

## US national security policy from Eisenhower to Kennedy

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US grand strategy during the presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy derived, in the broadest sense, from the same, deep-seated fear: that the Soviet Union's combination of implacable hostility, mounting military strength, and positive ideological appeal posed a fundamental – even existential – threat to US national security. The emergence of an equally hostile China as a military power in its own right deepened the perception they shared of an unusually menacing external environment. Eisenhower and Kennedy each accepted the basic goals of the containment strategy developed during the Harry S. Truman presidency, to be sure. But differing assessments about the precise nature and extent of the Communist threat, coupled with divergent judgments about how best to check it and what resources were available for the task, generated quite distinct tactical approaches to national security policy during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

### Eisenhower's Cold War

Long before he assumed the presidency, Dwight D. Eisenhower had been giving serious and sustained thought to questions of strategy. As a West Point cadet, he had imbibed the fundamental precepts of Carl von Clausewitz's classic nineteenth-century treatise on warfare. Later, of course, he gained invaluable practical experience in the formulation and implementation of strategic plans as the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe during World War II. One of Eisenhower's deepest core beliefs held that national security encompassed much more than the physical defense of the homeland; it meant to him, in the broadest sense, protecting the nation's basic values, its economic system, and its domestic institutions. In that respect, Eisenhower was firmly convinced that the greatest threat to national security emanated less from the potential for military defeat than from excessive government spending; striking an appropriate balance between the cost of an adequate

defense and the need to maintain a healthy, solvent economy constituted, accordingly, a crucial aspect of strategy.

Eisenhower expressed that viewpoint with great consistency, both publicly and privately, during his pre-White House years. In a private diary entry of January 1952, for example, he wrote that "it is necessary to recognize that the purpose of America is to defend a way of life rather than merely to defend property, territory, homes, or lives. As a consequence of this purpose, everything done to develop a defense against external threat, except under conditions readily recognizable as emergency, must be weighed and gauged in the light of probable long-term, internal, effect."<sup>1</sup> This "Great Equation," as Eisenhower sometimes called it, found expression in several of his public addresses during the 1952 presidential campaign. In one, he criticized the steady rise in the Truman administration's defense budget over the previous two years, and questioned whether the nation could afford to sustain this elevated level of government spending. "We must achieve both security and solvency," he insisted. "In fact, the foundation of military strength is economic strength. A bankrupt America is more the Soviet goal than an America conquered on the field of battle."<sup>2</sup>

Eisenhower accepted many of the central premises of Truman's national security policy. Like top-level decisionmakers in that administration, Eisenhower believed that US security in the Cold War required the establishment of a preponderance of American power across the Eurasian heartland. He, too, accepted that the US stake in postwar Western Europe remained vital, and that an integrated Western defense effort, one that utilized and harnessed West Germany's latent economic and military power, formed an essential component of any such effort. As well, Eisenhower appraised the Soviet threat as exceedingly grave and recognized as imperative the containment of further Soviet territorial expansion. He also appreciated the corresponding need to maintain both a powerful American nuclear arsenal and adequate conventional forces so as to deter Soviet adventurism.

Eisenhower dissented, however, from the view of Truman administration policy planners that an escalating US military buildup was needed to meet a time of maximum danger. That time had been pinpointed in NSC 68 and other policy documents as arriving in 1954, when the Soviet Union would presumably attain sufficient nuclear capability to menace the United States and its

1 Dwight D. Eisenhower diary entry, January 22, 1952, in *The Eisenhower Diaries*, ed. by Robert Ferrell (New York: Norton, 1981), 210.

2 *New York Times*, September 26, 1952.

Western allies. Instead, he visualized US-Soviet competition as more of a long-term proposition, rejecting the time-of-maximum-danger hypothesis. Eisenhower considered it highly unlikely that Soviet leaders would court a conflict that would surely bring ruin on their country and likely break their own hold on power. He reasoned that the preservation of the regime would temper the behavior of Kremlin policymakers, whom he saw as essentially rational men intent on self-preservation. Accordingly, Eisenhower believed that greater efficiency and economy in defense spending could, and must, be achieved.

