russians and now the Americans knew all too well, was non-existent.

Soviet prestige in the communist camp and among the non-aligned third world depended on their ability to stand up to the West. It was to redress this problem that Khrushchev attempted one of the largest secret operations in history when he tried

to place nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962. We have seen already what came out of it. By the end of 1962, the Russians were badly mauled internationally: (i) they had been forced to accept the division of Germany, (ii) they had to live with a re-armed West Germany being a member of NATO, (iii) they had to build a wall to stem the flow of escapes to the West, a singularly embarrassing situation for any system with pretensions for superiority, (iv) they had admitted their weakness by attempting to install missiles secretly in the Western hemisphere, and (v) they had demonstrated unequivocally that they would withdraw under direct threat by the U.S.

In short, by the end of 1962 the Soviets were in bad shape. It is not surprising that they concluded that the only way to deal with the situation and the triumphant West was by stepping up military spending, increasing production, and actually developing the capabilities they had been bragging about. Not unexpectedly, the 1962 American success virtually ensured that the Russians would embark on a large-scale arms race that would eventually transform them into a global superpower. Just as the Russians were beginning to indulge in this, the U.S. all but squandered its lead by stumbling into the Vietnam quagmire, which also laid bare the limitations of flexible response.

1 The Missile Gap and JFK

Let's now look in a little detail at the new doctrine of Flexible Response and the last Berlin Crisis that emboldened Khrushchev to attempt his nuclear gambit with Cuba.

By May 1958, the Sino-Soviet split was so evident that even Dulles no longer believed the Soviet Union presented a threat—the USSR had been co-opted. However, in the 1960 presidential campaign, the young Democratic nominee JFK charged the Republicans with permitting the **missile gap** in Soviets' favor. With one of the slimmest majorities (114,000 votes out of 68.3 million cast), JFK won the presidency and in his first inaugural message on January 30, 1961, he declared that in the conflict between "Freedom and Communism," the US should strengthen its military tools.

The administration immediately asked for more money for defense, above the budget allocation for the year. The money was spent on conventional forces and programs that would give the US a secure second-strike capability. The defense budget was increased by 15% in 1961. By October 1962, the strategic balance was definitely in favor of the U.S.: the Americans had about 226 ICBMs, 114 SLBMs, and 1350 bombers versus 75 ICBMs, 0 SLBMs, and 190 bombers on the Soviet side. Kennedy's buildup began out of initial fears of the putative missile gap. However, once the gap was shown to be a myth, the most important reason for doing it was still solid: the Soviets could (and did) build a vast number of ICBMs on a short notice. The buildup was designed to cope with that future threat.

How was the administration going to deal with such threats? It rejected Massive Retaliation (and its sibling, Graduated Deterrence) in favor of a new strategic doctrine called **Flexible Response**, which posited mutual deterrence at strategic, tactical, and conventional levels, emphasized multiple options supposed to enhance credibility of deterrence threat. This strategy effectively remained in use throughout the remainder of the Cold War.

1.1 Flexible Response

Flexible Response emphasized mutual deterrence at all levels of nuclear forces; that is both strategic and tactical. The US strategic forces deterred the Soviets from using their strategic arsenal (and vice versa); just like the US tactical forces deterred the Soviets from using nuclear weapons in the local theater (and vice versa). This extended to conventional forces: the total combined forces of America and its allies would be large enough to deter the Soviets from using their conventional forces (and vice versa). These forces could also be used in limited wars should deterrence fail and Soviets attack somewhere, Khrushchev-style. The US would not have to make the choice between defeat and using nuclear weapons.

This symmetrical approach to deterrence should be familiar: it was borrowed almost wholesale from General Taylor's book *The Uncertain Trumpet*, which criticized massive retaliation on the grounds that it left the U.S. only two choices in a Korean War-style confrontation: defeat on the ground or the resort to nuclear weapons. As Kennedy told Congress, the idea was

to deter all wars, general or limited, nuclear or conventional, large or small—to convince all potential aggressors that any attack would be futile—to provide backing for the diplomatic settlement of disputes—to insure the adequacy of our bargaining power for an end to the arms race.

Technological improvements in communications and transportation meant that US forces could be deployed and used more effectively and flexibly than before. The advocates of Flexible Response stressed the value of having “multiple options” that would allow the president to employ just the right amount of force at the right place without having to fear or risk losing alternatives. This also was supposed to improve credibility since the availability of low-level forces/options would make the US more willing to use them. This doctrine was accepted and continued to be used through the Cold War (it's so imprecise that it is easy to make it accommodate changes).

As soon as he entered office, JFK began implementing Flexible Response aided by his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The administration did that with considerable zeal although it quickly found out that the Soviets had grossly exaggerated their ICBM capabilities. Still, the military buildup was not a result of some

cynical economic agenda but the result of genuine concern that even though the Soviets lacked the advantage they claimed they had, they could rapidly build up their capabilities on short notice. (Which they did in the latter half of the 1960s after they solved their technological problems with the missiles).

