

## **The Acheson Doctrine and the Foreign Policy of Barack Obama**

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IT SEEMS THAT CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM about possible changes in American foreign policy stirred up by the new Obama-Biden Administration is much more justified than cautious skepticism. The first official visit of President Obama to Moscow confirmed that the stylistics and rhetoric had changed. No wonder.

It was not that hard to move away from *humanitarian imperialism* à la Dick Cheney and George W. Bush: it could not be described as an inalienable part of the U.S. traditional policy. It was the neocons in Washington who tried to pass it for such. They, however, are as far removed from the American Founding Fathers as the Communists in Beijing from Marx and Lenin.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a paramount figure of American history of foreign policy, wrote in his *The Cycles of American History*: “The conduct of policy is subject to cyclical fluctuations of withdrawal and return. ... And American conceptions of foreign policy respond to the old argument between experiment and destiny. The first derives from history and issues in an empirical approach to world affairs. The second derives from theology and issues in the secularization of theology which is ideology. The conflict between the two approaches expresses the schism in the American soul between a commitment to experiment and a susceptibility to dogma.”<sup>1</sup>

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THERE IS NOTHING NEW under the sun. Some 60 years ago an acute cultural and political conflict divided the top echelon of American politics into foreign policy dogmatists and “experimenters.”

When early in 1949 career diplomat Dean Acheson replaced General George Marshall as Secretary of State the confirmed American anti-Communists and patriots (General Douglas MacArthur and Senator Joseph McCarthy being the most prominent of them) were more or less publicly accusing the Truman Administration of having “lost” continental China to the Communists. By the end of 1949, Mao did win the civil war in mainland China; Chiang Kai-shek had to flee to Formosa (Taiwan).

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On 12 January 1950, when the accusations against the American leaders of conniving with Communists reached their peak Secretary of State Acheson speaking at a dinner at the National Press Club in Washington offered a detailed explanation of the Department's highly *non-dogmatic* foreign policy doctrine. The unofficial event allowed him to be straightforward, clear and undiplomatic.

Not a friend of the Soviet Union after 1945, Dean Acheson made his best either to finally appease Mao and his cronies or to provoke them. He went even further than stating that the United States no longer needed continued control of the pro-American Chiang Kai-shek government over Formosa: Korea was omitted as a strategically important part of America's "defense perimeter."

While his critics, still prisoners of the traditional approaches, sounded alarm because of the successful "Communist onslaught in Asia" the U.S. Secretary of State preferred to hold forth about the vistas opened in front of his country by an active Soviet involvement in China and a new balance of forces in it.

He minced no words to say that the Pacific and East Asian problems could not be resolved by force and that, therefore, American diplomacy should learn to use other, less expensive and hazardous means to contain the Soviet Union, capitalize on its blunders and fan disagreements in the enemy camp.

This logic suggested, went on the Secretary of State, that the Soviets' penetration into Manchuria, the old zone of Russia's interests in Northern China, should be seen as an important stage on the road toward America's final aim in the region.

The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance the Soviet government concluded with Chiang's central government on 14 August 1945 for 30 years envisaged, in particular, the transfer to the U.S.S.R. of the Port Arthur naval military base for the duration of the treaty and transformation of Dalian (Dalny) into a free port where the Soviet Union would enjoy special rights. Under the treaty The Soviet Union and China were to jointly use the Chinese Eastern Railway. The Chinese had to recognize independence of the so-called Outer Mongolia which had gained its *de facto* independence from China during the 1911 revolution. Later as the Mongolian People's Republic it became the Soviet Union's best friend.

The head of the American foreign policies was convinced that not only the Soviet control over Outer Mongolia played in the Americans' hand but even the Soviet Union's probable expansion to Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang.

His was a simple and fairly straightforward logic: an unceremonious presence of any foreign power on Chinese territory would cause indignation, fury and rage. (The U.S. Secretary of State probably knew that as distinct from Chiang Kai-shek, a fairly conventional nationalist, Communist Mao looked at the Middle Kingdom as the center of the world.)

Americans, he argued, should merely publicly insist on the formula that they had been defending at least since the late 19th century: those who violated China's integrity were not merely an enemy of China — they acted against America's interests proper. Dean Acheson was convinced that the United States

should formulate its interests and aims in a clear and transparent form and avoid quibbles and reservations.

It seems that at that time the American diplomats were much more aware of the meaning and culture of the Eastern martial arts than many of the American military. This speech and America's foreign policy

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maneuvers are an ample proof of this. (Long before the future president of Russia entered a gym to learn the ABC of judo and long before he learned to translate them into politics Dean Acheson had been deliberately relying on using his opponent's strength against him very much in style of the Asian martial arts.)

It should be said that in the final analysis the Acheson Doctrine did bear fruit: at the first opportune moment Beijing parted ways with Moscow to more or less reconcile with Washington.

In fact, the United States' consistent adherence to the foreign policy principles that underlay the Acheson Doctrine allowed it to triumph even before the doctrine itself had been formulated.