Immediately following his electoral triumph of November 1952, Eisenhower initiated the complex process of translating that vision into a concrete and cohesive national security strategy. After assembling an advisory team that mixed experienced foreign-policy and defense experts, such as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, with staunch fiscal conservatives, such as Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey, he encouraged a remarkably wide-ranging series of intra-administration debates about Cold War grand strategy. At the first meeting of Eisenhower's reconstituted National Security Council (NSC), which became the key sounding board and policymaking instrument of his administration, the new chief executive remarked that the "great problem" facing the council was to decide upon an appropriate defense posture "without bankrupting the nation." To that end, he authorized a broad-based reconsideration of the national security priorities established by the Truman administration. NSC 141, approved by Truman during his final weeks in office, had recommended substantial, though unspecified, increases in defense spending. Eisenhower called for a reexamination of the threat perceptions that lay behind those valedictory recommendations as well as a careful assessment of the suitability, and affordability, of current programs.<sup>3</sup>

What ensued was the first of many debates throughout the Eisenhower presidency about the appropriate balance between national security needs and fiscal solvency. During the course of the meeting, the president revealed his intent to cut several billion dollars from Truman's projected defense expenditures, stoutly resisting the military's pressure for increased defense spending. He achieved that goal by overturning the Joint Chiefs' focus on a so-called D-Day in 1954-55 and replacing it for planning purposes with an indeterminate, or "floating," D-Day; that allowed a reduction in the force objectives of

3 Memorandum of discussion, February 11, 1953, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1984), vol. II, 236-37 (hereafter *FRUS*, with year and volume number).



22. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (right) and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles meet to discuss foreign affairs.

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Along with the elimination of some waste and overhead and other cost-saving steps, Eisenhower thus demonstrated from the outset of his presidency his utter seriousness about reversing the trend toward upwardly spiraling defense expenditures.<sup>4</sup>

Although those initial budget-cutting moves laid down an important marker regarding Eisenhower's intentions, the task of defining and forging a consensus behind a new, integrated national security strategy remained. Eisenhower's core beliefs derived partly from an optimistic view about the ability over time of the freedom, openness, and pluralism of the American system to prevail over what he invariably disparaged as the tyrannical, freedom-denying depravities of Communism. At the same time, they

4 Memorandum of discussion, March 4, 1953, NSC Series, Whitman File, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers (Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas). For the early strategic planning of the Eisenhower administration, see Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

emanated from a deeply pessimistic view about the civilization-destroying horrors of a general, nuclear war. Others, including chief foreign-policy adviser John Foster Dulles, at first took a more dire view of Soviet strength and harbored a less restrained view about the feasibility of nuclear war as an instrument of national policy.

During an informal meeting among senior policymakers on May 8, 1953, some of those differences in perspective surfaced. "It is difficult to conclude that time is working in our favor," Dulles observed. Insisting that "the Reds" held "the better position" throughout the world at the present moment and that the European allies remained irresolute and undependable, he advocated a more assertive, active, and risk-tolerant US policy. Otherwise, Dulles cautioned, "we will lose bit by bit the free world, and practically break ourselves financially." While agreeing that "present policy was leading to disaster" and hence needed to be changed, Eisenhower disagreed that time favored the United States' adversaries. He had long believed that the overall assets of the West – military, economic, political, psychological, even spiritual – were far superior to those of the Soviet bloc. Time, consequently, was the United States' friend, not its enemy. Displaying characteristic confidence about the inherent strengths of the West, he insisted that the momentum in the Cold War would eventually shift to the United States as people on both sides of the East–West divide came to "see freedom and communism in their true lights." In other words, a patient, long-term strategy was the one best designed to win the Cold War.<sup>5</sup>

"Operation Solarium," a unique exercise in the annals of American Cold War planning, grew out of that Eisenhower–Dulles colloquy and set the stage for the formulation of the administration's basic statement of national security policy, NSC 162/2. The president proposed that three separate teams of foreign-policy experts examine, refine, and present to the NSC for consideration three quite distinct strategic options for prosecuting the Cold War. Task Force A was charged with making the case for continuation of the Truman containment strategy; Task Force B with making the case for a more assertive policy that would precisely specify, and make clear to the Soviets, those areas that the United States would automatically defend in case of attack; and Task Force C with developing an aggressive plan for "rolling back" Communism. The completed task force reports, delivered and debated at a lively NSC meeting on July 30, succeeded in laying out some stark alternatives. While Task Force A, headed by former policy planning chief George F. Kennan,

5 All quoted in Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 124–25.

contended that the prospects of a general war with the Soviet Union were highly unlikely for the foreseeable future, Task Force C identified a steadily growing Soviet threat that made the outbreak of general war a clear and present danger. The latter report rather ominously stated that the United States and the Soviet Union could no longer peacefully coexist and that the Soviet Union therefore “must and can be shaken apart” through the adoption of “a forward and aggressive political strategy in all fields and by all means.” Despite those, and other, fundamental differences in outlook, Eisenhower insisted that the three task forces combine their various analyses and recommendations around areas of common agreement.<sup>6</sup>

