

A decorative graphic at the top of the page features a series of stars in black and teal, and a large black silhouette of a hammer or sword on the right side.

Regime Change Starts at Home?

Practical Lessons of a Reconceptualisation of the Cold War

By Wes Ullrich

'Regime change starts at home'. Often heard among critics of the Bush administration in the run-up to, and after, the war in Iraq had begun; this platitude was not part of the popular lexicon until 2002. As a result, 'regime change' as a term has come to be popularly identified with invasions and overthrow of incumbent leaders and specifically with Iraq. This is a narrow view. 'Regime change' should not simply be thought of as a violent or total change in government, as commonly held, but simply as augmentation. A far more expansive definition of regime change offers a way of conceptualizing US foreign policy towards hostile regimes that can be illuminating. In a departure from the current common idea of regime change, such a definition would include the Cold War. And rather than revisionism merely for the sake of it as is often the case in academia, this redefinition would have numerous contemporaneous lessons.

The US has been engaged in efforts of regime change for well over a century. Most would understand 'regime change'; i.e., a coup or assassination. However, such a definition would omit the effort at regime change that has had undoubtedly the farthest-reaching implications: the Cold War. What is unique about the Cold War is that rather than a short effort to exchange an unfavourable government for a more favourable one, instead it was a concerted, almost half-century effort to change an existing regime.

While much diplomacy can be understood as an effort to modify the actions of other states, the fundamental difference is that the efforts the US made during the Cold War towards the Soviet Union were almost exclusively formulated with this as the underlying aim. After the October Revolution, the US engaged in an effort to overthrow the nascent Bolshevik regime. These efforts ended in the early 1920s and gave way to the creation of a cordon sanitaire, an apt term given the frequency with which Communism came to be referred to as a malignancy. The USSR was finally granted diplomatic recognition in 1933, and the Second World War created a more friendly, albeit not completely trusting, relationship.

The onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s gave rise to a new style of thinking about the USSR. It is seldom remembered that George Kennan, the oft-quoted 'father of containment', also advocated a policy of 'behaviour modification' towards the USSR. Kennan's ideas combined with the actions of the Truman Administration laid the groundwork for US Cold War policies. In combination with the Soviet attainment of nuclear power, and subsequently development of thermonuclear weapons on both sides, this policy of 'behaviour modification' became firmly entrenched. Not only would an attempt to topple the regime in Moscow most likely end in failure, but it could also end in nuclear disaster. It was simply not feasible for the US to attempt to do anything other than try to mould the USSR into a more acceptable rival.

But this did not dissuade US policymakers from attempting this feat without zeal. What made the US effort so quintessentially American was the assumption that not only could the international behaviour of the Soviet Union be changed through US efforts, but that the US could have some affect on the underlying ideologies and assumptions on which the regime was based. Indeed, it would have to, since US conception of the USSR was one of a regime beholden to Marxist doctrine.

The Soviets, while deeply affected by Marxist ideology, had given up hope of revolution in the West by the 1960s, although they continued to pay it lip service. While they intervened in various civil wars throughout the Cold War, they never attempted to fundamentally modify the international outlook of the US. Rather, the focus after the death of Stalin was on varying shades of competition and coexistence.

Perhaps the American democratic tradition of exchanging heads of state every four or eight years (although Congress is extremely stale, with about 90% of senators and a similar proportion of Congressional seats remaining static) has bestowed upon the American body politic an obsession with changing the regimes of others that is intertwined with its historically messianic style of foreign policy.

But of particular interest is rather how much this 'mission' points to the ideology of US foreign policy, and in particular, its messianic element. It is doubtful than any other country would have embarked upon such an effort. What made the US prone to do so was its history of 'otherness'; the long widespread idea that Americans, due to some mythical concept of benevolent betterment, can effect change on another, unwilling, state. US policy towards the Soviet Union was underwritten by this fundamental, although unquantifiable, element.

Why does it matter if American ideology (insofar as there can be *one*) has predisposed the US towards a type regime change that is fundamentally motivated by a desire to 'better' other countries? And specifically, what does such holistic definition of 'regime change', that allows us to classify the whole Cold War as such an effort, give us?

One reason is that it is the same sort of 'father knows best' mentality that continues to get the US in trouble today. It is an all too commonly held belief that US actions are characterized by such a paternalistic tone.

More importantly, it is because it can act as a mirror for US policymakers in which they can examine policy before it is implemented. The successes and failures of the US policy of 'behaviour modification' towards the USSR are myriad and can offer an indication of how such actions used towards the USSR may, or may not be successful in current situations. Indeed, any current applications of 'behaviour modification' do not need to reflect the same conditions or ideologies of the USSR (it would be difficult to find such) but rather the differences between an authoritarian Marxist regime and current areas of concern such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and China can highlight the efficacy that such efforts could have.

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The paramount lesson should be a hybrid of the above. The US should reflect on the way in which its foreign policy is perceived, especially in efforts to change the behaviour of other regimes since these types of actions are prone to amplify any hint of paternalism. But since it is entirely unrealistic that any country would forgo to alter the behaviour of an adversary, the US should review its boldest attempt in this regard. The fact that the Cold War lasted as long as it did allows several lessons to be drawn from it. All different methods of regime change were enacted towards the USSR. Engagement, détente, isolation, enticement and threats were all used at various points in the Cold War, and of course with various results depending on the circumstances. Instead of insisting that the Cold War is history, current policymakers should take advantage of the considerable documentation of US efforts in this regard to draw inferences on how to proceed in specific instances. Academia should also be willing to offer its help in this, rather than remonstrating from the sidelines.

Through reviewing US efforts at regime change through the prism of the Cold War as such a long-term effort, and thereby hopefully improving US efforts at modifying the behaviour of opposing regimes, it may after all prove true that regime change starts at home. ■

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