Throughout the first 150 years of independence America was consistently building up its economic and, hence, military might while avoiding protracted conflicts. Until the mid-20th century, anti-Americanism was limited to Latin America exposed to the gunboat diplomacy, marines and coups much more often than the *dollar diplomacy*.

Regrettably, neither the confirmed American anti-Communists nor, indirectly, the confirmed Soviet Communists arrived at the conclusions suggested by the Acheson Doctrine: history has demonstrated that both sides should have restrained their ardor.

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THERE ARE REASONS to believe that Stalin did not miss Dean Acheson's speech.

In the summer of 1950, the Soviet Union demonstrated its unpredictability: by letting its representative at the UN SC to miss "by inadvertence" that sitting that approved the UN operation on the Korean Peninsula and having invited the United State to a wide-scale military interference the Kremlin maneuvered into a position of a by-stander, supposedly neutral yet highly attentive.

A year later Moscow initiated peace talks: after secret negotiations with Prof. George Kennan acting on instruction of Dean Acheson Soviet UN Ambassador

Yakov Malik publicized the idea over the radio. Thus direct talks between the American and North Korean military became possible.

On 10 March 1952, the leaders of the already existing Western Bloc were taken unawares by the note of the Soviet Foreign Ministry on the German question<sup>2</sup> which meant a U-turn moving the Soviet Union away from the Potsdam Agreements and the usual Soviet stand.

The note invited the sides of the anti-Hitler coalition to sign a peace treaty with united Germany under the following conditions: (a) free elections across the country under joint observation of the victor powers; (b) creation of a democratic and neutral German state with guaranteed human rights and freedoms; (c) building up a new German army and national defense industry; (d) extending the full scope of civil rights to the former Wehrmacht military and former Nazis not convicted for crimes.

This meant a pull out of occupation forces; while Stalin was prepared to abandon the GDR the Americans clung to their control over Germany's western lands. They opted for confrontation which delayed Germany's unification by 40 years.

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SEVERAL YEARS AFTER Dean Acheson's famous speech, his foreign policy logic successfully tested in Asia lost its relevance. The Washington strategists probably due to the "cyclical fluctuations of withdrawal and return" embraced the special operations logic to remove the nationalist (yet not the left) Mossadegh Cabinet in Iran in 1953 and the left (and nationalist) President Jacobo Àrbenz of Guatemala in 1954.

Then came a direct armed invasion in Vietnam for which the U.S. paid dearly both at home with a psychological shock and abroad with dented reputation. Starting with the fall of 1945, even before the First Indochina War with France, Communist leader of Vietnam Hô Shi Minh had been insistently, and unsuccessfully, trying to win the Truman's Administration's support; this deprived the Vietnam War of the United States of any sense.

Washington obviously overestimated the degree of closeness between the Vietnamese Communists and the Soviet leaders: instead of acting in the Acheson Doctrine style by offering a brokerage in the conflict between Uncle Hô and Paris the Americans first had sided with the French colonialists and then went in their footsteps toward a tragic farce. "American troops had been sent to kill people they didn't know, in a country they had never been, for the reasons none of them could understand by men as benighted as they were."<sup>3</sup>

A cynic would have described the Vietnam War as well as all other American military ventures of the latter half of the 20th century *useful* because they detracted the world's attention from Washington's other front of struggle for domination: the economic or, rather, political-economic front. The numerous programs of "economic aid" realized by the USAID, WB and other international institu-

tions that shared the Washington Consensus ideology produced an equal or even stronger impact on the world's economic and political context as we know it than the military empire-building methods. Unarmed "economic liquidators" (economic advisors) were much more efficient than any of the known armed liquidators.

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IN THE 1980S, the United States used its military might to remove all sorts of "bad guys" in Central America; in the 1990s, however, it spread this practice worldwide from the 1991 Gulf War to the air war against Yugoslavia in 1999.

In 1989, America's post-World War II rival empire — the Soviet Union — threw in the towel leaving the only superpower without rivals. None of the countries could challenge America so the government of the United States had no *geopolitical worries*. The U.S. military budget, however, did not shrink, it was even inflated.<sup>4</sup>

Nobody bothered to explain the reasons for this to the nation. The military-industrial complex against the "unwarranted influence" of which Dwight Eisenhower had warned in his 1961 farewell address (but not earlier!) could rest on laurels.

The Anglo-Saxons' romantic war for the "Iraqi freedom" unleashed in 2003 against their own ally and client of long standing and the strongest secular Mid-Eastern regime is another story. It destroyed the Iraqi nation, a joint product of the British crown and Saddam Hussein to plunge the Arabs and Kurds of Mesopotamia back into the times of tribal and confessional enmity of all against all.

George W. Bush's penchant toward the neocons' deadly dangerous myths rather than toward his father's boring lecturing did nothing good to America's standing in the world. In 2006 fiscal year, it cost the American taxpayers \$885 billion; \$40 billion were allocated to the U.S. Homeland Security Department. In five years, the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan cost the country \$500 billion.<sup>5</sup>

The United State's ability to carry on this large-scale expensive campaign overseas that has already claimed financial and human losses cannot but impress. The fact that it has bogged down in the Mesopotamian sands, however, cast justified doubts on the American world hegemony that had looked unshakable in the 1990s.