### The New Look

The report the three task forces created constituted one of the foundation stones of NSC 162/2, the formal statement of US national security policy that Eisenhower approved at the end of October 1953 and that set forth the broad outline of his administration’s “New Look” defense strategy. Undergirding the New Look was a set of assumptions about the indispensability of nuclear weapons: as the most reliable deterrent to Soviet expansion; as critical instruments of offensive power that, in the event of hostilities, would be considered “as available for use as other munitions”; and as an essential substitute for ruinous spending on larger conventional forces. Under Eisenhower, the rapidly expanding American nuclear arsenal became the central element in its overall defense posture. “The major deterrent to aggression against Western Europe,” observed NSC 162/2, “is the manifest determination of the United States to use its atomic capability and massive retaliatory striking power if the area is attacked.” By redefining the role of nuclear weapons in US national defense strategy, Eisenhower believed he had unlocked the key to the most cost-efficient approach to waging – and ultimately winning – the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> In his famous “massive retaliation” speech of January 12, 1954, Dulles called public attention to this central plank of the administration’s new strategy. The psychological calculus of deterrence – not just the possession of nuclear weapons but the *credible* inclination to use them – thus assumed center stage in US defense planning.<sup>8</sup>

6 Memorandum by Robert Cutler (Special Assistant for National Security Affairs), May 9, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. II, 323–28; memorandum of discussion, 30 July 1953, *ibid.*, 435–40.

7 NSC 162/2, *ibid.*, 577–97.

8 *US Department of State Bulletin*, 30 (January 25, 1954), 107–10.

Other emphases of the New Look approach also derived in substantial measure from Eisenhower's search for more efficient, cost-saving means of conducting the Cold War. One of those featured an increased reliance on the role of espionage, sabotage, and covert operations in the implementation of policy. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), headed by Eisenhower appointee Allen W. Dulles, the secretary of state's brother, became a favored instrument of New Look strategy since it promised efficient, cost-effective actions that could forestall the need for utilizing conventional armed forces. Moreover, covert operations, such as those that helped topple Left-leaning governments in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954, could plausibly be denied even if the veil of secrecy was breached. Those early successes, however, bred an unwarranted degree of overconfidence in the CIA's ability to manipulate events overseas, setting the stage for later problems – including major failures in Syria in 1957 and Indonesia the following year, each of which proved wholly counterproductive to US policy goals.

Eisenhower's national security strategy also attached greater value to the role of allies than had Truman's. A simultaneous strengthening and expansion of US bilateral and multilateral alliances would, in the conviction of Eisenhower, Foster Dulles, and other top decisionmakers, help compensate for the conventional force reductions they sought – reductions necessitated by ever-present fiscal constraints. The "pactomania" associated especially with the peripatetic secretary of state, which helped produce the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), the Baghdad Pact (later the Central Treaty Organization or CENTO), and new security alliances with Pakistan and Taiwan, among others, flowed logically from such calculations. A network of global alliances enabled the United States to encircle the Soviet Union and China with nations formally committed to the West, thereby discouraging Soviet or Chinese aggression against any of them. Perhaps most important, though, alliance systems held out the prospect of local manpower being deployed for wartime and peacetime needs, which would thereby lessen the pressure on US forces. Eisenhower wanted gradually to substitute allied for US manpower in such key areas as Western Europe. In broad terms, he envisioned an evolving division of responsibility between the United States and its regional partners in which the United States provided the nuclear umbrella considered imperative for deterring Soviet aggression, while allies bore the principal burden of supplying ground forces for regional defense.

The Eisenhower administration also accorded much greater weight to the place of psychological warfare, public diplomacy, and propaganda within overall Cold War strategy. Convinced that the political, psychological,

cultural, and ideological competition between the United States and the Soviet Union had become as pivotal as the military-economic struggle, Eisenhower directed that a concerted effort be made to court world public opinion. In initiatives ranging from the president's idealistic sounding "Chance for Peace" speech, after the death of Iosif Stalin in 1953, and his "Open Skies" proposal of 1955 to various international cultural exhibitions and touring troupes, Radio Free Europe broadcasts aimed at Eastern Europe, the manifold activities abroad of the ubiquitous US Information Agency, and much more, the United States vied to seize the moral high ground in the Cold War. This objective pervaded nearly all aspects of Eisenhower's foreign policy. A global public relations campaign aimed at highlighting the strengths and appeal of the American system and exposing the deficiencies of Communism thus came to occupy, for the first time, a central place in American grand strategy.

