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**A different cold war? European settlement of
1963 and afterward ***

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Abstract. The expectation of ongoing pressure against the Soviet Union and potential allies elsewhere in world made up the thrust of early US planning for the Cold War, and were emblematic of Containment. They led the US to assume leadership of NATO in Western Europe, and to worldwide US engagements, including in Vietnam. But the US and NATO during the 1950s could not agree on a defense strategy; Eisenhower's plan by 1957 and 1958 was for the US to reduce its European presence in favor of national control of nuclear weapons, including by West Germany. That prospect frightened the Soviets, and more than anything else led to Khrushchev's ultimatum on Berlin in November 1958. Kennedy, with some collaboration from Khrushchev, constructed a settlement by 1963 that would keep US forces in western Europe; keep US nuclear weapons under US control, hence prevent Germans from having them; and maintain the political status quo in central Europe. A self-enforcing European peace could be achieved only because the Soviet goal of regional hegemony had been thwarted. But Kennedy and Khrushchev both left the scene, following which the accomplishment was poorly understood, a pattern oddly continued by most Cold War observers – including Morgenthau and Kissinger. Had it been better understood, it might have changed US policy toward less intervention in the Third World. Eisenhower left office in January 1961 with the US on the brink of showdown in central Africa, Cuba, and Laos. We got a pre-vision of a different strategy in Kennedy's policy shifts in all of these, and in withdrawal underway of forces from Vietnam. Meanwhile, DeGaulle offered a multi-dimensional case for neutrality in southeast Asia. A less ideological, more "realist" view would have led the US to stay "offshore," to avoid confrontation where superpower interests were only marginally involved, and otherwise to encourage neutralist solutions. The Cold War might have faded away; but that was not to be. Containment, as practiced, and resumed after 1963, prolonged the Cold War. Kennedy and DeGaulle were effective realists, while Eisenhower, Kissinger, and often Acheson, were not. The 1963 European settlement should have been updated during the decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it was not. A consequence, in part, was the Ukraine war of 2022.

Keywords. Containment; European settlement 1963; Cold War; Realism; Hegemony in Europe; Nuclear weapons policy; MC-48; NATO history; Berlin crisis; Vietnam War; Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; Domino Theory; Neutralism; Multi-lateral Force (MLF) arrangements; Dwight Eisenhower; John Kennedy; Dean Acheson; Henry Kissinger; Nikita Khrushchev; Charles DeGaulle; Konrad Adenauer; Harold Macmillan; Walter Lippmann; Hans Morgenthau; John Mearsheimer; Marc Trachtenberg; Kissinger's Diplomacy; Skybolt missile; Polaris missile; Ukraine War; Congolese neutrality; Laotian neutrality.

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1. Introduction: Containment

By 1946, hopes for post-WW2 cooperative settlement of differences between the US and the Soviet Union were fading. Premier Stalin's goals were expansionist, even to establish hegemony over Europe. Prominent realist on international affairs John Mearsheimer has written:

[The Soviet Union] had been invaded twice by Germany over a thirty-year period, and each time Germany made its victim pay an enormous blood price. No responsible Soviet leader would have passed up an opportunity to be Europe's hegemon in the wake of World War Two (Mearsheimer, 2017, 198).

Stalin mused to French Communist leader Maurice Thorez in 1947, "Had Churchill delayed opening the second front in northern France by a year, the Red Army would have come to France. We toyed with the idea of reaching Paris" (Gaddis, 2005, 14). He attempted expansive moves in Iran and at the Turkish Straits in 1946; both were thwarted by the threat of US military action. In September of that year, Clark Clifford – who was to be a prominent advisor to Democratic presidents from Truman through Carter – wrote a secret memorandum calling for a global US security mission to oppose the USSR wherever it might menace "democratic" countries. He argued that it was not a matter of clashing security interests, but of moral shortcomings of Soviet leadership. The goal was not, for example, to maintain the balance of power in Europe, but instead to transform Soviet society (Kissinger, 1994, 450). Dean Acheson, as President Truman's advisor in early 1947, presented the case for aid to Greece and Turkey as part of a global struggle between democracy and dictatorship; such packaging was effective for securing US political support, and anticipated future themes. In March of the same year, Truman spoke of the Truman Doctrine in Wilsonian terms about giving effect to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations (Kissinger, 1995, 452).²

The longer source document of containment policy was State Department's George Kennan's 1947 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, anonymously authored as "X", "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." The concept was that Soviet domestic governance structure was formidable, but fragile. Under relentless pressure, it might implode. An insight from the paper was that communist ideology served the domestic function of legitimizing an illegitimate Soviet government (Gaddis, 1982, 34). Kennan anticipated a scenario for collapse. He called for:

a policy of firm containment designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable World (Kennan, 1947, 575).

The goal, similar to what was outlined in Clifford's memorandum, was to *convert* the Soviet Union to a different kind of system, one that would

² "Wilsonian idealism" refers to a policy asserting a collection of goals to include self-determinism, democratic government, collective security, and the rule of law. Conceptually, it stands against a policy based on advancing the national interest.

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cease to challenge world peace and stability. For Kennan, this was not an effort to be compartmentalized for diplomats and perhaps military leaders to address. It would require a society-wide engagement. As he wrote in the same essay:

The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations... [T]he thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which... has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear (Kennan, 1947, 582).

Kennan defined an extraordinary task, one he asserted to be entrusted from Above. It recalls President Woodrow Wilson's quasi-religious appeal to "make the world safe for democracy" after the First World War, but it goes beyond Wilson in its call for transformation of *American* society. Henry Kissinger comments in *Diplomacy* (1994), his *magnum opus*, that Kennan "had defined a task so complex that America would nearly tear itself apart trying to fulfill it" (Kissinger, 1994, 456). Churchill, leader of the Opposition in Parliament in the late 1940s, already warned against a Western policy following Kennan's concepts that would bring the psychological strain of endless strategic stalemate (Kissinger, 2011). Looking beyond diplomatic events, it is easy to speculate that the demands of Containment affected other aspects of American culture during the 1950s. The image of a militarized economy with accompanying oppressive social norms was reflected in, for example, C. Wright Mills' *Power Elite*, or in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*.

Kennan was not effective as a senior diplomat, perhaps because he found it hard to focus on what Kissinger calls the "immediately feasible" (Kissinger, 2011). Kennan became critical of the way Containment was implemented – especially in a militarized form – and over subsequent decades he perhaps felt remorse for his role in introducing it. It was left to Dean Acheson, Truman's Secretary of State from 1949 to 1953, to take the lead in applying a containment framework as policy. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, established in 1949, was explained in the US not as defending territory, and not as directed against an enemy, but as defending principle, and directed toward preventing aggression from whatever source it might arise. That is – it was different from a European-style military alliance. Acheson no doubt suppressed a smile, but these formulations smoothed Senate approval of the Treaty. In fact, none of Containment's advocates were optimistic about the potential of the United Nations to resolve disputes, especially those between great powers. As a matter of political culture, NATO was thus an odd combination of a military alliance intended to advance power interests of its members while packaged in language of League of Nations-like collective security.

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Containment, as outlined by Clifford, Kennan and Acheson, disdained East-West negotiation, left initiative to the other side, and hence prescribed that US policy be (in Kissinger's word) "reactive" (Kissinger, 1994, 455-456). Kissinger described three alternatives to Containment's long-range strategy. The first he associates with journalist Walter Lippmann, who argued that Containment would drain American resources and bring psychological and geopolitical over-extension. Lippmann proposed more limited objectives, but combined it with recommendation for an assertive diplomacy with the Soviets. The second was from Winston Churchill, who wanted to use what he thought a strong Western strategic position to negotiate, or to demand, a settlement – while the US had an atomic bomb and the Soviets did not. We can link Lippmann and Churchill together as "realists." They wanted to co-exist with the Soviet Union, and to establish a balance of power to constrain it in Europe and perhaps elsewhere, without trying to transform it (or the United States!) in the process (Kissinger, 1994, 463ff). Implicit in this realist argument was that a Soviet effort to achieve hegemony in Europe could have been prevented by Western power at the time. Realists would not welcome the "psychological strain of continuous stalemate" embraced by some early cold warriors, and they generally give short shrift to discussion of legal principles or ideological preferences. By the time he returned to power in 1951, Churchill's objective had adjusted toward making Containment less rigid, hence toward what Kissinger writes anticipated his and President Nixon's policy of "détente" in the 1970s (Kissinger, 1994, 512). Kissinger's partiality to the realist critique of Containment policy is evident. The critique is also, he says, the position least conformable to American culture, which is marked by geographic isolation, hence relative security, from other great powers; and – perhaps until recently -- by almost messianic idealism about transforming the world.

The third objection to Kennan's Containment came from left "moralists," led at the time by Henry Wallace, Franklin Roosevelt's third-term Vice President and 1948 third-party presidential candidate. Their view was that America should improve its own moral standing before intervening against Soviet action in Europe or elsewhere. Wallace advocated something close to League of Nations style collective security, which he believed had also been Roosevelt's intention. (In fact, Roosevelt hoped Stalin would cooperate after the war. But his likely backup plan was to bring American and British military power to bear, were that to become necessary (Kissinger, 1994, 409).³ Wallace held the silly view that Russian political freedom and religious toleration were expanding in Stalin's Soviet Union in 1945. His political position collapsed in the face of the communist coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade, both in 1948. But Kissinger notes that the Left moralist critique of US foreign policy had strong resonance in

³ Kissinger cites a speech on topic by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

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the following decades, and that it has deeper roots in American thought patterns than does any kind of realism (Kissinger, 1994, 467-469).

Containment, as offered in the late 1940s, was a set of axioms often without clear policy applications. An exception was the Marshall Plan, soon implemented in part on Kennan's recommendation (Gaddis, 2005, 31-32), toward preventing collapse of western economies that might leave populations open to Soviet blandishments. Containment's founders were not always rigid. Kennan embraced diversity among governments and multipolarity in the world order as relatively stabilizing; Acheson wanted the State Department to encourage Tito's Yugoslavian breakaway from the Soviet bloc (Gaddis, 1982; 42-43, 67; also Brands, 1989, 141-180). But in the years ahead, two items, with Acheson's involvement, became emblematic of Containment policy. One was "multilateral force" (MLF) arrangements for nuclear weapons – to provide for European policy input, but while denying national control even to close allies. This grew out of Acheson's conviction by July 1951 that America should keep a major troop presence in Europe, including in Germany, almost indefinitely. The troop presence became a point of agreement among the US, Soviet Union and Germany; Stalin did not want an independent Germany, and was amenable to having the western part of it under US direction. Various plans for a European Defense Community, independent of the US, were put forward but never became viable. The alternative took shape: keep NATO forces under a US Supreme Allied Commander – Europe (SACEUR) (Trachtenberg, 1999, 119-120). A second item, represented by National Security Council document 68, which was drafted by State Department Policy Planning Director Paul Nitze and presented to Truman in April 1950, laid out a proto "domino theory" as basis of a Cold War strategy. A defeat anywhere – eg, in Czechoslovakia – was a defeat everywhere; this reasoning was extended already to developing world venues, including Indochina. And NSC-68 emphasized that aggressive behavior could be changed only through conversion of the Soviet Union, which in fact should *precede* serious negotiations (Kissinger, 1994, 462, 624, 755).