By October 1962, the US deployed 226 ICBMs (of which 100 were the advanced Minuteman, solid-fueled missiles in hardened silos, and 36 were the Titans which could carry larger loads; the other 90 Atlas rockets were retired soon) as opposed to 75 by the Soviet Union. In strategic bombers, US advantages were overwhelming: 1350 vs. 190. In addition, the US developed the Polaris SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) and deployed nine subs with 144 SLBMs when the USSR had none. Somewhat unexpectedly then, the result of stunning Russian success in 1957 was a clear and significant advantage for the US: the impressive military buildup fueled in large part by fears caused by Soviet boasts, had given the US its second era of military superiority. This time, however, the Soviet Union would attempt to redress the balance, precipitating the worst crisis of the Cold War.

After the Kennedy administration realized that although the missile gap did exist, it was definitely in US's favor, it became interested in using its military superiority within the framework of Flexible Response. The first innovation was the Strategic Triad doctrine. By 1960, the US had three kinds of offensive strategic forces: ICBMs, SLBMs, and bombers. The triad doctrine held that each of these forces should be able to impose unacceptable damage on the Soviet Union independently of the other two! The concept of a permanent triad of forces also lasted through the Cold War.

Different forces had different advantages and disadvantages: Bombers were vulnerable while on the ground, took a while to reach their targets, and could be shot down by defenses. On the other hand, they could deliver large payloads and strike their targets with great accuracy. The ICBMs were more secure (the hardened silo could take anything but a direct hit) but were less accurate than bombers, and most importantly, could not be recalled once launched. The SLBMs were least vulnerable but also least accurate and communication with the subs was also very limited.

There were innovations not only in the type of weapons but also in their intended use. The accepted principle of deterrence was that it rested on secure second-strike capability, or the so-called **assured destruction** mission of US forces. (In event of World War III, the Soviets would know with assurance that their cities would be destroyed). Since it was assumed that the Russians cared about their country most, the assured destruction mission targeted cities and industries, or targets whose destruction would make recovery from war slow or impossible. Because they were so vulnerable to the Soviet Union, these targets were called "countervalue targets." It was the SLBMs that were mostly trained at these.

1.2 The No-Cities Doctrine

To limit damage to the US, McNamara pursued two strategies, one offensive and the other defensive. The offensive strategy was to destroy Soviet military installations (bomber bases, ICBM silos, etc.) and thus disable most of his forces before they could be used. This **damage-limiting** mission of US forces involved destroying **counterforce targets** which, although not as valuable as cities, were important in limiting the damage to the US. In June 1962, McNamara gave a speech at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he elaborated the counterforce strategy. He announced that the US would refrain from striking **countervalue targets** (cities) early in a nuclear war while retaining in reserve powerful assured destruction forces that could annihilate them should the Soviets fail to observe similar restraint. This **no-cities** policy was meant both to induce the Soviets to reciprocate by sparing American cities and secure bargaining advantage by not destroying their cities early on—and thus giving them something they might want to negotiate over in order to keep. In this speech there was also a hidden warning that stated that US missiles were now so precise that the US could choose their targets with great accuracy. Finally, by August 1962 the administration publicly revealed what it had known for over a year—the missile gap not only did not exist, but it never did, and moreover, it was in US's favor.

The Soviets reacted angrily. Khrushchev stated that contrary to McNamara's beliefs, cities would be the first to go in a nuclear war. In addition, he warned Kennedy not to engage “in sinister competition as to who will be the first to start a war.” However, Khrushchev revealed, perhaps inadvertently, that the US claim to missile superiority was valid—for the first time in 5 years Khrushchev emphasized bomber strength instead of ICBMs.

We might add a criticism of our own. It might be true that limited escalation allows for negotiation and an end to war before an all-out exchange. This, of course, makes it more likely that a country could contemplate the use of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, it is not clear what deterrent effect this would have because a potential initiator now figures that a limited nuclear war brought to an end through negotiation is a lot less costly than an all-out war in which there is no time for bargaining. With a limited war scenario, there is a temptation to gamble that the costs would be acceptable whereas no such calculation is possible with an all-out war. This means that if the USSR believed the U.S. would engage in limited war, it might in fact be emboldened to pursue more risky strategies. It is no small paradox that precisely because war (nuclear or conventional) is so devastating that decision-makers will attempt to end it without fighting to the bitter end, and that this makes war a more attractive possibility for the potential challenger. This does not, of course, mean that leaders would be able to end the fighting before a military resolution (as they could not in the two world wars), but the fact that they often are able to might be enough to embolden challengers.

The second damage-limiting strategy McNamara pursued was defensive and involved defending the US from Soviet weapons that might escape a counterforce attack. The Americans began developing systems that could intercept and destroy incoming bombers and missiles. The bomber threat was relatively easy to reduce: Soviet planes were not too effective and even if they did manage to survive the counterforce strike, they could be shot down (at least most of them) before unloading their bombs.

The missiles were another matter. By the early 1960s, the Army had developed the Nike-Zeus system, in which its anti-aircraft Nike missiles were modified to shoot down incoming warheads. McNamara concluded it was not cost-effective: i.e., it was too expensive and would not work. The Army developed anti-ballistic missiles (or ABMs) of the next generation—the Nike-X, which consisted of large Spartan missiles that would destroy incoming warheads before they had entered the atmosphere and fast Spring missiles would finish off whatever the Spartans missed.