Threat perception invariably plays a large role in the formulation of any national security strategy. That certainly proved the case during the Eisenhower years. NSC 162/2 essentially codified the president's decision to abandon "fixed dates of maximum danger" – which he considered completely unknowable and hence unrealistic – as a basis for making and funding defense commitments. Instead, as Eisenhower explained in his January 21, 1954, budget message to Congress, his administration aimed for "a strong military position which [could] be maintained over the extended period of uneasy peace."<sup>9</sup> Since careful threat assessment always comprises the appraisal of enemy *intentions* as well as enemy capabilities, it bears emphasizing that NSC 162/2 operated from the assumption that the Kremlin's rulers remained more cautious than reckless in their international behavior. Secretary of State Dulles used those exact words in offering his personal analysis of Soviet intentions to the NSC. "The verdict of history," he observed, "was that the Soviet leaders have been rather cautious in exercising their power. They were not reckless, as Hitler was, but they primarily rely not on military force but on the methods of subversion."<sup>10</sup> Intentions aside, however, it was the projected growth of Soviet *capabilities*, especially in the nuclear sphere, that constituted the critical backdrop for the implementation, as well as the formulation, of the Eisenhower administration's strategic design.

The former general believed that the Kremlin's swelling arsenal of nuclear weapons transformed the nature of the Soviet–American conflict. With the

9 *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1954), 272–73.

10 Memorandum of discussion, December 21, 1954, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. II, 841.



emergence of hydrogen, or thermonuclear, weapons that were a thousand times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the prospect of a future nuclear exchange between the Americans and the Soviets deeply unsettled – indeed, frightened – the man who had so much intimate experience with war. Although the United States enjoyed vast superiority over its principal rival in both nuclear warheads and delivery systems throughout the 1950s, Eisenhower realized that rough nuclear parity between the two superpowers was just a matter of time. He also recognized that neither side could “win” a nuclear war in any meaningful sense. At an early NSC meeting, he stated that “there would be no individual freedom after the next global war,” just appalling chaos.<sup>11</sup> Following the stunning results of the powerful Bravo tests of 1954, Eisenhower mused: “Atomic war will destroy civilization. There will be millions of people dead ... If the Kremlin and Washington ever lock up in a war, the results are too horrible to contemplate.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, he urged his colleagues on the NSC in January 1956 to keep in mind that “No one was going to be the winner in such a nuclear war. The destruction might be such that we might have ultimately to go back to bows and arrows.”<sup>13</sup>

In view of the frequency and passion with which Eisenhower delivered such warnings about the certain devastation, for both sides, of a nuclear conflict, it might at first glance seem surprising that he insisted that all war-fighting plans be based on the expectation that the United States would attack the Soviet Union “with all available weapons.”<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower’s disdain for the concept of limited nuclear war helps explain the seeming paradox. The president considered limited nuclear war, an alternative backed by some military experts within his administration, to be a fatuous contradiction in terms. He was convinced that any general war between the United States and the Soviet Union would quickly and inevitably become a nuclear war, with each side using all weapons at its disposal. Ample evidence suggests, consequently, that Eisenhower insisted on planning only for total war because he believed that to be the best way to preclude any war from erupting – despite serious opposition within his own administration to the all-or-nothing policy. That approach, later decried by President Kennedy and his top defense advisers, can be seen then as the product of Eisenhower’s determination to

11 Memorandum of discussion, July 16, 1953, *ibid.*, vol. II, 397.

12 James Hagerty diary, July 27, 1954, *ibid.*, vol. XV, 1844–45.

13 Memorandum of discussion, January 12, 1956, NSC Series, Whitman File, Eisenhower Papers.

14 NSC 5422/2, August 7, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. II, 718.

avoid a nuclear holocaust that would assuredly destroy everything he held dear about American society.