As Kissinger tells it, Containment remained the default position of American diplomacy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union until the early 1970s, if not longer. At that point, he as National Security Advisor, and President Nixon (1969-1974), opened "triangular diplomacy" with China and the Soviet Union, then used new geopolitical fluidity to relax tensions (hence, "détente"), and to break locked-in positions involving Germany, Vietnam and elsewhere.

...the Nixon Administration's approach to containment differed from that of Acheson and Dulles in that it did not make the transformation of Soviet society a precondition to negotiations. Nixon parted company with the fathers of containment and chose a path reminiscent of Churchill, who in 1953 had called for talks with Moscow after Stalin's death (Kissinger, 1994, 713).

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In fact, as we will see, Containment as a policy framework was largely abandoned a decade earlier during the Kennedy administration (1961-1963); this happened vis-à-vis European and Soviet issues and again regarding intervention in Third World hostilities. Rigidity was also reintroduced during the subsequent Johnson (1963-1969) and Nixon administrations, especially regarding the developing world. Kissinger's omissions were matched by others: an important part of the story of the Cold War – the Berlin settlement of 1963 – is often neglected, with resulting confusion about policy choices during the following quarter-century.⁴ The US-Soviet rivalry continued, but within understood boundaries. We concentrate here on the Berlin Crisis and its resolution, some developments in post-colonial Africa, and how the US expanded its role in southeast Asia.

2. NATO and the Berlin crisis

Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964) announced in November 1958 that the Soviet Union would sign a peace treaty with East Germany that would end the rights of the US, Britain and France in Berlin. He added the ultimatum that Western powers had six months to reach settlement with East Germany, otherwise – the expected outcome – they would have to leave Berlin. Kissinger narrates that Khrushchev sought to convert new Soviet prestige from their Sputnik launch the previous year into diplomatic coin by demanding an end to Berlin's four-power status (Kissinger, 1994, 570). The Soviets' stated focus in launching the Berlin ultimatum in November 1958 was to burnish East Germany's sovereign credentials. In domestic politics, Khrushchev had been challenged by a hardline group, led by Stalin's one-time foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, mostly for leading what they considered a feckless foreign policy. Khrushchev was also sensitive to Chinese ally's saber rattling around the Taiwan Straits, and did not want to look weak vis-à-vis NATO by comparison (Zubok, 1993, 2-5, 7). But the NATO powers essentially refused to budge. The six-month ultimatum was extended repeatedly.

The Soviets were concerned about more than access to Berlin or about East Germany's sovereign status. The broader issue was the military power of West Germany, whether it would develop nuclear weapons, and whether NATO would continue to absorb its power into their multilateral defense structure (Schlesinger, 1965, 347; Dobrynin, 1995, 52; Trachtenberg, 1999, 246-247, 252, 344; Brinkley, 1992, 94). The Repack Plan, endorsed by Foreign Minister Gromyko in December 1957, already called for a nuclear free zone in central Europe. Lippmann interviewed Khrushchev in October 1958 and found him in "a cocoon of pre-1941 fears" – with US policy pushing Germany against the East, and with Adenauer as Paul Hindenburg, the aging President of the Weimar Republic who elevated

⁴ Eg, Gaddis (1982, 1997, 2005), Morgenthau (1969, 1970), and Brands (2022) do not mention the 1963 settlement.

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Hitler to power in 1933 (Zubok, 1993, 8).⁵ But NATO policy fell into disarray in the middle 1950s, and afterwards created gridlock against advancing negotiations. US President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961) wanted to spend less on conventional defenses, and intended for NATO to rely more directly on nuclear weapons. This New Look doctrine, outlined in a JCS report dated August 8, 1953, called for “redeployment” of US forces back to the continental US. It gave impetus to North Atlantic Military Committee Decision 48 (MC-48), in November 1954, which called for early first-strike nuclear response to Soviet provocation (Trachtenberg, 1999, 158-176).

Eisenhower was likely haunted by the human implications of official strategy (Thomas, 2012), and quietly wanted an exit. In July 1955, he and Secretary of State Dulles indicated during an NSC meeting their objective of “getting out of Europe” (Trachtenberg, 1999, 145). By 1957 and 1958, Eisenhower wanted to leave nuclear decisions to NATO’s west European allies, including West Germany (Trachtenberg, 1999, 210, 262); and the US administration quietly but directly supported France’s development efforts (Trachtenberg, 1999, 208-209). This was a reversal of the Truman-Acheson policy, under which a strong American SACEUR would anchor the US commitment to Europe. Indeed, Eisenhower’s intention to disengage from Europe raised security fears for the Soviets, and did much to trigger their ultimatums over Berlin (see also Mearsheimer, 2014, 51). The US State Department stayed closer to a Containment script, hence wanted to keep US forces in Europe at capacity. State also wanted multilateral arrangements to control nuclear weapons, and floated MLF schemes reminiscent of Acheson’s several years earlier. It was cool to British and French demands for national control, as such demands might also require empowering the Germans. As the Berlin crisis continued, NATO allies lacked plausible answers about how to reconcile Soviet demands regarding control over Germany, Western national demands and US commitments in Europe. Moving past the crisis required addressing, or in some cases revamping, negotiating positions of different countries, as well as different domestic arguments (especially in the US) regarding national defense and the role of NATO.

By 1959-1960, Eisenhower had cooled on national nuclear control, and his preference moved instead back toward MLF arrangements (Trachtenberg, 1999, 214-215). Correlated with this vision, USAF General Lauris Norstad, SACEUR, wanted NATO to operate multilaterally, and independently of direct US political control. In line with nuclear strategy, NATO military officials were prepared to respond to pressure in accord with military planning documents in place, not allowing Soviet sequences (or US political directives) to interfere in the escalatory process (Trachtenberg, 1999, 289-290, 301-302). This situation was indicative of civil-military tensions in US at the time.

⁵ Zubok cites interview notes in the Walter Lippman Papers; Series 7, Box 239, F 27.

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German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963), and head of center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to 1966, was committed to rebuilding Germany after WW2 as a West-integrated power. His role was essential in bringing West Germany into NATO, and in resisting any Soviet blandishments toward unification through neutrality. As Eisenhower put it in July 1953, “our whole political program in Europe [is based on] Adenauer’s continuation in power” (Trachtenberg, 1999, 132; Gaddis, 2007, 134). Adenauer was always cool to talk of re-unification, in part because of skepticism about East German voters as left-leaning, also because he saw them as less inclined politically and even culturally to side with the West. But by 1956, he actively wanted Germans to have an independent nuclear force, and by 1961 he saw this demand as not negotiable (Trachtenberg, 1999, 232-238, 280, 330). Aware of potential opposition among allies, and concern about stirring old ghosts, Adenauer usually offered his views outside of public settings (Trachtenberg, 1999).⁶ He vocally objected to US-Soviet negotiations over-the-heads of Europeans, hence opposed US-led détente initiatives.

French President Charles DeGaulle (1958-1969) continued earlier French demands for independent national control of nuclear weapons. More broadly, he wanted to expand France’s and Western Europe’s presence in a world dominated by two superpowers, a domination he thought against nature, and certainly against his vision of France in the world. DeGaulle did not want Germans to have nuclear weapons, but was even more dismayed by possible neutralization of Germany, which might pull it away from the West. As the Berlin Crisis evolved, France made itself the public defender of West German rights and eventual reunification. DeGaulle intended that a French-German combination would undermine superpower dominance, reinforce Germany’s ties to the West, and raise France’s power profile.

Acheson, who resurfaced in a quasi-official role as advisor to the Kennedy Administration during 1961 and 1962, usually advanced a view common among many in the European section of the State Department. He had advocated ongoing conventional US military presence in Europe through the Eisenhower years, with a US control over nuclear weapons, perhaps via an MLF arrangement –to avoid sharing with West Germans, which he thought a non-starter (Trachtenberg, 1999, 284, 304-305, 309, 311, 356). Acheson argued that US and other Western powers could offer nothing on Germany that Soviets would accept, hence – in line with Containment axioms -- he opposed East-West negotiations (Schlesinger, 1965, 380; Kissinger, 1994, 588; Brinkley, 1992, 100, 140, 147). Subsequent to policy arguments over the French loss in Dienbienphu and at Geneva in 1954, he doubted the usefulness of nuclear weapons, hence he wanted to

⁶ online Appendix 6, “The US Assessment of German Nuclear Aspirations.” [Retrieved from]. Trachtenberg cites Schwarz (1986).

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respond with non-nuclear force to Khrushchev's challenges over Berlin (Brinkley, 1992, 96-98).

British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1957-1963), in opposition to Eisenhower and other American officials, much preferred to avoid steps that might make military action over Berlin more likely. He and other British officials were aghast following a hard-line briefing from Acheson in April 1961 (Brinkley, 1992, 125). But Macmillan moderated opposition in order to maintain a common front with US positions (Trachtenberg, 1999, 266-267). Like France, Britain preferred national control over nuclear weapons, not MLF. Indeed, US efforts to promote multilateral control over nuclear forces – in line with Acheson's concept and with Eisenhower's later vision -- had a corrosive effect within the NATO alliance. Ongoing negotiations following the initial US agreement in 1957 to sell the Skybolt missile to the UK became a microcosm of broader strategic tensions.

Goaded by East German leader Walter Ulbricht, who faced a rising outflow of residents to West Berlin – roughly 2.7 million by 1961 (Gaddis, 2007, 114) -- and unwilling to risk military action to change Berlin's legal status, the Soviets in August 1961 erected the Berlin Wall. This move lessened tensions, as it was perceived as an alternative to military action regarding the city's status, although without resolving most underlying security issues. Meanwhile, US President Kennedy already in 1961 offered the outline of a European settlement to include: 1) US forces stay in Europe, and West German forces remain under NATO command; 2) US tightens control over its own nuclear weapons in Europe, de-emphasizing MLF schemes; 3) Britain and France move closer to national control of their nuclear development; 4) West Germany does not get nuclear weapons, and is to be blocked from developing them; 5) *status quo* is maintained in central Europe: there is no change in West Berlin's status or access, and no Soviet peace treaty with East Germany. Kennedy's roving ambassador Averell Harriman had in fact tightened the US position on the last items with the explanation to Khrushchev in March 1961 that "all discussions in Berlin must begin from the start" (Schlesinger, 1965, 348).

The agenda took shape. The first two points would mean moving past Eisenhower's intention to disengage from Europe, and hence required reining in the SACEUR. The third meant moving past the public Skybolt and MLF controversies and in its place offering Britain the more advanced Polaris missiles, and with escape clauses that assured it of greater national control. Doing so would ruffle expectations of the Acheson-aligned group at the State Department, and elsewhere, that the US would maintain a weapons monopoly. The fourth, getting German agreement not to go nuclear, would be more complicated for as long as Adenauer was in command; by April 1962, the US had supplied the more co-operative Foreign Minister Gerhard Schroeder with a "principles" paper, apparently through a separate diplomatic channel. The Americans hoped to get DeGaulle on board, better to isolate Adenauer. Point 5, recognizing the *status quo* in central Europe, came implicitly to include leaving the Wall in

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place. During talks in early months of 1962 and afterward, and via such signaling as stopping harassment of US flights to West Berlin, Khrushchev indicated interest in a proposed settlement (Trachtenberg, 1999, 346).