McNamara fought the large Nike-X ABM system for years arguing that the Soviets could overwhelm it by simply sending more missiles and since building more missiles was cheaper than protecting against them, this would eventually bankrupt the US. A smaller system called Sentinel almost made it but anti-war feelings stopped in under Johnson and Nixon scuttled it in favor of Safeguard, which was meant to protect only American ICBMs. The ABM issue was frozen when the US and the Soviet Union signed the SALT I treaty (we'll talk about this later) which limited the development and deployment of any ABM systems.

Can you think of reasons why it would be advantageous to keep both sides unprotected? It was the ABM treaty that Bush abrogated in 2001. What, do you think, was behind this decision? (Hint: he campaigned long and hard to secure support for this and made sure the Russians knew about it and were on board as much as possible.)

1.3 The Berlin Wall, 1961

Recall that on October 11, 1958, Khrushchev delivered his first 6-months ultimatum, and demanded that (i) Western troops evacuate West Berlin, (ii) the West recognize it as “free city,” and (iii) negotiate land access with East German communist government (not recognized by the West). The U.S. stood firm: Dulles threatened with NATO military response if East Germans took control of routes and refused access. The USSR responded with threatening World War III if NATO used military force. However, it soon became obvious that the Soviets would not risk war over Berlin, and they had to back down.

JFK met with Khrushchev in Vienna on June 3-4, 1961, where he was browbeaten by the Soviet Premier who was probably encouraged by the youth of the President, his inexperience, and the recent US debacle and humiliation with the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Khrushchev reimposed the 6 months notice about Berlin. The Soviets were

genuinely worried that West Germany was growing militarily, was bound to the West, was attracting experts from the East; that the East German communist regime was weak; that West Berlin was an ideal espionage and propaganda center deep in the communist bloc; that Eastern Europeans and the Soviets were getting scared by West German power, and, finally, that since their ICBM empty posturing was publicly revealed, they needed some quick strategic victory.

JFK proved tough. On Acheson's advice, he decided to call Khrushchev's bluff over Berlin. On July 25, 1961, Kennedy placed the National Reserve troops on active duty and increased the size of American forces by 25%. Berlin was not going to be treated as an isolated problem but as a test of US resolve in global terms.

When Khrushchev realized that JFK would not back down, he took a surprising course of action. On August 13, 1961, the Soviets suddenly built a wall, complete with barbed wire and guards, that separated East from West Berlin. This sealed the Eastern bloc from Western influences and stopped the exodus of talented people. The US was caught off-guard—Khrushchev had pulled a dramatic *fait accompli* and now refused to budge in the face of US protests. The US protested but was unprepared to use force to get rid of the wall. The Wall stood. The Soviets had scored a small “consolation” victory in Europe. Neither they nor the Americans were willing to challenge the fragile status quo thereby being the first to use force. Soon, the Soviets would attempt another, much more dangerous, adventure using similar tactics. This time, however, they would be caught in the act, before they were able to complete their plans.

The Berlin Crisis of 1961 was the one time the Soviets got the upper hand over the city, and it had much to do with pursuing strategies similar to the ones that had proven so effective when used by the West. The Wall was a tactic that relinquished the initiative to the Americans. This was not the first time the Russians had attempted this. As you should recall, they blocked access to the city in 1948-49 in an attempt to compel the West to abandon it. Then the tactic failed because the West found a way to shift the choice for war back onto the Russians with the air-bridge.

What, then, was different in 1961? For one, the Soviets had accepted the division and they were not really hoping to unite Germany into a neutral and disarmed state. Their problem now was not evicting the West from West Berlin, but rather stopping the flight of Germans from the East. Almost as soon as the barbed wire went up, the Russians were at pains to tell the West that *their* people could go in and out of Berlin as they wished, just like before. The separation was not meant for *them*. In effect, the Russians were enforcing the status quo.

However, unpalatable this was, the Americans could not go to war or attempt to tear down the wall with force. After all, the Russians had shown that they would not let a satellite escape their grip. Now they were trying to deter the U.S. from infiltrating the Eastern bloc. This was their own version of containment: they set up their literal “trip-wire” and could then sit back and wait for the U.S. to make the first aggressive move. Predictably, what worked against the Russians worked

against the Americans as well. As Kennedy said, better a wall than a war.

The last episode ended with the Russians enjoying a dubious foreign policy advantage—they had the Berlin Wall which both significance success and defiance of the status quo (and indeed, it became the new status quo) but at the same time it showed the entire world how pathetic and impotent the regime was. A country that surrounds itself with a fence to protect itself from foreign invaders is prudently guarding its national security. A country that needs to build a fence to keep its own citizens from leaving is a disgrace—it can never last long.