Yet Eisenhower was willing to threaten the use of nuclear weapons, as he did on several occasions during his tenure in the White House, when he thought such threats served larger strategic purposes. In the opening months of his presidency, Eisenhower alluded indirectly but unmistakably to the possible use of nuclear weapons against the North Koreans and Chinese as part of his effort to hasten the end of the Korean War. When Beijing began shelling Nationalist Chinese-controlled islands in the Taiwan Strait, in 1954–55 and again in 1958, Eisenhower relied upon the threat of nuclear retaliation to deter the regime of Mao Zedong from launching an attack upon Taiwan. In the 1958 crisis, he went so far as to put the US military on full alert, rush a formidable naval armada to the Taiwan Strait, and authorize the dispatch of nuclear-equipped forces to the region. Planning documents suggest he was willing to launch nuclear weapons against Chinese military installations in retaliation for any military move against Taiwan or the offshore islands it claimed. Had Mao chosen to call Eisenhower's bluff, the latter would have had one of two unwelcome choices: either risk a major foreign-policy defeat, and the loss of credibility that would have resulted from a failure to follow through on earlier threats; or risk the likely international revulsion that would greet another crossing of the nuclear threshold, one virtually certain in this case to cause millions of civilian deaths. In retrospect, a strategy based on the use of heavy-handed threats to alter the behavior of a regime as radically unpredictable as Mao's seems, at best, excessively risky.

## The United States and Europe

Implementation of the New Look strategy in Europe proved no less daunting and, in certain key respects, even less successful. Eisenhower, like Truman, considered the presence of US combat forces in Western Europe an essential requirement to deter the potential threat posed by superior Warsaw Pact forces. But Eisenhower, ever since his stint as NATO supreme commander, believed that stationing US troops on European soil was merely a temporary expedient. From his earliest days in the Oval Office, Eisenhower made clear his determination to withdraw US troops from Europe as quickly as possible by persuading Europeans to accept the principal responsibility for their own defense. Achieving that objective required that European troops be mobilized much more fully; it also necessitated a greater reliance on nuclear weapons in the defense of Europe.

Yet each of those prescriptions just exacerbated underlying allied tensions. The tensions arose especially from the discomfort of West European nations with their overdependence on the United States and from their corresponding unease about the prospect of their homelands becoming the principal battlefield in any Soviet–American military confrontation. As Secretary of State Dulles confided to the NSC on December 10, 1953: “While we regarded atomic weapons as one of the great new sources of defensive strength, many of our allies regarded the atomic capability as the gateway of annihilation.”<sup>15</sup> Following the Bravo tests of March 1954, the secretary of state voiced concern that a “wave of hysteria” was “driving our Allies away from us. They think we are getting ready for a war of this kind. We could survive, but some of them would be obliterated in a few minutes.” He worried, consequently, that allied fears of nuclear war “could lead to a policy of neutrality or appeasement.”<sup>16</sup>

The European Defense Community initiative had, since the end of the Truman administration, offered the prime US hope for an expansion of allied military capabilities. Its rejection by the French National Assembly, in 1954, compelled an “agonizing reappraisal” of US policy, in Secretary of State Dulles’s memorable phrase. In line with a British proposal, the Eisenhower administration and its Western allies agreed upon the alternative solution of a West Germany rearmed within the constraining fabric of NATO. The subsequent assumption of sovereignty, in 1955, by a rapidly rearming Federal Republic of Germany helped resolve the key riddle of how to assimilate German power for European defense, while at the same time preventing Bonn from developing a fully independent military force. The broader problem for the Eisenhower administration, however, remained: how could Washington induce its NATO partners to accept a much larger share of the collective security burden, thus reducing the enormous costs being borne by the Americans?

Annoyed that the Europeans were “making a sucker out of Uncle Sam,” as he once put it, Eisenhower decided, early in his second term, that the only way to induce Europeans to assume more responsibility for their own defense was to grant them *de facto* control over tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>17</sup> The controversial nuclear-sharing concept also grew out of Eisenhower’s desire to treat

15 Memorandum of discussion, December 10, 1953, *ibid.*, vol. V, 452.

16 Memorandum of telephone conversation, March 29, 1954, *ibid.*, vol. II, 1379–80.

17 Memorandum of conversation, November 5, 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960*, vol. VII, 516.

European allies as full partners rather than as “stepchildren.” The question of whether overall US security would be enhanced, or compromised, if certain NATO partners – including West Germany – gained control over nuclear weapons proved intensely controversial among US defense planners and within the Western alliance. This critically important issue remained unresolved as Eisenhower’s tenure in office came to a close. By then, however, the president had gravitated to a more restrictive policy centered around the possible development of a multilateral nuclear force. Plainly, none of the administration’s various initiatives had brought the goal of a US troop withdrawal from Europe any closer to realization, leaving a cornerstone element of Eisenhower’s New Look strategy unfulfilled.