What happened next on the Soviet side is a puzzle. Author Marc Trachtenberg summarizes in his Preface that we do not know why Khrushchev did not agree to a settlement in 1961 when Kennedy offered diplomatic steps toward securing a non-nuclear Germany (Trachtenberg, 1999, ix-x). Soviet Ambassador to the US Anatoly Dobrynin tells us in his memoirs, 30 years later, that Khrushchev was mistaken in not being receptive to the offer (Dobrynin, 1995, 64). Or as Kissinger later put it, "It is difficult to comprehend why Khrushchev never explored any of the innumerable negotiating options that were offered, debated, and so often hinted at" (Kissinger, 1994, 592). Khrushchev instead raised new demands regarding Berlin, specifically for an end to all Western military forces in the city. Kennedy read it as a test of wills rather than as a serious negotiating position. He told French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville on October 9, 1962, that he expected an imminent showdown with Khrushchev, and that NATO forces should be prepared to move down the Autobahn toward Berlin with one or two hours of notice (Trachtenberg, 1999, 350). The expected showdown did occur a week later, not however in Berlin but with the Cuban missile crisis. Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis suggests that Khrushchev "understood more clearly than Kennedy" during that period that the Soviet Union was losing the Cold War. Strategic "Potemkinism," effort to reassert control over heretofore allies Mao and Tito, pressures on Berlin, megatonnage nuclear tests – all had failed to reverse the trend. Khrushchev wanted another roll of the dice to turn things around (Gaddis, 1997, 261-262).

Kennedy guessed from its onset that the Soviets might use the Cuban crisis as a cover for a move on Berlin; but Khrushchev apparently ruled that out early in the confrontation. According to Dobrynin, indeed, the Soviets never contemplated military confrontation with the US (Dobrynin, 1995, 45). Kennedy decided early that he would have to trade removal of US missiles in Turkey for removal of Soviet missiles in Cuba, but he anticipated both opposition from his advisors and a negative reaction from NATO allies. So he cut advisors and allies out of discussion, and delivered an ultimatum – which included the Turkey trade -- directly to Soviet leadership. The Soviets accepted the trade (with the understanding that they must not publicly link Cuba with Turkey), and were seen to have backed down; power relations were hence reshuffled. The Soviets never again threatened violence over Berlin (Trachtenberg, 1999, 345-355).

Kennedy then sought to reassemble the settlement as initially formulated in 1961. General Norstad was out as SACEUR by July 1962, as nuclear strategy moved from quasi-independent NATO headquarters in Brussel back to Washington's direct control (Trachtenberg, 1999, 301-302). Acheson himself was critical of Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis, as he thought the president too willing to negotiate with Khrushchev

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– rather than put the Soviet Union in a corner, damage its prestige in the world, and perhaps force a national implosion as envisioned by Kennan’s 1947 formulation. (Keep in mind that the Soviet Union did not yet have nuclear weapons at the time of the X-article.) (Brinkley, 1992, 172-174). Following the October crisis, Acheson’s brand of Containment was fading, and his days as a senior advisor in that administration were over; and there was less talk of multilateral decision sharing (Trachtenberg, 1999, 329-356). Kennedy and Macmillan did some public posturing over the sale of Skybolt missiles before reaching the Nassau Agreement in December 1962: Macmillan wanted to show British voters that he could stand up to the US; and Kennedy wanted to demonstrate for the “MLF clique” at the State Department the intensity of British demand for sovereign control of weapons. Quietly, the two leaders had already agreed that the Skybolt transaction would be scrubbed, and Britain instead would get the more advanced Polaris missile, with effective national control. Kennedy’s intent was that Polaris also be offered to France, a step aborted by unauthorized State Department intervention (which asserted the otherwise discarded Acheson-MLF framework) by the beginning of January 1963. DeGaulle may also have seen the Polaris sale as linking Britain too closely to the US, and hence sought a different path to nuclear independence (Jackson, 2018, 591; Trachtenberg, 1999, 368). But, with Soviet concerns in mind, the advanced missile would not be offered to the Germans (Trachtenberg, 1999, 365-368). The last step required reaching out to Germans other than Adenauer.

As Adenauer was unhappy with the turn in US policy on nuclear weapons, and with US-Soviet détente, he turned to a receptive DeGaulle for an all-European combination. The upshot was the Franco-German friendship treaty (Elysee Treaty) in January 1963, with the implication that West Germany would gain access to nuclear technology. Washington was caught off-guard; and the Soviet reaction to the Treaty was furious.⁷ The US ambassador to Germany soon advised German leaders that they would have to choose between France and the US. Before the German Bundestag ratified the Treaty with France, a preamble was added that made clear the priority of German relations with the US (Trachtenberg, 1999, 374-377). And James Reston at the *New York Times* ran a well-sourced column on January 22 – the day the treaty was signed -- that relayed official US displeasure. Adenauer, keeping channels open to the US, pursued last-ditch efforts to revive MLF talks, as a back-door way for Germans to get access to nuclear weapons, to no avail (Jackson, 2018, 594). By October, Adenauer was out as chancellor, and Ludwig Erhard was in. Erhard and Foreign Minister Schroeder, both of the CDU, were willing to cooperate with US and Soviets to keep Germany non-nuclear. These Germans chose close US relations, as French and Soviet alternatives were unattractive or unavailable (Trachtenberg, 1999, 344, 346, 397). US forces would stay on the

⁷ US reaction, Trachtenberg (1999, 371-374). On Soviet reaction, *New York Times* (1963); also, Trachtenberg (1999, 381).

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ground in Germany, a turn of events surprising in 1963 to then-retired Eisenhower (Trachtenberg, 1999, 401). The center-left Social Democrats were mostly amenable, and hoped that improved relations with the Soviets, and de-escalation of Berlin tensions, would over time enhance prospects for German re-unification. When JFK spoke in front of the Berlin Wall in June 1963, the crowd reception was almost rapturous. They apparently took the message that America was reliable as Germany's most important ally, and peace would be preserved. It may also be that Germans were too-much taken with Kennedy's public allure.⁸

In April 1963, Harriman met with Khrushchev, who twice linked the test-ban negotiations with the German question, and then asserted flatly that Berlin was no longer a problem between the superpowers (Trachtenberg, 1999, 387-388). But Kennedy did not want directly to single out Germans for non-proliferation attention, so that part of the plot was wrapped in the soft velvet of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which would apply to all signatories. (It applied most urgently to Germany. Kennedy, for example, turned a nearly blind-eye to Israeli nuclear development during 1961-1963.⁹) Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed in principle on the Treaty in 1961, but it was not signed until August 1963, and ratified by the US Senate in September. The US compelled Germany to sign the Treaty, as a price for German reliance on the US, by a then-weakened Adenauer (Trachtenberg, 1999, 394). Meanwhile, the Soviets understood that any challenge to the German status quo would be likely to stir nationalist sentiment that might bring renewed pressure for nuclear development.¹⁰ The settlement was self-reinforcing. We can take it a step further: the settlement could be reached only because it was implicitly understood that the Soviet Union would never achieve hegemony over Europe.

DeGaulle would not sign the test-ban treaty, despite US offers to help with underground testing or with the sort of data that atmospheric testing might provide. But the outline of the settlement was consistent with French interests: West Germany remained linked to the West, even without nuclear weapons; and the status quo in central Europe would be maintained. Trachtenberg suggests that DeGaulle's decision was driven by resentment, in part because the Kennedy Administration had forced Germany to choose between the US and France a few months earlier (Trachtenberg, 1999, 393). Perhaps it was more strategic than that. Foreclosing of the German option may have been a blow to DeGaulle's "grand national ambition" for France; but he would live to pursue it another way (Jackson, 2018, 594). DeGaulle considered a bipolar world to be temporary and that it "paralyzed and sterilized the universe;"

⁸ Morgenthau (1970, 345), suggests the last explanation. "The Problem of Germany," Sept. 1963.

⁹ Trachtenberg (1999), on-line Appendix 8, "Kennedy and the Israeli Nuclear Program." [Retrieved from]. Trachtenberg cites declassified correspondence between Kennedy and Israeli Prime Ministers Ben Gurion and Eshkol.

¹⁰ Eg, *FRUS* (1996). Kennedy's private letter to Khrushchev, October 16, 1961; p. 40.

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nevertheless, he was bound to support his US ally during tense moments of the Berlin crises. As tensions cooled – coincidentally with progress toward a European settlement – DeGaulle began to downgrade relations with NATO (Jackson, 2018, 673-675). In June 1963, he withdrew French Atlantic and Channel fleets from NATO command; in June 1966, remaining French armed forces were withdrawn from the integrated military command. Days later, recognizing relaxation of European tensions – and the fizzling out of his opening to West Germany three years earlier -- DeGaulle traveled to Moscow to test different diplomatic waters. He wanted détente with the USSR, but led by Europeans (preferably French), rather than arranged by a US-Soviet combination. It was easier for DeGaulle to test the limits of the European settlement for having stood aside while it was constructed.

Aside from some notice for the Test-Ban Treaty, which has usually been understood (incorrectly) as not related to resolving the Berlin Crisis, the settlement was reached with little public fanfare. Indeed, the achievement appears to have been opaque to no less an observer than Hans Morgenthau, who wrote in December 1963 that the Franco-German treaty in January of that year represented a sort of dead end for Kennedy's NATO diplomacy. Morgenthau reported that the Kennedy Administration was "associated with the disintegration of the Atlantic Alliance;" he indicated that Kennedy had offered multilateral force proposals to NATO allies right to his end in November – the Acheson, MLF clique formula, which Morgenthau accurately described as "political evasion" (Morgenthau, 1970)¹¹. In fact, such proposals had been quietly abandoned over the previous two years. Perhaps more puzzling, Kissinger, writing 30 years later, made similarly incomplete comments regarding the Berlin Crisis and the subsequent settlement:

...[N]either side was in a position to substitute diplomacy for power. Despite the mounting tension, the arguments in favor of the status quo always seemed to outweigh the impulse to modify it. On the side of the democracies, an allied consensus proved impossible to achieve; in the communist side, Khrushchev's boasting may have raised the expectations of his colleagues to such an extent that even the major concessions the West was prepared to make seemed inadequate to the Kremlin hard-liners.

...Any concession conceivably acceptable to Khrushchev would weaken the Atlantic Alliance, and any settlement tolerable to the democracies would weaken Khrushchev (Kissinger, 1994, 586-587).

Then Kissinger added:

Through [the Berlin Crisis], the allies preserved their position on all the most essential matters – albeit with many a vacillation. For his part, Khrushchev had achieved no more than to build a wall to keep East Germany's unwilling subjects from bolting the communist utopia (Kissinger, 1994, 591).

