



BRIEF G

BRITISH EMBASSY,

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20008

TELEPHONE: (202) 462-1340

23 May 1980

FROM THE AMBASSADOR

Could we discuss this pt.

AMM 21/5

Sir A Acland KCVO CMG
Deputy Under Secretary of State
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
London SW1

Mr Gullimore

Defence Dept.

cc. Sir D. Mackenzie

Mr J. McDermott

Mr P. McKeown

gov.

Mr Walters has seen.

Walters

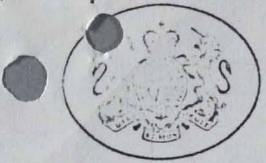
New Review

THE ARC OF CRISIS: US DEFENCE POLICY

1. As you will know from your visit here, it is sometimes hard to put one's finger on exactly where policy is being made within the Administration, and to know whether any serious thinking is being done along broader strategic lines about what the West should be doing in the face of the Soviet threat to the Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf region. In pursuit of this will-o'-the-wisp I went and had a chat today with Bob Komer who, for practical purposes, is really the key man under Harold Brown on the policy side. John Weston came with me. In the course of a characteristic and good humoured hour-long stream of consciousness a number of points emerged which may be of interest to you.

2. I asked Komer whether he saw any future in devising some kind of organizational or institutional mechanism for galvanising joint efforts in the Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf region and to ensure a more automatic habit of consultation not only amongst NATO Allies but with some of the countries in the region. Komer said in principle this would of course be very useful but he thought it highly impractical. He recalled vividly his days as US Permanent Representative to CENTO in 1969 and how little the ritual meetings had accomplished. The trouble was that the interests of all the countries involved were too disparate. He saw little hope of bringing together say Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, the Europeans and Australia, within one framework. How could one even get Egypt to sit down with Saudi Arabia? He was prepared to concede that in the longer run it might be right to keep alive the possibility of some such procedure - we discussed the idea of an "Islamic Consultative Group" or perhaps some common security understanding emerging among some of the states concerned, particularly if one were to take Komer's optimistic view on an evolution in the Iraqi position. But in the short run he thought the United States had little option but to pursue the policy of multiple

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bilateralism with each of the countries concerned. (Indeed, even between the US, UK and France trilateral efforts for joint exercises in the Indian Ocean had had to give way to the bilateral formula).

3. Komer said there was a limited though dawning perception of the continuing interest the United States had in pursuing a strategic dialogue with the local states and he personally was working hard within the US Government and on Harold Brown to increase awareness of this. He is of course obsessed with the idea of getting Sadat to sit down with the Saudis, and the Saudis giving Egypt a billion dollars on economic account while the United States takes care of Sadat's military needs. He accepted my point that the Arab/Israel problem remained the major fly in the ointment for the Saudis but merely asserted that the Saudis had to understand that the major threat to them came from the Soviet Union. He continues to talk of Saudi Arabia as the major forward base in the area; /the Americans needed land-based air cover for the oil fields; and the base structure being created there in co-ordination with the US was working out quite well (F-15 facilities, fuel storage, SAMs). Komer emphasised that he was very careful not to talk too much about this. If the Saudis were prepared to keep the discussion covert and provide the money themselves, he saw no reason why it should surface at all for quite a while, which would save them a lot of trouble with Congress. But if the Saudis did not want the Americans actually to come over the horizon until a very late moment in a major crisis, that had implications for Egypt.

4. Egypt was the major rear base. So long as Sadat and Mubarak were there to hang on, the United States had more or less what it wanted. (He recalled how close the Americans had been to a security understanding with Egypt in 1952 before they managed to mess it up). He speculated again about the possibility of even using Egyptian infantry in the context of some future crisis between the Yemens and at another point diverged into some very sweeping talk about pushing Egypt to move against Qadhafi thereby securing the oil and some fancy Russian hardware.

5. Turning to the nature of the threat, Komer dwelt on the way in which the energy squeeze was undermining the United States' security posture by eating away at what would otherwise be real defence increases through the inflationary effect in the economy and the loss of any real effect from aid to such countries as South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan and Turkey, because of the outflow there on oil account. It was all very well for states in the region to say that the Western security umbrella had of necessity to be extended over them because we knew that our own vital interests were involved. But, as Komer

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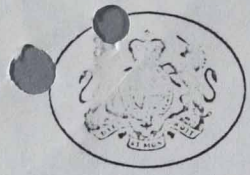
kept telling them, the United States has actually to be able to get in there in an emergency. Hence the need for access on the spot. This might mean for example moving rapidly to secure Southern Iran and then on Northwards in order to stop the adversary. Likewise to defend the oilfields of Basra and Kurdistan there had to be a buffer area, which meant Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. (Komer does not entirely exclude Kuwait itself from his ideal network of bases/facilities, though he sees it would be a difficult nut to crack!)

6. Equally something had to be said to the Israelis. There had to be a security dialogue with the Israelis and they had to be brought to understand that the West must talk to the Arabs. This was because the balance of power was tilting against the US and if this continued and the West lost the security of its oil supplies it would not be able to defend Israel either. If they wanted to keep Russian influence out, they had to recognise that a few villages were less important than US support and the regional strength that was necessary to sustain it.

7. Komer said his constant advice to everyone within the Administration was to emphasise the importance of keeping in touch with the British about all this, particularly because of our experience in the region and the advice we could offer. We need have no fear on that score (he made an exception of the hostage rescue attempt). He was also very conscious of the Omani dimension. He regarded this as our legitimate parish for training and equipment purposes. If the Omanis preferred to operate with British hardware that was all right by him. He thought it would be silly for the United States to try to replace the British in what they did well there already. He took a strong personal interest in vetting the Americans who went there. He hoped that we, like himself, would keep a sharp eye out for problems, which if they came up should be relayed through the diplomatic channel and jumped on quickly. I said I could foresee that there may be one or two problems if we were not careful, and Komer did not dissent. He emphasised that the US was not looking for bases where the Stars and Stripes could fly ("Except perhaps in Diego Garcia. By the way I do wish you would stop being mean about the place for ulterior purposes" - I take this to be Komer's way of saying he thinks we are footdragging over their plans deliberately).

8. As you can see, none of this really amounts to anything very coherent or new as an interpretation of the famous framework for regional co-operation. I have the feeling that we are all still reaching for something we have not yet quite succeeded in identifying. For the moment Komer's preference is for a vigorous and modulated process of bilateral diplomacy

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by the United States with each of the countries concerned. He welcomes the contribution that other Western Allies can make in the area, not excluding the Australians. He is everlastingly hopeful of some major breakthroughs between neighbours in the region, eg Egypt/Saudi Arabia. And for an American, he has quite a nice sense of historical irony. He may not quite have his finger on the realities of Middle East politics to the extent of his earlier apprenticeship in the NSC under Kennedy and Johnson, or when he did the National Intelligence Estimates for the Middle East back in his CIA days. But he is not afraid of ideas, and they are not all bad, as his recent contribution to the DPC discussions in NATO has shown.

John C. ...
Nicholas

Nicholas Henderson

- cc: HM Representatives in:
- Cairo
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 - Muscat
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