Hardly an achievement in view of the Chinese factor!

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BY THE IRONY OF HISTORY China's turn to capitalism proved to be a worse headache for the Western leaders than its former socialist orientation. The country has resolved to play by the rules of others and win the game with the help of its resource advantages: the cheap labor (nearly free, that is *slave* labor, by the American standards) of the hardworking and undemanding nation.

In the 1960s-1980s, all sorts of elite forums, clubs and commissions — *the intelligence, honor and conscience* of the Western world — never expected Deng Xiaoping to build up a new China with a voice of its own.

Early in the 21st century, it became obvious that China and India were the winners in the game that used the rules of von Hayek and Friedman. As distinct from the Middle Kingdom the Indian empire as a political entity is dated back to the British colonial domination. This means that India's present economic successes are not easily convertible into geopolitical influence even on the limited, Asian scale.

As soon as “red” China joined the WTO it became absolutely clear that it knows how to capitalize on the advantages of the so-called free trade. Today, Americans should not so much meditate on their “hegemonic intentions” but rather on how to get out of the trap the Western world fell in by letting China into the WTO.

When early in 2008 the China's *sovereign wealth funds* used its hundreds of billions dollars to buy, in the most aggressive manner, all sorts of assets — from mineral resources to industrial enterprises—it looked as if the Federal Reserve and the Wall Street were impotent in the face of Beijing's insistent intention to transform its trillions of dollars into something more tangible, viz. control over a large chunk of world economy.

Strange at it may seem the amazingly well-timed world financial and economic crisis delivered a heavy blow at China's export-oriented economy: in the spring of 2009, up to 80 percent of the industrial enterprises in Guangzhou, for example, were closed.

This means that what the Western governments could not do for political reasons — to close the main foreign markets for Chinese commodities — happened as if *by itself*.

Henry Kissinger's public attempts at re-playing the China card by tempting “red” China with the formerly Soviet role of the second superpower are intended as either a tranquilizer or a smokescreen. Deliberations about a possible American-Chinese alliance have at least 100-year long intellectual pre-history with a practically total absence of a real one. (Early in the 20th century, American military theorist Homer Lea dreamed about an American-British Saxon world empire able, together with the restored might of China, to stand opposed to the German, Russian and Japanese foreign policy *expansion*. It was these sentiments that brought the catastrophe of World War I closer.<sup>6</sup>)

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IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS, the Obama Administration will be busy at the economic front struggling for America's survival. For this reason, at all other fronts (armed, etc) it will replace direct interference and pressure à la neocons with much more elegant and effective “neo-democratic” political methods in the Acheson Doctrine style.

In view of the obvious consequences of “red” China’s investment onslaught that had lasted for many years everywhere in the world (in South America in the first place of which the U.S. was especially sensitive) it takes no wisdom to guess that Washington’s attempts at restoring the relations with the former *underbelly* (President Obama had been doing precisely this at his first OAS summit in April 2009) promise no swift success.

Washington’s global rival for the next decade has been identified — this is surely not Moscow. This is important. We should not regret this since our historic responsibility — that of the Third Rome — does not presuppose claims of the ruler (co-ruler) status of *this world*.

The United States is welcome to shoulder the burden of the problem of Afghanistan. It is in our interests to let them supply its *limited contingent* via our territory according to the agreement signed during President Obama’s first Moscow visit. We should watch the developments from aside. After all, the events that followed President Putin’s invitation to the Americans to contemplate the using of bases in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia should have taught us, and especially Americans, a lot. We should concentrate at building up a checks-and-balances system in our relationships with the United States.

In the near future the relations between the Kremlin and the new American administration will depend, to a great extent, on how the U.S. president and vice-president will handle America’s global role. So far, they prefer an “empirical approach to world affairs” and do not demonstrate, to borrow an expression from Schlesinger Jr., “a susceptibility to dogma.”

This is probably explained by the world crisis in the context of which the political mythology of America’s moral exclusiveness and the economic dogmas of Washington Consensus have lost much of their glamour. The crisis *has come to stay* — time has come to turn to common sense, one of the sources of America’s history.

Half a million copies of *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine’s 50-page long pamphlet, appeared in 1776 on the eve of the Declaration of Independence.

It seems that very soon we shall witness a paradoxical phenomenon: the Obama Democratic Administration might force itself with the foreign policy arguments of the American right conservatives (not neo-conservatives!)

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, Mariner Books, 1999, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Izvestia*, 11 March, 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Bonner and Addison Wiggin, *Empire of Debt. The Rise of an Epic Financial Crisis*, Hoboken, NJ, 2006, p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> *American Chronicle*, 28 April 2007 [<http://www.americanchronicle.com>]

<sup>6</sup> Homer Lea, *The Day of Saxon*, N.-Y., London, 1912.