To the contrary, Khrushchev and the Soviets achieved their most important requirements: the Germans would be bound by multilateral international

¹¹ to (Morgenthau, 1970) "The Problem of Germany," September 1963; p. 345.

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treaty not to conduct nuclear tests, and hence not to develop nuclear weapons; and West German defense would be subsumed under a NATO structure. It is indicative of Kissinger's account that he nowhere in his discussion of the Berlin crises mentions multi-lateral force schemes or the 1963 Test Ban Treaty. The status quo was maintained regarding Berlin, even without a formal peace treaty. The NATO allies agreed that Britain and France would have access to or develop their own nuclear deterrents; for the US to accept this freedom for close allies was itself a step away from the Containment pattern of MLF arrangements.

One prospect was foreclosed by the settlement: that of a reunified nationalist or neutralist Germany that might become "a loose cannon on the European boat." Such a Germany might have sought Rapallo-like cooperation with Russia, as had occurred during the 1920s (Zubok, 1993, 3); it might also have turned against the eastern neighbor, as it did during both world wars. Morgenthau wrote in mid-1963 of the possibility of "a drastic change in the world balance of power through an Eastern orientation of a united Germany" (Morgenthau, 1970)¹². Russian leaders were mostly disquieted by such a prospect, in the 1960s and later. As Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet leader during 1985-1991, told US Secretary of State James Baker in 1990:

We really don't want to see a replay of Versailles, where the Germans were able to arm themselves... The best way to constrain that process is to see that Germany is contained within European structures. What you have said to me about your approach is very realistic"¹³

The 1963 settlement included ongoing US military deployments in Germany; the neutralist Germany scenario was blocked. Kissinger concludes that "Containment had worked after all" (Kissinger, 1994, 593). In fact, what happened in 1963 was more like the anti-Containment, realist negotiation that Churchill had wanted during the middle and late 1940s, and again as British prime minister in 1952 and 1953. *Once a self-enforcing agreement was in place to prevent Soviet hegemony in Europe, rationale for a Containment framework should have dissolved.* The Soviets felt the ongoing US deployments from 1963 as a form of détente, as they allayed fears regarding a resurgent Germany. Soviet expansion beyond eastern Europe satellites would not happen. And US troop deployments continued on a smaller scale after the Cold War ended, after any rationale for converting the Soviet Union had vanished.

Kissinger notes the role of the Quadripartite Agreement of 1971 (adopted while he was US National Security Advisor) in formalizing the recognition of East Germany, the status of the four powers in Berlin, and in creating "ironclad" access procedures. Kissinger reasonably notes that the Berlin Crisis ended as it did because of "latent Soviet weakness."

¹² to (Morgenthau, 1970) "The Problem of Germany," September 1963; p.345.

¹³ Gorbachev-Baker meeting, February 9, 1990; in Zelikov & Rice, (1995, 184). Also, Trachtenberg (1994, 401-402).

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(Kissinger, 1994, 593). But the Quadripartite Agreement would not have been realized without the prior Berlin settlement of 1963, which reflected the power relations among the US, its NATO allies and the Soviet Union. Going forward, the threat of nuclear brinkmanship faded, and the Cold War became a different, less intense conflict.

3. A different cold war?

Eisenhower, committed early in his term to a NATO strategy that relied on nuclear weapons, including the New Look and MC-48, believed East-West relations in Europe (and Korea in the Far East) to be frozen, with potential hegemony still in doubt. The only place the Soviets could expand was in the developing world. In line with Containment reflexes, Eisenhower shifted his Cold War battlefield to meet that challenge, indeed, to respond almost wherever provoked. From 1954, he popularized the concept of the “falling dominos.” This was a bad idea, which reflected the focus of Truman-era planners on European recovery and defense. In a postwar world of decolonization, adoption of the domino theory frequently made the US the enemy of gathering nationalisms. In an era of East-West confrontation, it might have worked better to look for ways to tap down developing world tensions, to take countries off the global chessboard. And whatever Eisenhower’s reasoning for policy in the developing world, his intended drawback from Europe would destabilize what had been implicit agreement among the US, Germans, and the Soviet Union, and raise the prospect of a nuclear-armed Germany. In a chain reaction, destabilization of the Cold War balance in Europe then contributed to carrying the same conflict, including its threats of nuclear force, into what had been, as far as great power diplomacy, peripheral parts of the world. But the post-Berlin peace of 1963 tamped-down the European standoff, which, had it been better understood, should have implied diminishing need to draw developing world conflict into East-West brinkmanship.

At about the same time the European settlement came together, Kennedy delivered his “peace” speech at American University in June 1963. Where Containment doctrine urged vigilance and fortification for battle, Kennedy at American University urged critical self-examination and international reconciliation. In the months ahead, beyond a nuclear test ban treaty, Kennedy took the first steps toward normalizing relations with Cuba and toward reducing US force levels in Vietnam (Johnson, 2016, 91-93). He and Khrushchev were discussing a state visit to Moscow for the following year. Khrushchev’s son Sergei, noting the end of the Berlin confrontation in 1963, told the *New York Times* in 2001:

...[T]here was much that President Kennedy and my father did not succeed in seeing through to the end. I am convinced that if history had allowed them another six years, they would have brought the cold war to a close before the end of the 1960s. I say this with good reason, because in 1963 my father made an official announcement to a session of the U.S.S.R. Defense Council that he intended to sharply

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reduce Soviet armed forces from 2.5 million men to a half a million and to stop the production of tanks and other offensive weapons. [He then indicates that his father wished to shift resources from military spending to agriculture and housing construction.]

...But fate decreed otherwise, and the window of opportunity, barely cracked open, closed at once. In 1963 President was killed, and a year later, October 1964, my father was removed from power. The cold war continued for another quarter of a century (Khrushchev, 2001; Quoted in Douglass, 2008, 53-54).

This is hypothetical; but it is interesting commentary that Sergei Khrushchev believed his father was removed from his post because he had invested too much in making peace with Kennedy – and because cold warriors were again in charge in the US after Kennedy's assassination in November 1963.

Back in real history, there would never again be another cold war confrontation involving major industrial powers on both sides. The multilateral force concept did reappear during the Johnson years, as German leaders continued to seek some route to access nuclear weapons; but that bottle stayed corked, as officials on both the US and Soviet sides were determined to prevent such Access (Trachtenberg, 2012, 161-162; Dobrynin, 1995, 147-148). (With the French-German combination closed in 1963, DeGaulle also turned more decisively against West German possession of nukes (Jackson, 2018, 676)). Following the Berlin settlement, remaining venues for confrontation shifted to the developing world: the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America.

Kennedy rejected the Containment framework of much of Eisenhower's foreign policy – the preoccupation with communist designs, military pacts, Soviet maneuvers, and anti-neutralism. As he put it in a 1958: "Less and less have we and our allies been concerned with our own capacities, our own positive objectives, and our own ability to reach new goals consonant with our own values and traditions" (Mahoney, 1983, 19).¹⁴ Relations with newly and soon-to-be independent African countries were an emblematic, sometimes under-emphasized, aspect of the Kennedy record. Following his call for Algerian independence in a 1957 speech, he became the "man to meet" for African visitors to Washington. During his presidential run leading into 1960, Kennedy emphasized African issues as a way to attract black voters in the North without putting-off white Democratic voters in the South. In three months of campaigning, he mentioned African issues 479 times (Mahoney, 1983; 30). As a diplomatic strategy, Kennedy coincidentally thought encouraging nationalism in African former colonies to be the best way to counter Soviet inroads or communist enticements (Mahoney, 1983, 108).

The issue of the newly-independent Congo and the break-away Katanga province was boiling as Kennedy took office in January 1961. On January 17, three days before inauguration, the democratically elected leader

¹⁴ Quoted from a US Senate speech, March 25.

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Patrice Lumumba was assassinated with involvement of the CIA; based on testimony to the Church Committee in 1975, Eisenhower himself authorized US participation in meetings on August 18 and 25, 1960 (Newman, 2017, 224ff). Moreover, Eisenhower had become involved in Congolese events through a tacit agreement with NATO member Belgium to go along with his plan for regime change in Cuba (Newman, 2017, 406). Also, Katangan leader Moïse Tshombe – a favorite with Belgian mineral extractors and white regime leaders in southern Africa -- was implicated in the murder in a UN report released late in 1961. Lumumba had been dealing with the Soviets mostly because Belgian, French, British and Eisenhower's US governments had isolated him -- Europeans usually because of commercial interests in Katanga, and both they and the US because of Lumumba's suspected communist sympathies. Harriman, however, had traveled to Africa and reported back to Kennedy during the campaign, in September 1960, that Lumumba was a genuine nationalist, not a communist; he urged further that the US continue to support the UN's role in the Congo, which to that point had been a barrier to Soviet intervention. But Harriman also opined that Lumumba's Soviet dealings and hostility to the UN role would be problematic for US strategy (Newman, 2017, 202-263). Kennedy only learned of Lumumba's death a month after his inauguration, but in the meantime had brushed aside entreaties from other African leaders to act in support of Lumumba's political interests.

Kennedy took a cautious middle road: he would support the UN presence in the Congo, championed by Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, with the intent of preventing Katangan secession. Rather than endorse Lumumbists, Kennedy supported what was perceived as the more moderate Cyrille Adoula, which he intended could be acceptable both to Lumumbists concentrated in the northeast and Katangan secessionists, led by Tshombe, in the southeast. Kennedy continued the Eisenhower administration's dealings with Colonel Joseph Mobutu, who had led the coup (with CIA collaboration (Newman, 2017, 265-266)) to bring down Lumumba in September 1960, and who continued as the key figure in the central government's army. Kennedy's premise, shared by Hammarskjöld, was that without the Katanga province, the Congo would be deprived of resources, lapse into tribal rivalries, and descend into civil war (Mahoney, 1983, 94, 124, 131, 155, 245). Hammarskjöld died in a suspicious plane crash in September 1961; (some evidence, including what were intended as secret communications between them, pointed to culpability for Tshombe and Rhodesian white-regime Prime Minister Roy Welensky (Mahoney, 1983, 103). Kennedy at that point became more active in reasserting a role for the UN in suppressing the breakaway, and obtained US funding to support it; for a moment in late 1962, a tentative coalition of Congolese factions and other African and European governments in a supporting role held together. Katanga was seized by UN forces and Tshombe was forced into exile as the US administration's effort

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appeared to have succeeded (Mahoney, 1983, Ch.5). The UN had been deployed not to maintain collective security among great powers – a task beyond any international body’s capacity – but instead to aid small powers in remaining neutral, and in staying out of great power fights. But by the summer of 1963, the Congo again fell into chaos. Lumumbists challenged and weakened Adoula’s position, and the Western “safety catch,” Mobutu, was activated. Forces under Mobutu’s command, but perhaps not his full control, rampaged in Katanga. Kennedy again, and against odds, pushed a UN funding bill through the US Congress, which was enough to keep UN forces in-theatre; Kennedy’s objective all along was to use the UN “to keep the Cold War out of Africa,” so as not have to deploy US forces (Mahoney, 1983, 225-226).