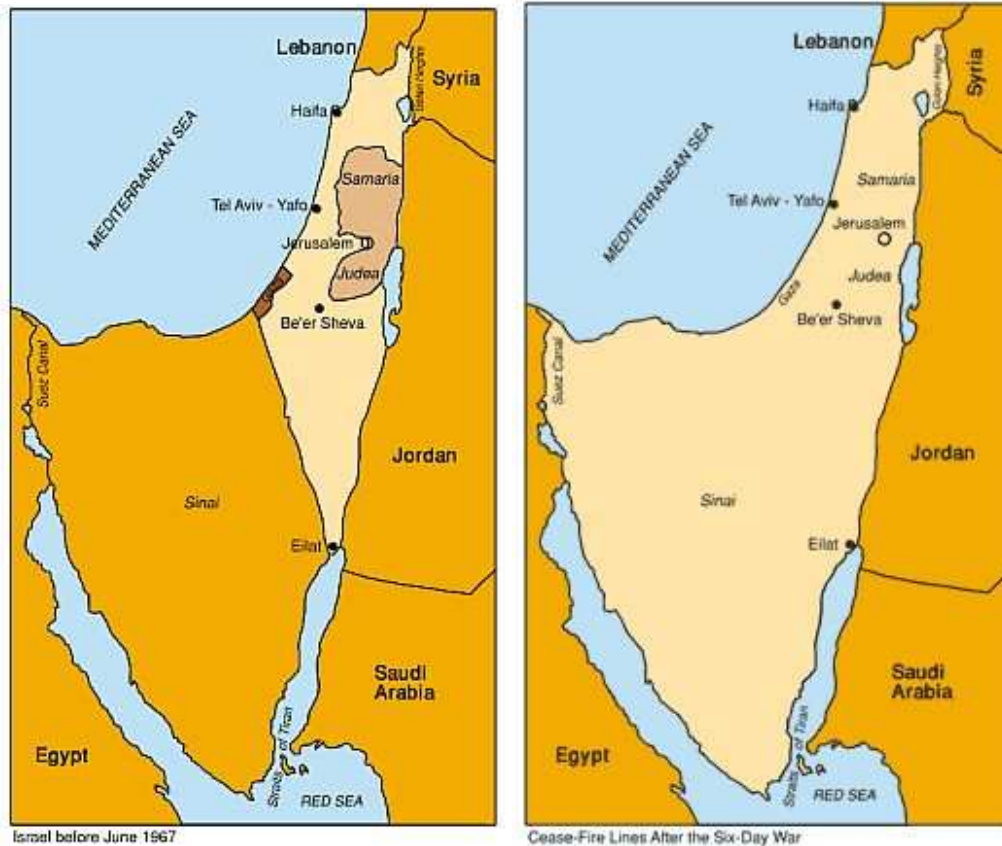
In fact, its longevity depends entirely on the willingness of its leaders to use their tanks to maul any opposition, however mild it may be. In 1956, the Soviets had proven themselves willing and able to impose their rule in what they considered their own sphere of influence and in countries they thought vital to their security. They would do so again in 1968, and again under a doctrine that claimed that once a country had gone socialist, there was no turning back. The Soviet Union, as any concentration camp, finally imploded when the camp supervisor refused to shoot the prisoners.

But, this was still the distant future... in 1961, the Soviets had just successfully challenged the West; they appeared to have solved their problems with West Berlin, at least temporarily. However, since the Kennedy administration had also publicly revealed that Soviet boasts of ICBM superiority were a sham, Khrushchev was looking for some other, more substantial, foreign policy triumph to restore the somewhat shaky prestige of the Soviet Union. It would, of course, also be helpful if that triumph could also redress somewhat the severe imbalance of military power that favored the US. The opportunity presented itself in 1962, when the Russians undertook a risky gamble barely off the coast of the US—in Cuba. We deal with the crisis separately. Now we turn to a bigger event.

2 The Six Days War, 1967

The year 1958 saw major disturbances in the region. First, a revolution in Iraq toppled the eastern branch of the Hashemite monarchy leaving King Hussein wobbling on his Jordanian throne. King Faisal's short-sighted anti-Nasserism and failure to break with the British over the Suez War were so contrary to popular moods that his end was practically ensured despite the liberal use of repression. Iraq began cooperating with the USSR. Second, a civil war in Lebanon almost overthrew its government which was saved by an American intervention under the Eisenhower Doctrine when it appealed for help in defending itself against pro-Nasser forces.

Nasser concentrated on exporting his blend of nationalism and socialism to the other Arab states. In early 1958 he agreed to the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) which united Egypt and Syria into a single state. Although it was the Syrians who approached him with the idea because they were afraid of being over-



(a) Israel on the Eve of the War

(b) Israel after the War

thrown by communists, Nasser assumed the initiative and Egypt soon dominated the new country, installing its own military regime and upsetting the Syrians.

However, Arab public opinion approved of the union and soon began clamoring for a military liberation of Palestine. Israel appeared to be in a precarious position, pressed on two sides now by a single hostile Arab state. Things nearly came to head in 1960 when Israel provoked a clash on the Syrian border by trying to cultivate the Demilitarized Zone. As the situation escalated, the Soviets warned Nasser that Israel was planning an invasion. Although this was neither true nor the first time the Russians had issued such warnings, Nasser sent two divisions into the Sinai and told the UNEF to prepare to vacate the region should hostilities break out.