### Eisenhower’s Third World policies

The New Look’s assumption that alliance-building would enhance overall US Cold War strength also fell well short of expectations. Pakistan, for example, which signed a mutual security pact with the United States in 1954 and then joined SEATO that same year and the Baghdad Pact the following year, pursued an agenda sharply at odds with the geopolitical calculations that drove US policy. It valued an alliance with the United States primarily as a form of protection against its regional rival, India, rather than from some amorphous Communist threat. As did many American allies, Pakistan thus frequently worked at cross-purposes with its superpower patron, all the while providing a negligible contribution to collective defense efforts. Similar patterns can to some extent be identified in the cases of Taiwan, Thailand, Iran, and Iraq, among other Third World allies. Each was eager to reap the bounty of formal ties with the United States, especially in terms of increased military and economic assistance, but remained much less enthusiastic about committing manpower to regional defense.

Nor did multilateral alliances, at least those outside NATO, add appreciable muscle to the containment strategy. They frequently did, on the other hand, alienate neighboring, non-Communist states. SEATO serves as an illustrative case. The defeat, in 1954, of the American-supported French at the hands of the Chinese-supplied and Soviet-supported Viet Minh in Indochina prompted the Eisenhower administration to cast about for ways of shoring up the crumbling Western position in Southeast Asia. At an August 12, 1954, NSC meeting, foreign-aid chief Harold Stassen lamented that the French defeat once again demonstrated that “a gain to the communists was a loss to us, no matter where it occurred.” Eisenhower concurred, adding that “some time we must

face up to it: We can't go on losing areas of the free world forever."<sup>18</sup> What the administration feared, in particular, was unchecked Chinese expansion into the Southeast Asian region. Its response, though, amounted to little more than playing midwife to a weak grouping pledged vaguely to block Communist aggression, with no military force at hand to achieve that objective. In the end, SEATO emerged as a mere paper alliance, its capacity for dealing with either overt aggression or internal subversion well nigh invisible. The alliance did no more than signal a US commitment to the region – though it did, in keeping with the budgetary strictures of the New Look policy, limit the direct military costs to be borne by Washington.

In the Middle East, the US-sponsored Baghdad Pact of 1955 represented another deeply flawed response to perceived Western weakness. It brought together some of the region's pro-Western states – Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan – while leaving out all but one of the Arab states, most of whom staunchly opposed the pact. The alliance also pushed Egypt, the most important of those, to turn to the Soviet bloc for aid in order to counter its regional rival Iraq, now fortified by Western military support. The bitter chill in US–Egyptian relations that followed arguably owed much to the Eisenhower administration's misguided efforts to build strength through a Western-constructed defense pact that threatened, from Cairo's perspective, to upset the prevailing regional order.

Those flawed alliances bespoke a broader conceptual problem that plagued Eisenhower's grand strategy throughout his presidency: namely, the administration's persistent failure to gauge accurately and adapt effectively to Third World nationalism. The emergence of vigorous, broad-based, and assertive nationalisms throughout the developing world constituted the single most dynamic new element in international affairs during the Eisenhower years. On occasion, the president and other top officials displayed some keen insights about the challenges, and opportunities, this posed. "There is abroad in the world a fierce and growing spirit of nationalism," Eisenhower wrote British prime minister Winston S. Churchill in 1954. "Should we try to dam it up completely," he emphasized, "it would, like a mighty river, burst through the barriers and could create havoc. But again, like a river, if we are intelligent enough to make constructive use of this force, then the result, far from being disastrous, could redound greatly to our advantage, particularly in our struggle against the Kremlin's power."<sup>19</sup> Eisenhower's conviction that the West

<sup>18</sup> Memorandum of discussion, August 12, 1954, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, vol. XII, 698.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91; for developments in the Third World, see the chapter by Mark Philip Bradley in this volume.

derived a substantial measure of its overall economic strength from its access to crucial Third World resources – not least the fabled oil reserves of the Middle East – also lay behind his fixation on the developing world's crucial importance. He appreciated the economic interdependence of the global economy and repeatedly expressed concern about growing American dependence on Third World countries for a wide range of important raw materials.

Yet, the Eisenhower administration never found appropriate means for achieving the goals it sought. Instead, it frequently confused nationalism with Communism, sided with European allies in their disputes with colonies or former colonies, and alienated non-aligned states with its harsh condemnations of neutrality and its destabilizing alliance-building policies. In a wider sense, the administration reflexively wedded American interests to the status quo in areas undergoing fundamental social, political, and economic upheaval.