Kennedy’s Congo policy, measured though it was, faced stiff US counter-currents. Tshombe became a darling of Republican politicians for his anti-communism, was lauded by the John Birch Society and what was left of the China Lobby, and the Luces put him on the cover of *Time*. Former and future GOP presidents and candidates, including Herbert Hoover, Barry Goldwater and Nixon, embraced him (Mahoney, 1983, 135-136). From the Democratic side, Acheson (his Containment reflexes intact) tried to reassure European leaders that US support for UN activity in central Africa should not be mistaken for real US security interests – which, in his mind, nearly always lay in siding with NATO allies. Acheson was in 1968 to begin a frequent and enthusiastic correspondence with the same Welensky on post-colonial governance, race, and other African matters (Brinkley, 1992, 132, 324, 325). Johnson, Kennedy’s vice president and successor, was a “not-so-secret admirer of Tshombe” (Halberstam, 1972, 292). In the face of a provincial rebellion in 1964, Johnson did not even try to extend Congressional funding to keep the UN in place. Instead, turning to the right, he had the US join Belgians in intervening with arms, airplanes and military advisors. In some desperation, white mercenaries from South Africa, Rhodesia and parts of Europe were also deployed. Mobutu, breaking away from what had been Kennedy’s effort to build an enduring center, brought Tshombe back from exile to become prime minister the same year (Mahoney, 1983, 230). The optics of white intervention in central Africa were terrible, and made for a durable political setback to the US. Mobutu went on to become a quintessential corrupt African dictator, who would hold power into the 1990s. Kennedy had sought to provide training for Mobutu’s Congolese army, preferably in coordination with the UN, intended to turn it from a marauding band to a professional military; but the effort never quite got off the ground (Mahoney, 1983, 226-228).¹⁵ An unknowable of Kennedy’s demise is of whether, or how, that African history would have been different had he lived.

¹⁵ Mahoney’s book is also useful for understanding Kennedy’s initiatives elsewhere in Africa, including Ghana, Mozambique, and Angola.

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Back in the Americas, there was much speculation in the press in early April 1961 about an imminent effort to overthrow dictator Fidel Castro in Cuba. Covert action had been approved by Eisenhower at the White House, probably on March 17, 1960, for CIA planning and direction; meeting notes indicated that what was otherwise intended as an invasion by mercenaries and Cuban exiles would if needed be reinforced by US forces (Newman, 2017, 61-65). Kennedy, in a direct break with that expectation, stated on April 12, 1961, that the US would not use military force to overthrow Castro (Kaiser, 2000, 47). The Bay of Pigs invasion took place during April 17-20 – and failed, in large part because Kennedy would not authorize military deployment in the heat of crisis, despite much pressure from the CIA and military to do otherwise. The fiasco, as it came to be known, was followed by two years of efforts to assassinate Castro by one method or another (essentially as extension of CIA-Mafia collaboration begun during the previous administration (Newman, 2017, 331ff, 406). All of the assassination efforts failed, and have stained the Kennedy legacy. The relevance of Bay of Pigs events to the account here is twofold. First, Kennedy tried to step back from Cold War-driven plans left over from Eisenhower (although in Cuba, he did not step back enough.) Second, he never wavered from his commitment not to deploy US troops, despite more than 100 of the CIA's ragtag force being killed on the beach and 1200 surrendering.¹⁶ The pattern would appear again in events in Laos and Vietnam.

Eisenhower's administration also left a legacy of intervention in southeast Asia. On the day before the January 20 inauguration, Eisenhower advised his successor that a fall of Laos to communists would mean "writing off" the whole region, hence that Kennedy should be prepared to intervene militarily to prevent that from happening (Newman, 1992, 9). In September 1956, NSC 5612/1 set US policy against allowing pro-communists into an otherwise neutralist Laotian government. In 1958, the CIA intervened heavily against neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma (already in coalition with the communist Pathet Lao) in a Laotian election, but Souvanna won anyway (Kaiser, 2000, 22). In December 1959, without Eisenhower's authorization, CIA under Director Dulles arranged a *coup d'état* in favor of anti-communist Phoumi Nosavan; the US president was apparently led to believe that coup was directed by other Laotians. A few months later, in August 1960, Souvanna Phouma regained power, this time with Soviet support. In December of the same year, Phoumi regained power, again with CIA help (Newman, 2017, 371-373). Both of these coup interventions were carried out against the advice of US ambassadors to Laos, Smith in 1959, Brown in 1960 (Kaiser, 2000, 24-26). The US military led Kennedy to believe in February and March 1961 that Souvanna's forces were weaker, and Phoumi's stronger, than was the case; more accurate military intelligence had been gathered, but was internally suppressed.

¹⁶ Kennedy Presidential Library.

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Kennedy agreed to troop movements around Laos in March reflecting the inaccurate information; some senior military officials took the message that Kennedy could be manipulated. By late March 1961, with Souvanna aided by North Vietnamese and Soviet forces, pro-American Laotians were in full retreat. The US military wanted a sizeable intervention; Defense Secretary McNamara mentioned the figure 11,000 troops ([Newman, 2017](#), 375-380; [Kaiser, 2000](#), 48).

The collapse of the Bay of Pigs invasion on April 20 had a profound effect on Kennedy, who henceforth became much more skeptical about whatever intelligence he got from the CIA or the military. A couple of weeks later, he told house intellectual Arthur Schlesinger Jr:

“If it hadn’t been for Cuba, we might be about to intervene in Laos.” Waving a sheaf of cables from [Joint Chiefs Chairman] Lemnitzer, he added, “I might have taken this advice seriously” ([Schlesinger, 1965](#), 316).

With that background, intervention advocates were put on the defensive. An important meeting was held on April 27 with the National Security Council to brief Congressional leaders. The military, led by Admiral Burke (standing in for Lemnitzer), made a case for intervention, which included the expectation that a war with China would likely follow - - and lead to the use of nuclear weapons. Congressional leaders, including Senators Mansfield, Dirksen, Humphrey, Fulbright, Russell, Saltonstall and others, and House Speaker Rayburn, were underwhelmed, and unanimously rejected Burke’s case ([Kaiser, 2000](#), 48-49). Kennedy advisor Rostow called the meeting the worst he knew of during the Kennedy administration ([Schlesinger, 1965](#), 315). Newman writes that the meeting was the beginning of a series of events that “opened a breach” between the president and the Chiefs ([Newman, 1992](#), 18). Kennedy decided against intervention, if he had not previously. Year-long negotiations began the following month, attended by 14 countries, which led to the Geneva Accords of July 1962. The Accords established a three-part government of pro-communist, pro-American and neutralist factions; it was mostly honored in the breach in the years ahead.

A few items from the Laotian story merit highlight. First, while Eisenhower was prepared to act unilaterally in Laos, Kennedy from the outset wanted to coordinate with Britain, DeGaulle’s France, Nehru’s India and others ([Newman, 1992](#), 9; [Kaiser, 2000](#), 42-45). Second, US advocates of intervention showed little interest throughout in what Laotians thought, or specifically in whether they were prepared to fight under Phoumi Nosavan against the Pathet Lao; for interventionists, it was all about the global military balance ([Kaiser, 2000](#), 40, 49-50). Third, shocking to those examining the period decades later, was the readiness of some intervention advocates, led by the Joint Chiefs and joined by McNamara, to use nuclear weapons over the fate of a small, landlocked country in southeast Asia. In fact, that readiness reflected US military doctrine during the Eisenhower administration, including NSC 5809 (April 1958) and NSC 6012 (July 1960)

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(Kaiser, 2000, 17-19). Take this as emblematic of the then-prevailing Containment premise that the US must treat every confrontation in the world as potentially decisive for the East-West standoff. Fourth, in an anticipation of things to come -- including a post-Kennedy policy shift on Vietnam -- only Vice President Johnson, among April 27 civilian attendees, spoke out to support the military's case for intervention (Kaiser, 2000, 49-50; Newman, 1992, 16-18).

Historian David Kaiser shares a memorandum by Robert Komer (better known for his later role as pacification advisor in Vietnam) to National Security Advisor MacGeorge Bundy in February 1964 that pointed to the strategic issue of support for neutralism. Komer raised an alarm about the deterioration of US relations with neutrals, including Indonesia, Egypt, and India, noting that the Johnson Administration was apparently "reversing the Kennedy line." He wrote:

A hard line [against neutrals] now may increase the chances that -- in addition to Vietnam, Cuba, Cyprus, Panama and other current trials -- will be added come summer Indonesia/Malaysia, Arab/Israeli, India/Pak crises which may be even more unmanageable.

Kaiser noted that within a few years the three crises had mutated into civil wars. He adds that in 1964 the US refused a conference intended to reaffirm Cambodia's status as a neutral. He infers that Johnson himself took little interest in the matter at the time -- the decision reflected the bureaucracy falling back on "its own instincts" (Kaiser, 2000, 314-315). Perhaps bureaucratic instincts included the Containment reflex that nationalism and neutralism somehow aided the Soviets? As Morgenthau summarized: "After [Kennedy's] brief and inconsequential interlude, the routines of the 1950s were continued with renewed vigor" (Morgenthau, 1969, 84).¹⁷

Kissinger supported the logic of the Vietnam engagement as early as 1955; he agreed a decade later that General Suharto should be supported against Indonesian communists. Kennedy sought to collaborate with DeGaulle and Nehru on a neutralist strategy in Indochina almost from the beginning of his term in 1961 (Kaiser, 2000, 44); Kissinger, in contrast, scarcely acknowledged neutrality-intentioned initiatives. Kissinger wrote 30 years later, approving Eisenhower's advice to Kennedy on Laos, that he would have preferred to intervene militarily there in 1961 or 1962 -- with no mention of previous US interventions in that country, and without discussing arguments then advanced against a military role (Kissinger, 1994, 647).¹⁸ Kissinger and Nixon a decade later were ill-disposed toward Indira Gandhi, then the prime minister of India, the world's leading neutralist state. Kissinger's policies were reactive to communist or hostile provocations in the way anticipated in earlier Containment axioms. His strategic approach to Vietnam as national security advisor in 1969 departed little from what it had been during the Johnson administration following

¹⁷ Morgenthau again misses what would be the lasting success of the 1963 settlement.

¹⁸ Kissinger's (1979) discussion of Laos begins with the 1962 Accords, with no mention of previous US interventions. pp. 448-457.

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the troop commitments in 1965, or even what it had been during the Eisenhower years.

Containment as a *strategy* gave scant attention to nationalism as a force in developing countries. Mearsheimer noted a few years ago:

A brief analysis of how American policymakers thought about interacting with smaller powers during the Cold War shows that they not only failed to appreciate how nationalism limits Washington's ability to intervene in other states, but also did not understand how that ism works to America's advantage. If the United States had to run the Cold War all over again, or had to engage in a similar security competition in the future, it would make good sense to pursue containment in a markedly different way (Mearsheimer, 2017, 223-224; also Rosato & Schuessler, 2011).