The Israelis panicked and mobilized as diplomats frantically searched for a solution. War appeared imminent until March when the Egyptian troops quietly left the Sinai. The surprise deployment had caught the Israelis unprepared and underlined their vulnerability to sudden attack. While Nasser scored a diplomatic triumph, his very success ensured that Israel would be extremely nervous the next time Egypt attempted hostile moves in the region. As usual, the highest concern was deterrence,

whose success is predicated on the opponent expecting swift and determined retaliation for any encroachments on the status quo. Nasser had just shown that Egypt could poke and probe and that Israel was not prepared to respond.

Despite this success, the UAR was short-lived. In 1961, the Syrian military finally rebelled and broke up the UAR, dashing the hope for a pan-Arab state. Still, Nasser was undeterred in pursuit of his vision of Arab unity under his aegis. In 1962 a military coup in Yemen ousted its leader al-Badr who rallied various tribes and with the generous help of Saudi Arabia and Jordan launched a civil war to regain his throne. The new military regime turned to Nasser who seized the chance to stab at the old order.

This began the disastrous Egyptian involvement in this vicious internecine conflict that lasted for six years and kept over 70,000 of its best troops bogged down against resourceful guerilla fighters. Instead of promoting Arab unity, the Yemeni war split the Middle East into two camps, pitting the traditionalist regimes against Nasserite radicalism, and witnessing the use of chemical weapons.

The only issue on which the Arabs remained united was Israel. The vitriolic anti-Israel propaganda continued to emanate unabated from the Arab capitals. Israel's apprehension steadily mounted as the Soviets supplied their new friends with arms in astounding quantities. Frequent incursions (from the Jordanian side) of Palestinian guerillas caused endless friction because Israel had no choice but to retaliate against Jordan even though the Palestinians were actually based in Syria. On the whole, however, the Arabs were busy with their inter-Arab affairs and were too pre-occupied with those to plan a systematic invasion of Israel. However, this did not imply that they would not jump at an opportunity if one presented itself.

By 1965, IDF intelligence had concluded that the Arabs were preparing to force a showdown, and it could come in the form of another blockade of the straits or an attempt to divert the Jordan River. The terrorist incursions intensified, and the Syrians became more vigorous in their shelling from atop the Golan Heights. Some, like Yitzhak Rabin, favored a preemptive strike against Syria arguing that the time was especially propitious because of Arab disunity. Prime Minister Eshkol agreed, and the Israeli Air Force went into action dealing a blow on the Syrian installations. The Syrians resolved to procure more weapons and change tactics: by supporting Palestinian guerillas and goading Egypt into assuming the front lines of a confrontation they could get the benefits of anti-Israeli policy at a considerably lower risk to themselves.

Nasser found himself hemmed in by his own eloquence. The Palestinian raids that he had supported to great success with the public now threatened to yank the leadership from Egypt or else force it into an open confrontation with Israel when the latter inevitably retaliated. The timing was not good for the Egyptian army was bogged down in Yemen and unprepared for a showdown. Nasser denounced the recently formed Islamic League (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran) claiming that the Arabs could destroy Israel in less than two weeks if they had been united but adding

cautiously that this could only be done with an attack from Syrian and Jordan. Having washed his hands, at least for the time being, he proclaimed full support for the Palestinians and quietly arrested all members of their military wing in Egypt and Gaza. Nasser appeared determined to reap all political benefits from the conflict with Israel without actually risking war.

It was not to be. King Hussein of Jordan also found himself goaded inexorably toward war by the force of public opinion. The king had been unable to stop the terrorist attacks from his soil and quite helpless against IDF reprisals. Publicly, he supported the PLO but privately he talked to the Israelis for practical arrangements that would reduce the likelihood of war between the two states. When the PLO called for the overthrow of the Hashemite dynasty, Hussein arrested Palestinian activists and closed the PLO office in Jordan. The Palestinians were as much a threat to his rule as they were to Israel's existence. The king appealed to Egypt for help in stopping the PLO from provoking a clash with Israel but Nasser ignored him. After all, the progressive Egyptian leader was not about to support a reactionary illegitimate ruler or squander the political benefits provided by championing the Palestinian cause.

The situation began to simmer with tension when the Soviets openly began supporting the Arabs against "colonialist Zionism." With America distracted by Vietnam, Brezhnev seems to have concluded that it was time for the Soviets to restore some of the international prestige it had lost in the Caribbean. The Soviets threatened Israel not to invade Syria in May 1966 even though there were no such plans. Desperate rejections and assurances by the Israelis did not help. By conjuring up the specter of invasion and issuing a public threat, the Soviets could boast of having prevented a Zionist plot as proof of their dedication to the Arab cause. It was diplomacy on the cheap but it frightened the Israelis sufficiently to force them to limit retaliatory strikes to the West Bank.