In the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union began to turn the United States' Third World problems to its own advantage. Using generous aid and trade offers, Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev launched a broad-based campaign to win Third World allies for Moscow. This new departure in Soviet policy sparked genuine alarm in Washington. A CIA report of November 1, 1955, warned that a "grave danger" existed that the new policy "will create an even more serious threat to the Free World than did Stalin's aggressive postwar policies."<sup>20</sup> John Foster Dulles solemnly proclaimed to the NSC that "the scene of the battle between the free world and the Communist world was shifting."<sup>21</sup> For his part, Eisenhower fretted that because the Soviets were now challenging the United States not with military pressure but with economic weapons, they held a distinct strategic advantage. "This is the selectivity and flexibility that always belong to the offensive," the president pointed out in a private letter to Dulles. "The defensive must normally try to secure an entire area, the offensive can concentrate on any point of its own selection."<sup>22</sup>

The Soviet economic offensive in the Third World, in the appraisal of top administration strategists, carried serious implications for US security. Eisenhower voiced the fear that this new Soviet challenge might prove just as difficult to meet as the military challenge. He authorized increases in US economic assistance programs to offset Soviet aid offers. A budget-conscious Congress balked at even those modest increases, however, slashing the

20 NIE100-7-55, "World Situation and Trends," November 1, 1955, *FRUS, 1955-1957*, vol. XIX, 24-38.

21 Memorandum of discussion, November 21, 1955, *ibid.*, vol. X, 32-36.

22 D. D. Eisenhower to J. F. Dulles, December 5, 1955, *ibid.*, vol. IX, 10-12.

president's proposed foreign-aid budgets in 1956, 1957, and 1958. The self-imposed spending restraints of the New Look, in conjunction with the additional restraints imposed by Congress, produced, in the end, a remarkably tepid response to what the administration's own analyses identified as a dire threat.

This mismatch between strategic goals and resource allocations lays bare a significant shortcoming of the Eisenhower approach. In early 1956, the president commissioned a revision in the government's statement of "Basic National Security Policy" for the express purpose of reassessing the gravity of external threats in light of the recent shift in Soviet tactics. NSC 5602/1, approved by Eisenhower that March, warned not only that the movement of any additional country into the Communist camp would harm US security – a standard, long-held assumption – but emphasized that the resultant damage "might be out of all proportion to the strategic or economic significance of the territory involved."<sup>23</sup> This blurring of the distinction between vital and peripheral interests, so reminiscent of Truman's NSC 68, undercut a key assumption undergirding the New Look. How could the United States now distinguish between areas that needed to be defended and those that did not if the "loss" even of territories possessing minimal economic or strategic value could cause disproportionate harm to national security? Given such a worrisome prospect, how could the administration retain the flexibility and selectivity, along with the budgetary savings, that Eisenhower thought an asymmetrical containment strategy would bring? He never resolved those complex issues.

### Eisenhower's legacy

Despite the shortcomings and contradictions emphasized above, Eisenhower's grand strategy displayed some marked strengths and was predicated on a number of keen insights. Eisenhower correctly grasped the long-term nature of the Cold War and began to plan accordingly. His administration's focus on the nonmilitary dimensions of Soviet-American competition led to a shrewd emphasis on the importance of public diplomacy and targeted propaganda initiatives designed to shape and influence world opinion. Perhaps most important of all, the president recognized more clearly than almost any of his contemporaries in the American policymaking elite that nuclear war could not be won and hence must not be fought. He displayed uncommon wisdom

23 NSC 5602/1, 15 March 1956, *ibid.*, vol. XIX, 242–68.

in comprehending that central reality of international relations in the middle of the twentieth century. Measured on its own terms, furthermore, the Eisenhower approach to national security did succeed in reining in defense spending, reducing the defense budget as a percentage of gross domestic product, and slashing the number of troops under arms. All the while, Eisenhower managed to ensure that the United States' overall military strength far surpassed that of the Soviet Union, a fact largely confirmed for him by the secret U-2 overflights of Soviet territory that began in 1956, and by the satellite reconnaissance missions that commenced in 1960.