Kennedy embraced neutrality as a diplomatic solution, thereby allowing nationalisms to bloom without US opposition, and as a way to take emerging countries off the cold war battlefield. His Administration reversed the Eisenhower-Belgian policy of allowing the Congo to break up, and instead supported the UN in holding the new country together. Kennedy at the end of his term wanted to deal with Castro in Cuba if the latter would dissociate from Soviet subversion efforts in the western hemisphere (Mahoney, 1999, 287; Schlesinger, 1965, 999-1000). Laos faded to the left for years following the 1962 Geneva Accords, although this narrative should recognize that Eisenhower-era interventions to make that country an ally against Hanoi likely backfired. Neutrality between the West and the Communist-bloc did not provide immunity against civil wars, or against communist take-over through internal factions or even external invasion. Sukarno was a card-carrying neutral, but always dealt with the Indonesia communist party; his turn to them for support in 1964 led in phases to his removal from power – but the turn was in part a response to the post-Kennedy shift from the US against neutralism (Jones, 1971, Ch.10). The context for most of these cases was that the US had no pressing national security interest in bringing such geopolitically peripheral countries to the anti-Communist ledger.

In a realist framework, it would matter that no other power become a hegemon in its region – as the US was in the western hemisphere -- but the US might better have elsewhere adopted an off-shore posture of intervening only where such imbalance was threatened (Mearsheimer, 2014, especially Ch.2.). The purpose of NATO was to prevent a European power from achieving regional hegemony; toward that end, the US engaged directly. Given the importance of oil to the world economy, the US had an interest in preventing any country – perhaps the Soviet Union or Iran – from gaining hegemony over the Persian Gulf; indeed, this became the Carter Doctrine. Similarly, the US would have reason to prevent an Asian power from acquiring hegemony in the Far East – although that should not have been a major concern during the 1960s or 1970s (See Morgenthau, 1970, "The Far East", 1968; 396-397). Essential geopolitical dynamics were conflated with concern about communism, which was

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perceived as automatically advancing Soviet – and later, Chinese – power interests. Indeed, such reasoning was built into early Cold War national security documents, and it was implicit in Containment axioms. Those premises often set an unfortunate presumption against neutralist policy choices. Foster Dulles said in 1956 that a policy of neutralism was “indifferent to the fate of others... immoral and shortsighted (Kaiser, 2000, 20). Dulles’ sweeping language went beyond US policy; in fact, the Eisenhower administration often dealt constructively with such “Bandung generation” neutrals as India and Nasser’s Egypt (Brands, 1989, 4-5).¹⁹ But a wave of post-colonial new countries triggered Eisenhower-era anti-communist reflexes, in Africa and especially in southeast Asia. Morgenthau credited Kennedy in retrospect with having moved beyond such a mindset, noting:

...the intellectual recognition on the part of the Kennedy administration that Communism could no longer be defined simply, as it could in 1950, as the “spearhead of Russian imperialism.” Thus the crusading spirit gave way to a sober differentiating assessment of the bearing of the newly emerged, different types of Communism on the American national interest (Morgenthau, 1969, 18).

Here is a picture, a blurry negative, of what a different Cold War strategy – one using nationalism to US advantage -- might have been, especially after the 1963 European settlement.

4. A different course in Vietnam?

There is a direct policy line from containment of the Soviet Union to the US commitment in Vietnam, initially in support of the French recolonization effort during 1950-1954, then as a US-supported anti-communist effort from the middle-1950s into the 1970s. Kissinger several times links early US commitments to supporting French forces in Vietnam during 1950-1954, and subsequent US intervention, to the domino theory (advanced in NSC documents 64 and 68, both from 1950). The requirement to prop up potentially falling dominoes was a variation on Wilsonian tenets, which, as Kissinger put it, “permitted no distinction to be made among monsters to be slain” (Kissinger, 1994, 621ff; Goldstein, 2008).²⁰ Such tenets dictated confrontation over principles – international law, self-determination, democratic governance, and collective security – rather than over national interests.

It became Eisenhower’s policy that the US must resist Communist expansion wherever it appeared. NSC 5429/5 of December 1954 committed the US to defend the SEATO (southeast Asia) area without help from allies, if necessary. NSC 5612/1 of August 1956 provided a framework for intervention, again independently of treaty requirements (Kaiser, 2000, 11ff). In his writings, Kissinger often tries to link Kennedy’s policy choices

¹⁹ on Dulles’ statement; throughout on India and Egypt.

²⁰ Kissinger (1994), pp. 621ff. Goldstein (2008) summarizes the view linking US commitment in Vietnam to seldom-questioned policy of containment over two decades; p. 240.

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to a Containment framework. He notes the universalist language of Kennedy's Inaugural Address; and he surfaces a statement by then-Senator Kennedy in 1956 in support of US policy in Vietnam as the "keystone of the arch" of security in Southeast Asia (Kissinger 1994, 639). (Kissinger does not mention differently-directed speeches Senator Kennedy made on Indochina, Algerian independence, Eisenhower foreign policy, black Africa, or later as president at American University.) He says Kennedy's comments at a press conference on March 23, 1961, were consistent with Eisenhower's advice a couple of months earlier to intervene in Laos on behalf of Phoumi Nosovan; in fact, during the same press conference, Kennedy had shifted emphasis to seeking a neutralist solution, with as small a US military footprint as possible. Indeed, as early as a press conference on January 25, five days after inauguration and six days after Eisenhower's counsel of vigilance, Kennedy had said he wanted Laos to be independent of control from either side in the Cold War (Kissinger, 1994, 646; Kaiser, 2000, 38; Newman, 1992, 9, 14). Kissinger says, again inaccurately – see below -- that "more [US] troops were in the pipeline" for Vietnam when Kennedy was assassinated (Kissinger, 1994, 653). He then argues that it would have been difficult for incoming President Johnson to reverse the policy of a popular assassinated president, especially given that almost all members of that president's administration supported the war policy.

Kissinger notes that Eisenhower's anti-communism was to some extent softened by his traditional American anti-colonialism, and he calls the decision to avoid intervention on the French exit in 1954 "wise." (Kissinger, 1994, 636). In fact, the sweeping generalities of Containment often contrasted with policies actually pursued by Truman and Acheson, and again by Eisenhower and Dulles, as both administrations trimmed pronouncements down to some version of what they thought compatible with the national interest (Morgenthau, 1969, 17-18).²¹ But whatever their private reasoning, Truman and Acheson publicly justified the Korean intervention in 1950 according to moral and legal generalities that easily blended with Containment logic. Consequently, the Cold War battlefield was expanded, which helped to bring China into the war, so to protect what communist leaders feared might be a US incursion against their territory, and against their revolution (Kissinger, 1994, 478-179).

Some of Kissinger's defenders point to private situations in which he challenged the case for escalation in Vietnam (Gewen, 2020, 249; Ferguson, 2015, 583-584). In fact, Kissinger acknowledges in the first volume of his memoirs that he was part of the "silent majority" in support of the decision to commit combat forces in Vietnam in 1965. He notes a page or so later that no one on the US side at the time had any idea how to win or how to conclude such a war (Kissinger, 1979, 231-232). (Wouldn't that be reason enough to withhold support?) Kissinger notes that Churchill rejected

²¹ see Brands (1989) on dealing with established neutrals.

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Eisenhower's effort to win him over to a more supportive position on Vietnam in 1954 (Kissinger, 1994, 632). Lippmann, the other realist Kissinger likes to cite, was consistently and publicly critical of US commitments in Vietnam. In late 1963, Lippmann – along with Senators Mansfield and Russell – endorsed DeGaulle's proposal to neutralize all of Southeast Asia, the better to save the area from Chinese domination; the advice was presented to the newly acceded Johnson, who rejected it (Logevall, 1999, 106). A year later, Lippmann met again with DeGaulle, and brought a similar message back to the White House – with the same result (Logevall, 1999, 280). Kissinger notes in *Diplomacy* that a “geopolitical approach” to Vietnam would have distinguished between what was significant in terms of national interest and what was peripheral (Kissinger, 1994, 621). But I can find only one sentence in Kissinger's memoirs on the topic of South Vietnam's negotiations with North Vietnam in 1963 (Kissinger, 1979, 231) and similarly one sentence in *Diplomacy* on DeGaulle's initiatives during 1963-1966 (Kissinger, 1994, 666). Rather than grapple with Lippmann's or DeGaulle's arguments, Kissinger preferred to define the debate as between idealists who “thought we could bring democracy to Southeast Asia” and moralists who thought the US role reflected some “moral rot at the core of the American system” (Kissinger, 1994, 666). He notes the diplomatic and bureaucratic pull of containment and domino logic toward US commitment in Vietnam, including such overwrought themes as preventing “the collapse of non-communist Asia” and “Japan's accommodation to communism.” Apparently taking such themes as plausible, he describes them as “too geopolitical and power-oriented” for Americans, who are inclined to “Wilsonian idealism” (Kissinger, 1994, 658). Kissinger then notes less cogent objections from Henry Wallace-style moralists. In this vein, he cites Senator William Fulbright's legal and moral reservations about intervention in 1961, while tut-tutting that a more cogent diplomatist – “a Richelieu, Palmerston, or Bismarck” -- would ask about the national interest (Kissinger, 1994, 650). Kissinger's framing of the Vietnam debate allows him to emerge, misleadingly, as a savvy advisor guiding his country through corridors filled with extremists or naifs on both sides.

Many from the Kennedy Administration did endorse the military buildup in 1965, as Kissinger noted, but there were exceptions. Kennedy-appointed State Department officials Bowles and Ball and Ambassador-at-Large Harriman opposed the buildup (Parker, 2005, 366). Kennedy National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy was open in 1964 to neutralization of the region as a possible solution (Kaiser, 2000, 295). Kennedy-linked intellectuals Schlesinger and John Kenneth Galbraith were resolute opponents of the Vietnam commitment from the beginning. More to the point, based in part on John Newman's research, we know that Kennedy was in the process of ending the US commitment to Vietnam before his assassination in November 1963. National Security Action Memo 263, issued without public announcement on October 11, directed

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withdrawal of 1,000 soldiers from the Vietnam theatre by the end of the year (Newman, 1992, 407-411). Subsequent to Newman's 1992 study, additional relevant documents were declassified. We have General Maxwell Taylor's memorandum of October 4, 1963, written under Kennedy's direction: "All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN forces for the withdrawal of all US special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965" (Galbraith, 2003).²²

Some, notably Noam Chomsky, have argued that any withdrawal plans by Kennedy were contingent on US military victory; inasmuch as the US was nowhere close to winning at the time, Chomsky says, such plans were empty of content. He adds that that Newman "never suggests" that Kennedy had reason to believe optimistic reports on battlefield progress were inaccurate (Galbraith, 2003; Galbraith quotes Chomsky, 1999). Chomsky is wrong. Newman argues that Kennedy well knew of deliberately misleading military assertions of progress by March 1963, if not earlier. By that time, Newman concludes, Kennedy resolved to get out *even if the war was lost* (Newman, 1992, 320-321. Italics added). In tune with the "deception" in Newman's subtitle, Kennedy reasoned in early October:

...The irony of the elaborate deception story [from some in the US military], begun in early 1962, was this: it was originally designed to forestall Kennedy from a precipitous withdrawal, but he would now use it – judo style – to justify just that. The original architects of the deception had feared a collapse on the battlefield would bring about a U.S. pullout, but they had been careful to paint a picture of cautious "success" to prevent a claim of victory and a bring-the-boys-home routine to justify increased U.S. military participation in the war. Kennedy's plan was indeed more imaginative and brilliant than [US Embassy Chief of Mission] Mecklin first realized – and duplicitous. He was using the [September 1963] McNamara-Taylor trip to hold the fiction of success in place while he engineered a withdrawal (Newman, 1992, 410).