In November 1966, a large Israeli force mounted a reprisal in the Hebron area. Near the village of Samu' it came into contact with Jordanian convoy, which it ambushed and destroyed but not before the surgical strike had turned into a real battle. The operation backfired as the Palestinians demanded the overthrow of King Hussein who was eventually forced to put down their demonstrations by force. The U.S. also registered vehement displeasure with the Israeli action because Hussein was one of the few remaining friends America had in the region.

Egypt denounced Hussein for allowing Samu' and very soon their bickering produced a gaping rift between the two countries. Amman hurled bitter recriminations at Nasser and taunted him for hiding behind the UNEF whose existence the Egyptian leader had carefully kept secret from his own countrymen. Nasser started to contemplate removal of UNEF from the Sinai and perhaps another closure of the Straits of Tiran. Both of these, however, were too dangerous and provocative, and so he sat tight trying to ignore the Palestinian problem for as long as possible.

He had not figured the Syrians. Under the Soviet umbrella, the Syrians became

more adventurous and initiated a series of attacks on Israeli kibbutzim from the Golan Heights. These and the overt support for Palestinian raids became so obvious that eventually even the Americans got impatient with them. Even though Israel was afraid of provoking a full-scale war that might draw in the Soviet Union, on April 7, 1967 the Israeli Air Force took off to neutralize Syrian artillery in the Golan Heights. When Syrian MiGs engaged them, the IAF shot down six of them and indulged in an ill-conceived victory overflight of Damascus, which mortified and enraged the Syrians.

The Egyptians failed to intervene in support of the Syrians despite their defense pact. More mutual recriminations followed and inter-Arab relations deteriorated just as al-Fatah increased its attacks on Israel and Israeli public opinion began pressing the government to take revenge on the Syrians. Ironically, Arab disunity created an opportunity for the Palestinians to escalate the tensions and compel the various regimes to out-champion each other for their cause. This further destabilized the situation and played Egypt and Jordan into Syrian hands as well. When repeated attempts to secure a common front with Egypt failed, Hussein continued goading Nasser in the hope that this would take the pressure off Jordan. Somewhat paradoxically, the Arab leaders were driving each other into a showdown with Israel that neither of them wanted.

The Soviets provided the spark that lit the conflagration when they informed Sadat that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian border in preparation for an attack. This was a lie and it was not the first time they had tried to stir trouble in this way. This time, however, Nasser either believed them or chose to pretend to believe them. At any rate, he decided to demonstrate resolve by sending Egyptian troops into the Sinai. He was in no position to attack Israel while fighting in Yemen, and consequently he tried to ensure that Israel would not take his action as a preparation for war. To this end, he sent the troops openly hoping that this would serve the dual purpose of deterring aggression against Syria without provoking a preemptive strike against Egypt. Nasser failed to anticipate how events would take a life of their own as the countries began sliding down the precipice to disaster.

Emboldened by the outpour of public support for his move into the Sinai, Nasser decided to up the stakes and demanded the withdrawal of UNEF forces. The U.N. Secretary General U Thant capitulated without so much as asking the General Assembly to consider the matter as per the original agreement. The U.N. force was withdrawn eliminating the last shield Israel had against Egypt. Predictably, the anti-Israeli voices escalated their rhetoric: now that the U.N. was not protecting the Zionist entity, the time had come to wipe it out in war. Caught in the momentum of his success, Nasser blockaded the Straits of Tiran again on May 22, cutting off all Israeli shipping and stopping the covert supply of Iranian oil.

This was a huge mistake for it marked a point of no return in the crisis. Israel had always maintained that closure of the straits was a *casus belli* against which Israel was free to respond with force in self-defense. Nasser was clearly unprepared for

war, and hence one is drawn to the conclusion that he must have hoped for some sort of diplomatic resolution of the crisis, perhaps an intervention by the superpowers that would allow him to escape with his reputation intact. But the events were gathering a momentum of their own and he was soon swept in the maelstrom that he helped unleash, a good example of just how dangerous brinkmanship can be.

As soon as Nasser gave the appearance for preparing for a military solution of the Zionist problem, the Arab leaders rallied around Egypt. The Arab forces began mobilizing, reaching over a quarter of a million troops with 2,000 tanks and 700 aircraft. Israel had gone on alert three weeks previously and was reeling under the intense pressure. Rabin suffered a nervous breakdown that put him out of commission for a while. Desperately, the Israelis tried to get President Johnson to intervene somehow and compel Nasser to open the straits. The Americans preferred negotiations and warned Israel that if it decided to preempt it would be alone.

Negotiations went nowhere and there was no time for patience. The Soviets were supplying the Arabs with massive amounts of arms. On the 30th King Hussein suddenly flew to Cairo and Jordan signed a defense pact with Egypt. The choir clamoring for Israel's destruction reached a crescendo with Iraq joining it. The Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies swelled with contributions from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and even distant Algeria. The Israelis panicked and pressed America once more to step in and diffuse the crisis or, failing that, let Israel preempt. In response, the U.S. imposed an arms embargo on the region, further worsening Israel's ability to withstand a military attack.

