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Middle East peacemaking: Real and imaginary

July 30, 2006

Barrie Dunsmore

DEFCON III is Pentagonese for defense condition three, the state of full U.S. military alert. It is only two steps removed from DEFCON I, which during the Cold War meant nuclear war. Only once during all those years was the state of alert for the U.S. armed forces raised as high as DEFCON II — during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

It was extremely rare for all American commands to go to DEFCON III. The most significant time was near the end of the 1973 Middle East War. Historians would later conclude that in the four decades of the Cold War, only the Cuban Missile Crisis had brought us closer to World War III.

The U.S. military went to DEFCON III on October 25, 1973, in response to a Soviet threat to send troops and equipment into Egypt to help the Egyptians lift the siege of their Third Army. That army had been trapped by Israeli forces on the eastern side of the Suez Canal, after a cease-fire arranged by the United States and the Soviet Union. Egypt and Israel claimed the other had violated the cease-fire. (At the time, I was with an Israeli artillery battery a few miles east of Suez City. All I could tell for certain was that the Israelis resumed firing after the first cease-fire was announced — and very little was coming back from the Egyptians.)

The crisis was resolved when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat withdrew his request to have both American and Russian troops come to Egypt to intervene — allowing the Soviets to back off. Sadat also agreed to direct military talks with the Israelis — a historical first.

In his memoirs, then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote: "We had supported Israel throughout this war for many historical, moral and strategic reasons. And we had just run the risk of a war with the Soviet Union, amidst the domestic crisis of Watergate. But our (American and Israeli) shared interests did not embrace the elimination of the Third Army. The issue of the Third Army was quite simply that Israel had completed its entrapment well after a cease-fire that we had negotiated."

Kissinger went on to make the point that, while he understood Israeli anger at Sadat for having started the fighting on Oct. 6 and their desire to end the war with his destruction, such an outcome would not have been in Israel's long-term interests. "Our exchanges with Cairo had convinced us that Anwar Sadat represented the best chance for peace in the Middle East." As indeed he was.

Things did not immediately go smoothly. Having achieved a cease-fire, Kissinger would spend much of the next year shuttling around the region — first between Israel and Egypt — then between Israel and Syria. In doing so, he laid the groundwork for the peace between Israel and Egypt that came a few years later. And he cemented a border understanding between Israel and Syria that has never been violated by either side.

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This example of skillful and nuanced management of a major crisis stands in stark contrast to the mystifying strategic thinking now being shown by the Bush administration amid a new Middle East war. This is not to imply that World War III is imminent, but if it continues unchecked, the current fighting could spread to directly involve Iran and Syria with catastrophic consequences for the region and for this country.

From the outset of this new crisis, the Bush administration has continued to cling to the delusional belief that it can transform the Middle East. It has evidently learned nothing from its experiences in Iraq — not to mention the recent electoral results in Palestine and Lebanon, which gave new power to Islamic fundamentalist extremists. Both the president and the alleged pragmatist among his foreign policy advisers, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, remain determined to reject the proven tactics of godless realists like Kissinger. As Rice says repeatedly: "It is time for a new Middle East."

In pursuit of the mirage of a new, democratic Middle East magically cleansed of historical hatreds, these are some of the astonishing things this administration has said and done — or not done — since the crisis began.

- As hundreds of Lebanese and dozens of Israeli civilians have been killed in the bloody exchanges between Hezbollah and Israel, Rice went to the region, not to try to arrange a cease-fire, but to lecture those who wanted one on the reasons why trying to stop the killing now was a bad idea. When Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora pleaded for an end to Israeli bombing, Rice responded by telling him that any cease-fire has to be "sustainable" and has to result in a "durable solution." In Israel she added, "If we have learned anything, it is that any peace is going to have to be based on enduring principles and not on temporary solutions." In fact, if we have learned anything in the region, it is that military actions do not lead to "durable solutions." The best example of that is the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that was supposed to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization. Instead it led to 18 years of Israeli occupation and the emergence of the extremist Shiite movement Hezbollah, now the most powerful force in Lebanon and Israel's new worst enemy.

- During her Middle East visit, Rice set her terms for a cease-fire. Hezbollah, which ignited the crisis by capturing two Israeli soldiers, must do the following: stop firing rockets at Israel, withdraw from southern Lebanon, disband its militia and return the soldiers. Certainly these are issues to be dealt with. But just as surely they are not going to be achieved as a pre-condition for a cease-fire. This package is going to require long and difficult negotiations for which Rice has shown little inclination or aptitude.

- An emergency meeting of interested Arab and European countries had to be held in Rome because no Arab "friend" of the United States would host it for fear of being associated with current American policy. As for the Europeans, there is great reluctance to provide troops for the "robust" multinational force Rice wants to have patrolling the Israeli-Lebanese border. That's because they realize they would be seen as occupiers and eventually would become Hezbollah targets (as did American and French troops trying to restore order in Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of '82.)

- There are seven key players in the current crisis: Israel, Lebanon, the PLO, Hezbollah, Hamas (the elected government of the Palestinians), Syria and Iran. On her trip, Rice saw only the Israelis, the Lebanese and the PLO. Her administration refuses to engage Hezbollah and Hamas — or their patrons Iran and Syria — on the grounds that they are terrorist organizations and states.

This policy is based on the fallible notion that if you negotiate with such a party, you are somehow rewarding its bad behavior. That ignores a much older reality — that you negotiate peace, not with your friends or like-minded people, but with your enemies.

Of course, the Bush administration rejects such old realities. It wants to purge itself of such Kissingerian realism as it seeks to create that new Middle East.

Obviously, all the region's problems have not been solved by diplomacy. But for over 30 years, significant contributions to a more peaceful Middle East and safer world were made by a series of Republican and Democratic presidents and their secretaries of state. As one who was often with them on the ground and on the shuttles, I certainly believe

that without that cease-fire in October 1973 — and without the intense American diplomatic effort that followed — a major Middle East war involving both the United States and the Soviet Union was highly probable. Then, as today, a cease-fire is where you have to start. And then you have to negotiate — with all the parties.

Barrie Dunsmore is a veteran diplomatic and foreign correspondent for ABC News now living in Charlotte.



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