At about the same time, the State Department Request for Evidence 90 (October 22, 1963) summarized findings with this Abstract:

Statistics on the insurgency in South Vietnam, although neither thoroughly trustworthy nor entirely satisfactory as criteria, indicate an unfavorable shift in the military balance. Since July 1963, the trend in Viet Cong casualties, weapons losses, and defections has been downward while the number of Viet Cong armed attacks and other incidents has been upward. Comparison with earlier periods suggests that the military position of the government of Vietnam may have been set back to the point it occupied six months to a year ago. These trends coincide in time with the sharp deterioration of the political situation. At the same time, even without the Buddhist issue and the attending government crisis, it is possible that the Diem regime would have been unable to maintain the favorable trends of previous periods in the face of the accelerated Viet Cong effort (FRUS, 1963; Newman, 1992, 454).

²² Also, Jones (2003), on Taylor's memorandum; p.383.

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On the morning of November 22, Kennedy's last day, he commented publicly in Fort Worth, "Without the United States, South Vietnam would collapse overnight" (Newman, 1992, 427). Also, the Diem assassinations of Nov 1 – which some have argued committed to US to remain in-theatre (Ferguson, 2015, 590-592) -- did not change the quiet momentum toward withdrawal. In a November 16 press conference, Kennedy indicated that he wished to permit "democratic forces within the country to operate," a formulation only a step away from the neutrality language used the year previously in Laos. Two days later, the troop withdrawal was announced publicly. Within a day or two of Kennedy's funeral however, troop withdrawal orders were effectively canceled, a decision directed by Joint Chiefs Chairman General Taylor – but no doubt with concurrence of Kennedy's successor (Newman, 1992, 433-434).

The planning baseline for Vietnam during the Kennedy years was rejection in November 1961 of advice to introduce ground troops, when Defense Secretary McNamara requested 205,000 in a secret memorandum (FRUS, 1988). Kennedy had taken what were understood to be political losses over Cuba and Laos earlier that year, and he faced nearly unanimous demands from military and national security leaders to make a large commitment in Vietnam. The decision instead to send 16,000 advisors was an attempt to buy time, in the context of electoral politics. The essential choice was not "kicked down the road," it was made: there would be no US ground troops in Vietnam under the Kennedy administration. Deceptions and counter-deceptions, at the highest levels of the US government, were made to break or to implement that choice. Kennedy made a decision against Containment as it had been practiced, in favor of neutralism and nationalism. It has obvious echoes with choices made at about the same time on the Congo, Cuba and in Laos – which offers some of the best corroborative evidence on where JFK's Vietnam policy was headed. And, as was true of the other choices, Kennedy's directions on Vietnam scarcely survived his death.

There is much irony in Chomsky and Kissinger both sidestepping evidence that Kennedy was taking US forces out of Vietnam; both have been committed to almost opposite Cold War narratives that such evidence contradicts. Chomsky's hard left critique holds that US policy prizes capital over people, so he rejects evidence that any US leader – especially a popular one – could have embraced nationalism to avert war. And inclusion of such evidence undermines Kissinger's account of US options in Indochina as narrow and limited by prior commitments during most of the 1960s. Kissinger (and Nixon) did not acknowledge, even in 1968 and 1969, what Morgenthau and others had by then emphasized for the better part of a decade: by one route or another, Communists were going to rule in South Vietnam.

Evidence of the step away from Containment policies in Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia suggests a weakness – more than a time lag -- in Kissinger's geopolitical analysis, especially regarding worldwide

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commitments. Morgenthau wrote of the Truman Doctrine (almost co-sourced with Containment), for publication in 1969:

...[T]he Truman Doctrine transformed a concrete interest of the United States in a geographically defined part of the world [Greece and Turkey] into a moral principle of world-wide validity, to be applied regardless of the limits of American interests and or American power (Morgenthau, 1969, 17).

Even at the point of maximum concern about Soviet intentions – during the 1950s and early 1960s – Morgenthau (in common with Lippmann and Churchill) drew limits on the scope of US interests and the extent of its plausible power. Morgenthau also indicated that fighting a war like the one in Vietnam that inevitably brought major damage to civilian populations would undermine the international prestige, and the domestic cohesion, of the country fighting it (Morgenthau, 1969, 137-138). In contrast, Kissinger during the same years had a Containment-driven concern with opposing the Soviet Union at every turn, even in venues of the Soviets choosing. Niall Ferguson's biography describes a meeting Kissinger attended in April 1961 with his patron Nelson Rockefeller:

...[T]here is little doubt that Kissinger did most of the talking. Three clear themes emerge: first the return of limited nuclear war as an option; second, the need to stand up to Soviet encroachments anywhere and everywhere; and third and most important, the need for idealism in American foreign policy.

...[T]he second Tarrytown argument – for treating “Cuba, Laos, South Viet-Nam, Berlin and Iran as testing points of national purpose” – was hardly likely to resonate with the writers of protest songs. Yet the notes make clear that, to Kissinger, losing such places to Communist governments would be a greater evil than fighting back.

Kissinger's third theme of “idealism” had a Wilsonian echo, or a Containment one, that the US must “play the part of the global policeman” (Ferguson, 2015, 471-472).

During the 1960s, DeGaulle was the Western leader who best understood the dynamics of neutralism in Asia. As Lippmann put it in the *Washington Post*, February 11, 1964, “DeGaulle has proposed a line of policy and a mode of thinking which we cannot afford to dismiss lightly” (Logevall, 1999, 106). Regarding Laos, DeGaulle advocated that the US seek a neutral solution, which he encouraged also for all of Indochina, and beyond. He offered several general advantages to accepting neutrality rather than seeking military victory.

1) DeGaulle told Kennedy in 1961, “the worst thing that could happen to the West would be a military defeat” (Kaiser, 2000, 54). And he told Lippmann in December 1964, in an accurate diagnosis, that it would take a million Americans to pacify South Vietnam, and that a lasting military victory could never be achieved (Logevall, 1999, 280).

2) Intervention by one side provokes intervention from the other side. DeGaulle added during the same conversation with Kennedy, “Southeast Asia, and that applies to Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and even Thailand, is

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not a good terrain for the West to fight on. The best thing to do is encourage neutralism in that area, the more so that the Soviets themselves do not have any strong desire to move in. They will, however, tend to follow every time the West moves in" (Kaiser, 2000, 539). The Vietnam historian William Duiker made a similar observation about the "dialectics of escalation" in the region:

The new Soviet leadership [Brezhnev and Kosygin, who acceded to top positions in October 1964] apparently less fearful of the United States and anxious to prevent a closer Vietnamese relationship with Peking, promised to increase military assistance to Hanoi and pledged to support [North Vietnam] if it were attacked by the United States. One source notes that Moscow agreed to support a general offensive in the South if the United States continued to refuse meaningful negotiations (Duiker, 1981, 231).

3) DeGaulle argued in February 1964 that for the US to fight in Southeast Asia would make national leaderships there more dependent on China. Better, he said, to encourage neutrality (and nationalism), which would increase Indochina-Chinese friction (Logevall, 1999, 106). On a related point, the Soviets saw a re-convened Geneva conference to advance neutralism as a way to reassert their influence in the region, perhaps at the expense of China (Logevall, 1999, 191). France formally recognized China in January 1964, and DeGaulle sought ways to profit diplomatically from intra-bloc tensions – most of a decade before the Nixon-Kissinger opening to China. Howard Palfrey Jones, the US ambassador to Indonesia during 1958-1965 observed a few years later:

...I was repeatedly approached by Ambassadors from other bloc countries, who deplored the escalation of the war in Vietnam, urged us to get out, and stressed that we were playing into the hands of the Communist Chinese by forcing North Vietnam into their arms. The Soviet concern at the time seemed clearly to be directed toward keeping Southeast Asia quiet for the all-too-obvious reason that the Chinese had the more advantageous position for exploiting a chaotic situation there (Jones, 1971, 338).

4) DeGaulle also told Kennedy that the US would be able to maintain influence in Indochina countries even when they were neutral. He added that France was able to regain some influence in Indochina – following its 1954 departure – only when it renounced future military action, "which seemed equivalent to Asians to a desire to rule them" (Kaiser, 2000, 54).

Not surprisingly, DeGaulle was unpopular with such Containment-driven US leaders as Lyndon Johnson and Dean Acheson (Brinkley, 1992, 189ff). But DeGaulle's counsel on Vietnam reads very well decades later. Kissinger often showed a diplomatist's respect for DeGaulle as a practitioner of their common craft. But he scarcely gave DeGaulle's views on Vietnam policy, or his Vietnam peace efforts during the Kennedy and Johnson years, more than a stray sentence.

5. Some inferences

Trachtenberg's *Constructed Peace* describes in detail a usually overlooked European settlement patched together during 1961-1963. The peace was based on implicit recognition by stakeholders that the Soviet Union would achieve no hegemonic objective in Europe. Had that outcome not been clear, the Soviets would not have agreed to leave the more productive three-quarters of Germany so openly aligned with the US, Britain and France. But Kennedy and his sometime collaborator Khrushchev were soon removed from the scene. Prominent academic observers, including Morgenthau at the time and Kissinger later, seem not to have understood what happened. DeGaulle, who presumably did understand, for the moment stood aside. Yet the 1963 settlement endured, diplomatic pressures cooled to something closer to normal, and nuclear threats became less frequent and much less strident. It became easier for DeGaulle's France to challenge what had been a rigid East-West division in Europe, and subsequently easier for West Germans to pursue *Ostpolitik*. But the argument here goes a step further: had the construction of a settlement at the end of the Berlin crisis been better understood, the Western side might have pursued different policies over the following quarter-century. The settlement effectively replaced Containment's full-court pressure framework with East-West détente. Looking back over the subsequent decades, the message should have been heeded that reduced East-West tension meant that independence struggles and civil wars on the world's periphery could have stayed on the periphery. With the settlement, in a variation on what Lippmann and Churchill had advocated a decade and a half earlier, western strategy no longer required conversion of the Soviet system. In most cases neither US nor Soviet spheres of influence were being challenged. The Cold War might have faded away. That was evidently what Kennedy intended, and perhaps Khrushchev would have gone along with it.