Israel's situation became untenable. The country was being asked to stay put and allow itself to be attacked as a condition of international support. The U.S. estimated blithely that Israel would be able to absorb an initial strike and then defeat the Arabs anyway within days. The massive civilian casualties that such an attack would inflict did not figure in these calculations. Neither did Israel's concern with the safety of the nuclear reactor at Dimona which had been overflowed by Egyptian fighters on several occasions.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 is a good example that while Israel could defeat the Arabs even after allowing itself to be attacked, such victory would be costly and cause deep and lasting societal anxiety. No leader could ever be excused for exposing his citizens to a deliberate attack by an enemy. This war also demonstrates vividly the consequences of losing the credibility of the deterrent posture. Israel's decision to preempt had both military and political reasons. Militarily it made sense to take the initiative if war would come anyway and spare the civilians needless suffering. Politically, it would enhance its deterrent threat by demonstrating the might of the IDF and the readiness to use force to defend the country's interests.

On the other hand, Washington's pressure seemed to bear fruit when Nasser agreed to send his vice-president to discuss a diplomatic resolution. It may have been possible to avert war but Israel's preemptive strike came two days before his scheduled arrival. Having sowed the seeds of war, having placed Israel into an im-

possible quandary, and having incited Arab public opinion for blood and destruction of Israel, Nasser had to reap the fruits of his dangerous policies.

On June 5, 1967 the Israeli Air Force attacked air bases throughout Egypt and destroyed almost the entire Egyptian air force on the ground. Israel had tried to limit the conflict and had promised Jordan that it would not attack as long as the Jordanians did not initiate hostilities. However, when the Jordanian radars picked up aircraft flying from Egypt to Israel, they began shelling West Jerusalem. It turned out that the planes were Israeli fighters returning from their mission in Egypt. They swung around and dealt a devastating blow on the Jordanian air force before continuing to Syria and achieving the same success.

The mastery of the skies opened the way for the ground invasion. Israeli tanks rolled into the Sinai and captured the entire peninsula stopping at the eastern bank of the Suez canal. The IDF drove out the Jordanian forces from Jerusalem and expelled them from the West Bank completely. The cease-fire stopped the fighting with the Egyptians on the 9th, allowing the IDF to turn its attention to the Syrians. By the 11th, the Israelis had conquered the Golan Heights as well. In a mere six days, Israel had dealt a shattering blow to the Arabs.

The stunning victory was not costless to the Israelis. The casualties were a bit over 3,000 of which about 780 were killed. The air force also lost a quarter of its aircraft. The stunning defeat was even costlier to the Arabs, who had suffered a combined total of 20,000 casualties, with Egypt losing about 80% of its air force and armor.

However, it was the war's aftermath that proved historic. About 300,000 new Palestinian refugees fled the war zones in Gaza and the West Bank. Jordan had relieved itself of some of the troublesome Palestinians but Israel found itself ruling over an Arab population of a million and a half. This raised the first questions about how the country was going to maintain its predominantly Jewish composition while preserving its democratic character.

Israel swelled in size almost tripling its territorial holdings. In addition to the entire Jerusalem, it now held the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. All three Arab belligerents lost territories in this war. In addition, the Egyptians lost revenues from the oil field in the Sinai and shipping through the canal which was closed until 1975.

The *blitzkrieg* had revealed the corruption and incompetence of the Arab regimes, some of which (Nasser's) had invested heavily in their new progressive ways. Now all the boasts seemed hollow and the military regimes appeared no better than their predecessors. Just like the 1948 war exposed the losers to the wrath of their publics, the Six Day War triggered the chain of events that led to the fall of the Iraqi (1968) and Syrian (1970) regimes.

The success in the war conveyed an aura of invincibility on the IDF that eventually turned into arrogance for which Israel paid dearly in 1973. In the meantime, the one-sided victory allowed Israel to dictate the terms of peace and permitted it

to indulge in intransigence, often refusing to negotiate with the defeated Arabs. Of course, history is replete with examples of victors not heeding the demands of the vanquished. However, history also shows that this usually provokes the defeated to seek revenge. On the other hand, the Arabs themselves were loath to deal with Israel from a position of weakness. They resolved to tip the scales in their favor, which of course meant another war.

However, the Palestinians finally became thoroughly disillusioned with the Arab states that had not only failed to secure the destruction of Israel but also managed to lose additional territories. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) concluded that Palestinians would have to take matters into their own hands. Yasser Arafat, the leader of al-Fatah became chairman of the PLO in 1969, a position which he held until 2004.

The Palestinians eschewed entanglements with fashionable causes like communism, pan-Arabism, or Ba'athism but instead concentrated on a simple nationalist message: recover the entire Palestinian land and establish an independent state there. This was a turning point for the region because it led to the establishment of a Palestinian national identity separate from the surrounding Arab states. Al-Fatah rejected Israel's right to exist and preached armed struggle against the Jewish state until its destruction and the expulsion of all Jews from Palestine. Consequently, the PLO refused to endorse almost all of the agreements and resolutions that involved Israel one way or another. The armed struggle quickly degenerated into a worldwide orgy of terrorism against Israel and its sympathizers.