In view of the above, it seems deeply ironic that, during his last several years in office, Eisenhower was hounded by criticisms about the presumed inadequacy of the US strategic posture, about declining American technological prowess, and about the Kremlin's rising capabilities. Technical breakthroughs by Moscow of an undeniably significant character triggered the complaints. The Soviets followed the first successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in the summer of 1957 with the launch, in October, of Sputnik, the first artificial earth satellite sent into orbit. Those achievements prompted widespread concern on the part of ordinary citizens as well as many defense experts that the United States might actually be falling behind in the arms and technological races. A political culture shaped by the relentless assaults of McCarthyism, moreover, conferred a certain legitimacy on those who would accuse Washington officialdom of laxity and malfeasance – a political fact of life that not even a Republican White House could escape. Partly to quell fears about a developing “missile gap,” Eisenhower appointed a blue-ribbon commission to examine the actual state of the nuclear-arms balance. To his great frustration, the Gaither Commission's highly classified report, completed in 1958, found that such a gap did, indeed, exist – and some of the commission's more politically damaging conclusions were soon leaked to the press. Although the reality was the exact opposite, the imaginary missile gap became an effective political rallying cry. Democratic presidential aspirant Kennedy used it to good effect in his 1960 race against Eisenhower's vice president, Richard M. Nixon.

### Kennedy and flexible response

During the presidential campaign and throughout his foreshortened presidency, Kennedy articulated a strategic vision that differed from Eisenhower's in key respects. Operating from the assumption that the purported missile gap between the Soviet Union and the United States was real – the evidence, in



fairness, was not yet conclusive that it was not – he pounded away in stump speeches about the need to bolster US defenses. This conviction formed an instrumental part of Kennedy's broader plea for the United States to prosecute the Cold War with greater vigor. He wanted to regain the initiative that he thought the Soviets had seized from the Americans, and he believed that spending additional dollars to enhance both the nation's conventional military capabilities and its long-range missile forces was imperative.

Like Eisenhower, the Democratic chief executive personally harbored a deep unease about the sure-to-be horrific consequences of any nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Quite unlike Eisenhower, however, Kennedy was convinced that expanding the full range of the nation's nonnuclear capabilities would reduce that threat by allowing the United States to tailor its responses appropriately to each kind and level of threat: from limited war to conflict on the periphery to insurgency to subversion. Such enhanced flexibility would eliminate, in his view, the all-or-nothing straightjacket imposed by the Eisenhower policy of massive retaliation, a policy he had blasted during his senatorial years. Kennedy's counterdoctrine of "flexible response," perhaps his administration's most distinctive innovation in the national security sphere, flowed directly from that supposition. The increased defense spending that the new president set as his highest priority was made possible by a Keynesian-influenced economic philosophy that, in sharp contradistinction to Eisenhower's conservative orthodoxy, held that the American economy was more than capable of absorbing increased defense expenditures – without suffering the deleterious effects that so exercised his predecessor. In that important respect, Kennedy's embrace of Keynesianism freed him from the tight budgetary constraints within which Eisenhower operated. Kennedy also advocated a more innovative, tolerant, and activist policy toward the Third World. Convinced that the primary scene of the struggle between the United States and its Soviet–Chinese adversaries had shifted to the developing areas, he elevated the battle for the Third World to a first-order priority in overall Cold War strategy.

The distinctive features of Kennedy's national security strategy emanated mostly from a heightened perception of the dangers posed to US security by the Soviet Union and China. Certain that the United States' adversaries were growing both stronger and more adventurous, he and his chief foreign-policy advisers considered a more activist US approach essential to meet the rising external threat those adversaries presented. "I think there is a danger," he declared in one campaign speech, "that history will make a judgment that these were the days when the tide began to run out for the United States.



23. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk (middle), and President John F. Kennedy.

These were the times when the Communist tide began to pour in.”<sup>24</sup> Those concerns dominated the president’s first state-of-the-union message of January 1961. In it, he implored Congress to provide sufficient funds for “a Free World force so powerful as to make any aggression clearly futile.” Neither the Soviet Union nor China, he said, “has yielded its ambitions for world domination.” He offered an exceptionally bleak vision of the global situation in the address, noting that he spoke “in an hour of national peril” and declaring it “by no means certain” that the nation would endure. “Each day the crises multiply,” Kennedy stressed. “Each day their solution grows more difficult. Each day we draw nearer the hour of maximum danger as weapons spread and hostile forces grow stronger.”<sup>25</sup>

### Kennedy and the Third World threat

That heightened perception of threat can be traced to the analysis, accepted by virtually all senior Kennedy administration planners, that the United States

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, August 25, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1962), 19–22 (hereafter PPP: *Kennedy*, with year).