A recent argument holds that "containment required abandoning a beautiful dream – collective security and global integration – for the ugly reality of rivalry.... Yet it is now seen as one of history's great strategies because its key traits were well suited to protracted struggle" (Brands, 2022, 238). Or as Kissinger wrote later of Kennan's "X" article: "No other document forecast so presciently what would in fact occur [more than four decades later] under Mikhail Gorbachev" (Kissinger, 2011). It is true that collective security through the United Nations was not going to prevent Soviet hegemony in Europe after the Second World War, any more than the League of Nations was able to prevent a German attempt at hegemony after the First. US policy in the years after 1945 also included large-scale assistance to European economic recovery, and a military alliance to block future hegemonic efforts. These usefully separated early Cold War US policy from the isolationist turn during the interwar period. But we are left with a puzzle Ferguson sets up in his study of Kissinger, without quite resolving. Given US wealth, technology, impact of popular culture,

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relatively attractive governance, and abundance of allies, the central question should not be self-congratulatory about how the US won, but almost the opposite: why did the Cold War last so long? (Ferguson, 2015, 23-24).

Containment, as outlined by Kennan, and in part implemented by Acheson, Eisenhower, Kissinger and others, was less a response to protracted conflict than a contributor to it. Containment made sense as policy, if at all, when the outcome of the confrontation over hegemony was in the balance; by 1963, it should have been clear to all that Europe would have no regional hegemon. Despite Kissinger's claim, it was not Kennan's 1947 proposed strategy of avoiding East-West negotiation that led to the implosion of the Soviet Union by 1991. Kennan's suggestion that the Soviet Union would have to be "converted" before European settlement negotiations could begin offers no insight into the 1963 Berlin settlement, which was based on East-West dialogue; its essence was to lock West Germany, without nuclear weapons, into a NATO structure so that it would relax (not heighten) pressure on Soviet interests. And Nixon-Kissinger détente initiatives a decade later sought to link foreign policy issues in different parts of the world, but again not -- by Kissinger's own account -- to "transform" the Soviet system.

As practiced, Containment required subordinating regional and local conflicts to the logic of great power confrontation, or even to a great ideological struggle. That framework made it harder to resolve conflict, not easier. Moving away from the central European flashpoint of the Cold War, Kennedy's sometimes fitful approach to Africa was intended to hasten decolonization, and to invite nationalism and neutralism as the path for their future. He saw this mix, co-incidentally, as the best buffer against Soviet encroachment in Africa. In Indochina, Kennedy's developing strategy was to neutralize the region, to remove it as an item of conflict with either Communist China or the Soviets. Frequent assertions that the US followed a containment policy for 45 years conflate different meanings of the word. Do post-1991 tributes to Containment's success mean to include most of US policy as having contributed to it -- including nuclear brinkmanship, overthrowing elected leaders in different parts of the world, intervention in Vietnam? Or is it a more specific tribute to the narrower axioms from Kennan, Acheson, Nitze, or others during the formative years of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and as carried forward in subsequent decades? If the first, the term is so vague as to explain little. If the second, it is not accurate. What brought the Soviet Union down was a mix of inept central planning, corruption, generally declining economic growth, lack of innovation, and weak oil prices during much of the 1980s. Surely pressure to stay up with US military spending during the Reagan years strained a failing system, but that strain largely reflects the same economic weakness.

The onset of war in Ukraine in 2022 is evidence that the 1963 European settlement should have been updated during the previous two or three decades. The earlier peace was reached after years of nuclear ultimatums,

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and following a US reserve call up of more than 200,000 in July 1961. It was self-reinforcing even through the break-up of the Soviet Union, as it was in all sides' interest to keep it in place. The settlement did not touch the Warsaw Pact; for that moment, the destinies of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania, and Bulgaria were locked into the Soviet sphere. The settlement brought no conversion, no liberation, no rollback. In 1968, the Soviets suppressed an insurrection in Czechoslovakia, comparable to what had happened in Hungary in 1956 or East Germany in 1953. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1990-1991, Russian leaders were "led to believe" by US, German, French and British officials that NATO would not expand eastward ([National Security Archive, 2017](#)). (The Budapest Agreement of 1994, under which Ukraine returned nuclear weapons on its territory to Russia, is sometimes cited as evidence of US security commitment to the Ukraine. But anyone in the West who took that agreement as consent for Ukraine to join a potentially hostile military coalition, reversing what had been implicit in discussions three years earlier, was surely mistaken.) Through negotiations beginning in 1996 with the new member states – while excluding Russia -- all of these formerly Warsaw Pact countries were nevertheless absorbed into NATO. By Western design, Russia was left on the periphery of a post-Cold War Europe ([Sarotte, 2014](#)). Even the three Baltic states, formerly part of the Soviet Union (via the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact), have joined NATO. More recently, in the 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration, former Soviet Republics Ukraine and Georgia were advised they would become NATO members in the future. In November 2021, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart Dymetro Kuleba signed the US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, which refers back to the Bucharest Declaration as authority. Russian President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov immediately denounced the new framework, and demanded that NATO remove military assets it has deployed in former Warsaw Pact countries since 1997 ([Mearsheimer, 2022](#)).

NATO expansion eastward was a byproduct of the unipolar American moment, emblematic of the spirit of those years according to which the rules of great power politics no longer applied. But as Chinese wealth and power grew rapidly in the early 21st century, and Russia recovered somewhat from its historic weakness during the 1990s, multipolarity returned ([Mearsheimer, 2019](#)). The 1963 European settlement faded further from diplomatic memory. It should have been anticipated that a decision to expand NATO would not be self-enforcing, as it hardly served Russians' security interest – perhaps raising a military threat, and certainly by undergirding an alternative political model immediately on Russia's border. It violated the logic of the post-Berlin peace. NATO and Secretary Blinken have defended their action on legal and moral grounds (both of which are strong), and they – indeed joined by non-NATO countries -- have

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been surprisingly assertive and unified in supporting such action.²³ But given current Russian leadership, NATO's messaging led directly to war in Ukraine. More than any time since the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, a scenario leading to armed conflict between one or more great powers is plausible, and the threat of nuclear war again influences policy choices (Ignatius, 2022).²⁴ From a cold *realpolitik* view, Russia in the 21st century does not present a threat to achieve hegemony in Europe, unlike the Soviet Union following the Second World War, or Germany twice during the first half of the 20th century. Whatever its *revanchist* intentions, Russia today is a declining power, without the economic heft, cogent governance, or growing population of the earlier challengers. From a US perspective, and perhaps from that of western Europe's great powers, the hegemonic threat now comes from China in the Far East. Accordingly, the US and western Europe should have focused in the new millennium on Asia and avoided war, or its provocation, in Europe.

In the face of evidence of large-scale Russian war crimes emerging in April 2022, willingness of Ukraine and its western allies to reach a peace agreement, or even limited compromise, has narrowed. Some sort of provisional armistice in the Ukraine is more likely, perhaps following a *de facto* Ukrainian victory. Any updating of the broader 1963 settlement will have to wait, and will depend in part on the role China chooses to play, or not, in the war's aftermath. An overall settlement with China, comparable to the post-Berlin peace with the Soviets, is unlikely: China is in a stronger international position now than the Soviet Union was in the early 1960s. As China seeks regional hegemony in Asia, it will be disinclined to negotiate a settlement with the US, or with any combination of powers, that would hinder such an outcome. It will be in China's interest to keep the US distracted with European disputes; on the other hand, the Ukraine war has energized NATO countries as a more coherent geopolitical force – one that might become a counter-weight to Chinese objectives. Plausibly, the last could provide reason for China to encourage a new Europe-Russia *détente*.

Kaiser observes at the end of his study that the Vietnam War was “essentially” without effect on duration or outcome of the Cold War (Kaiser, 2000, 493). Kissinger has suggested that everything from Soviet support to Cuban activity in Africa, to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, to the collapse of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the same year, were somehow a consequence of the way the US departed Vietnam in 1975 (Kissinger, 1994, 763). That is surely a stretch, and it misses the point. The more important evidence is that such Soviet activity scarcely affected the collapse of the Soviet Union

²³ Another dimension of the Russia-Ukraine war is its role the 21st century's worldwide confrontation between authoritarianism and liberalism. That topic is obviously important, but is not addressed in this paper.

²⁴ Mearsheimer (2014b) noted that the path toward NATO's inclusion of the Ukraine threatened a “major war.” Cohen (2019) commented that US Democrats' efforts to provide military materials to Ukraine were making theirs the “war party.”

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and the end of international bipolarity just over a decade later. With the balance in Europe essentially stable after 1963, hence with the Soviet Union no longer a hegemonic threat, the linkages among events in different parts of the world that Kissinger usually emphasized became less important. The enemy-based, Containment reflex that the Soviet Union had to be countered at every turn became strategically misguided – certainly from the time of the European settlement in 1963, and probably before that. Nothing about national security requirements required that the US become an enemy of nationalism, or even of revolution.

Kissinger's sketches of Containment's early realist critics – Lippmann and Churchill – suggests that he wants to be associated with them. He observes that Kennan himself later reached a view closer to Churchill's, and suggested that the West might have successfully negotiated with the Soviets in 1944 or 1945 (Kissinger, 1994, 512). Kissinger argues that his and Nixon's approach to the Soviet Union was, he says, similar to Churchill's in that their administration did not seek transformation of the opposing power (Kissinger, 1994, 713, 813). But in several ways, his arguments during the 1960s were anything but realist. One of these was Kissinger's ideological, or emotional, objection to revolution in general, and to communism specifically; in a world emerging from generations of colonialism, this tended to make him an emblem of outdated *status quos* – eg, in the Middle East, the western hemisphere, southeast Asia, or at times in Africa. Next, realists from geopolitical island powers, including the US and Britain, should stay out of on-shore fights, unless the regional balance is clearly at stake. As DeGaulle and Kennedy understood, Vietnamese unification (even under a communist auspices) would have added little to China's regional power position, hence war there was a fight to be avoided. A third not-very-realist position was the importance Kissinger assigned to keeping commitments, even where commitments locked the US into policies that were domestically or reputationally damaging.²⁵ It is unlikely that Kissinger would have convinced Richelieu, Palmerston or Bismarck of the wisdom of his approach to Vietnam. Many have the impression that Kissinger was a foreign policy realist; but a portion of his legacy was to give realism a bad name, especially in the US, often by malpractice of it.

Eisenhower's impulse in the mid-1950s was to reduce the US presence in Europe, but without first stabilizing the European framework of US-Soviet confrontation; more than anything else, those plans lit the fuse that led to the Berlin crisis and the threat of nuclear war. Eisenhower then left ill-informed interventions, and the prospect of larger wars, in the Congo, Laos and the Caribbean. After his departure, the West and the Soviet Union constructed a settlement that would remove the prospect of a nuclear Germany, reduce uncertainty over the status of Berlin, and allow the US to step back from trying to control military postures of west European allies. The might-have-been is about whether that peace agreement could have

²⁵ For discussion, see Stoessinger (1976, 216-219); Gaddis (2005, 164-165, 170-171).

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become a platform for neutralization of Southeast Asia, of Cuba, and of portions of Africa. The puzzle is that the 1963 settlement was not better understood after Kennedy and Khrushchev departed – both in real time and in historical accounts.

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