U.N. Resolution 242 set the terms of Israeli withdrawal from the occupied lands in exchange for peace. It had two provisions, "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," and "termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats of acts of force." Not a single word on the fate of the Palestinians except the need to achieve "a just settlement of the refugee problem." Egypt, Jordan, and Israel accept the resolution but Syria and the Palestinians did not.

The resolution's text was a bit murky: it did not require withdrawal from *all the territories* conquered in the war, only some of them. How many has been a continued bone of contention, with each side advancing its own interpretation. For the Arabs, this meant immediate and full withdrawal from 100% of the territories. For the Israelis, this meant peace talks followed by a withdrawal that still allowed Israel to keep some lands to ensure secure boundaries. The Americans did not share either position. Instead, they endorsed a view that the text allowed minor adjustments in the West Bank, along with the establishment of demilitarized zones in the Sinai and Golan Heights.

The Israeli victory stunned the world, it was so quick that neither the US nor the Soviet Union had time to intervene. Very soon, however, both superpowers re-

sumed their game in the region. Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) placed US foreign policy on the Three Pillars: Israeli power, Iran's oil and military, and Saudi Arabia's oil and bases. The Soviets moved to establish port bases in Egypt and, having realized the Egyptian army must be modernized if it were ever to erase the disgrace of 1967, they started supplying it with better equipment. Although the Soviets consistently refused to send offensive weapons to Egypt (for it was clear that the moment the Arabs felt sufficiently strong they would again go after Israel), their military assistance and numerous advisors greatly improved Egyptian tactics and capabilities.

Two years of negotiations ended in deadlock. The Arabs would not yield until Israel withdrew and Israel saw no need to concede given that it had just won a war. For their part, the Palestinians rejected the resolution altogether because it legitimized the existence of Israel. Slowly, the frustrated Americans began drawing closer to the Israeli position. By 1969, the Vietnam War had produced its casualty in the White House as Johnson made way for Nixon.

The Kissinger/Nixon policy embodied in the Nixon Doctrine required that America reduced its military involvement throughout the world by unloading some of the defense burdens on its allies. The U.S. sought containment on the cheap because it could not afford to continue its previous policies. Israel was the natural choice to stem communism in the region: staunchly democratic, pro-Western, and militarily invincible, its advantages tempted the U.S. administration. Israel evolved into a strategic partner of the U.S., which offered diplomatic support, economic assistance, and military equipment for sale. Naturally, this did nothing to excite the Israelis into being more accommodating with the Arabs.

3 The Prague Spring, 1968

Recall that as the situation in Vietnam escalated, LBJ sought to deescalate conflict with the Soviets. However, the Russians were willing to talk just about anything except Vietnam, as they were benefiting from the war there. But since the Soviets were having economic problems, they needed a deal. LBJ had some success with slowing down the nuclear race and in 1968, the United States and Soviet Union reached an agreement to halt distribution of nuclear weapons. Ominously, China, France, and India—among others—refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Détente, seemingly off to an auspicious start, then stalled when the Tet Offensive (February 1968) showed how badly the US was doing in Vietnam, was further strained by ghetto riots, political assassinations, and mass unrest at home, and finally was temporarily knocked off in August 1968 by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The roots of that conflict lay in the mid 1960s, when the ailing economically Eastern Bloc tried experimenting with more liberal economic policies. The Eastern Europeans tried loosening some of the political controls in order to invigorate the economy, the Czechs even went so far as to discuss loosening of the one-party

system in favor of some pluralism. The West encouraged the Czech reforms by opening trade channels—the goods from the West were the best proof of the superiority of the capitalist system. The Prague Spring, as the reforms came to be called, seemed promising.

The liberal political line of the Czechs ran into a solid wall in Moscow for the Soviet regime, led unimaginatively by Brezhnev, moved to refurbish some of the old Stalinist system. Heavy military and industrial investment displaced production of consumer goods once again, and the Russians began paying once again for the ambition of their rulers to preside over a superpower. All dissent was quelled—intellectuals were arrested, deported, or declared insane and then “treated” in state loony-bins. The ideological war continued with new strength at the very time when Brezhnev was accepting the relaxation of military and political tensions with the West.

To Moscow, the Prague Spring presented a dilemma. Some did not want to intervene because they correctly feared that this would endanger détente, the more serious process. However, the hardliners who were afraid that the Czech liberal virus might infect the rest of the bloc gained the upper hand and prevailed over Brezhnev to order a military intervention in Czechoslovakia.

Brezhnev issued his very own **Brezhnev Doctrine**, that justified Soviet intervention on the grounds that one socialist nation had the right to save another from “world imperialism” and thus preserve the ‘indivisible’ socialist system. In effect, the Doctrine stated that once a country had gone socialist, there was no turning back, even if it had to be dragged kicking and screaming by Soviet tanks back into the friendly fraternal fold of socialist states. This was the mirror image of the Johnson Doctrine for Latin America. Neither superpower was prepared to tolerate ideological challenges in its own backyard. As a result, in August 1968, Soviet tanks moved in and destroyed all Czech resistance. Czechoslovakia slipped back into the darkness behind the iron curtain to become one of the most reactionary and stolid communist states.