

A Middle East Final Act?

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April 2009 will mark the 10th anniversary of the entry of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into NATO. The journey of these and other former Warsaw Pact countries to NATO and to the European Union is one of the most inspiring transformations in modern history. There are lessons from these remarkable achievements relevant to the current foreign policy debate in the United States, especially as our national conversation focuses on three crucial issues:

- The political, ideological and practical debate between “Realists” and “Wilsonians” over if and how the United States should promote democracy and pluralism around the world.
- The debate now engaged between Senators McCain and Obama about if, how, and when the United States should negotiate with its adversaries.
- The debate over how best to commit the tools of statecraft to bring peace and security to the Middle East, including an end to the Iranian nuclear threat.

A useful first step to bridging the gap between Realists and Wilsonians, making it politically plausible to confront our adversaries at the negotiating table and to promote peace, prosperity, and stability in the larger Middle East, would be to study the diplomatic effort that culminated in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.

In his book *The Cold War: A New History*, John Lewis Gaddis describes the many reasons nations gathered in Helsinki for the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev wanted the United States and its Western allies to accept the post-war division of Europe. The Kremlin was desperate to discourage further “Prague Springs” and to reinforce the Brezhnev Doctrine. Gaddis notes that Brezhnev was willing to make extraordinary concessions to get this commitment from the West. For example, the Soviets agreed to give advance notice of military maneuvers, to allow signatory states to join or leave alliances, and to recognize “the universal significance of

human rights and fundamental freedoms ... in conformity with the purposes and principles of the charter United Nations and with the universal declaration of human rights.”

The Soviets were nervous about committing to this last condition but, as Gaddis reminds, it had “originated with the Western Europeans and the Canadians, not the Americans, which made it more difficult to oppose. Moreover, the liberties it specified appeared in the largely unimplemented Soviet constitution: that too would have made rejection awkward. So the Politburo agreed, with misgivings, to the inclusion of human rights provisions in the Conference’s ‘Final Act.’” As then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger later put it: “Rarely has the diplomatic process so illuminated the limitations of human foresight.” The path to freedom and to NATO and EU membership for the countries of Eastern Europe began at Helsinki.

Because no one could predict the consequences, liberals and conservatives denounced U.S. President Gerald Ford and Secretary Kissinger for having abandoned the cause of human rights at Helsinki. But the Final Act’s effect inside the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was transformational. Helsinki became for the Soviet empire what Gaddis calls “a legal and moral trap,” harnessing what Max Kampelman has described as the “power of ought.” Brezhnev had, as Gaddis writes, “handed his critics a standard, based on universal principles of justice, rooted in international law and independent of Marxist-Leninist ideology, against which they could evaluate his and other Communist regimes.” The following year saw the creation of “Helsinki groups” in Eastern Europe, including Charter 77. By pursuing strong, purposeful diplomacy, the allies fused Realism and Wilsonianism to support those courageous individuals in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe who sought to undermine tyranny.

Do we have today the strategic diplomatic vision to organize a Middle East Helsinki? The current Iranian leadership wants a Western commitment to its borders, a promise not to change the regime by force and a recognition of Iranian security concerns. What might the Iranians be prepared to concede on the questions of their nuclear weapons program, human rights, or their support for terrorism to

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get these commitments? As much as Brezhnev did in 1975?

Official rhetoric in Iran and many Arab states refer to the protection of human rights and to the UN Charter. Why not demand in a Middle East Final Act that they live up to their rhetoric by allowing insiders and outsiders to judge the distance between promises and policies just as Helsinki allowed the world to judge the former Soviet empire?

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states worry that they will be overpowered by an ascendant Iran. To support a Helsinki-like Final Act in the Middle East, why not have NATO propose joint planning and joint exercises with the GCC? Iran should know that the West is prepared to defend its interests in the area and that NATO, which so successfully deterred a Soviet nuclear threat for decades, has the will and experience to help do so again.

This Helsinki-like conference, which would include Russia, Israel, and Turkey as full participants, could produce a Middle East Final Act with five “baskets:”

- First, a commitment to the security of all states in the region, including Israel, Iraq, and an Iran without nuclear weapons. Like the Soviets in 1975, the Iranians would be required to give commitments about the nature of their future behavior in the region.
- Second, a commitment to the creation and maintenance of a Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace with Israel.
- Third, as in Helsinki, a declaration of the “universal significance of human rights and freedoms ... in conformity with the purposes and principles of the charter of the United Nations and the universal declaration of human rights.”
- Fourth, a joint Western-Middle Eastern commitment to economic and social development in the region. This should include an attempt to engage the states in the area, including Iran, in a discussion of environmental sustainability, alternative energy, and climate change.
- Fifth, the creation of a follow-on organization, like the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to promote the Middle East Final Act’s goals into the future.

The challenges to preparing for and then structuring a Helsinki-like conference for the Middle East are of course legion, and we should take care to reason from the right analogies. Helsinki did not end the Cold War by itself. Western success required a kalei-

doscope of policies, including the maintenance of strong military forces and the will to deploy Pershing-II and GLCMs in the 1980s. A Middle East Helsinki would similarly not solve all of the Middle East’s problems. Policies such as sanctions against Iran, the political and military will to deter aggression and a focus on keeping Israel strong will remain necessary.

But consider how far we have traveled from what was once Eastern Europe. When one encountered dissidents in those early years, they would pull from their pockets worn copies of the Helsinki Final Act, which they kept for inspiration. The dissidents of the 1980s led their countries to NATO in 1999. The West’s vision at Helsinki in 1975—including promises Western leaders were prepared to make to secure human rights commitments from the Soviet Union—fused the various strains of America’s foreign policy heritage into an ultimately successful outcome.

In the epilogue to *The Cold War*, John Lewis Gaddis highlights the escape from (Marxist) determinism that helped end the Cold War. Such an escape from determinism is possible here as well. We should not accept as a permanent fact that people in the Middle East will never live in pluralistic, market-oriented societies that promote the right of individuals to make decisions about their own lives. We must take the risks necessary to test whether the same pluralistic forces that were freed in Eastern Europe by Helsinki can be let loose in the Middle East. We must have faith that peaceful and democratic change can be created by people of the region with the support of the West. If the United States and its allies are prepared to make the same intellectual and political commitment to the Middle East that we made to Eastern Europe at Helsinki in 1975, escape from Middle East determinism and underdevelopment is possible.

Let’s take a chance on a big idea. Iran is pursuing a dangerous nuclear program. President Bush’s June 2002 vision of an Israeli and Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace is still a dream, even after Annapolis and increased U.S. diplomacy. Democratic, economic, and social development lags in the Arab world. Dependence on Middle Eastern oil is not just bad for the West, but retards rather than promotes real development in the region.

Preparing for a Middle East Helsinki conference would take time, energy, focus, and understanding that serious diplomacy is a tool of national security. The current U.S. administration should spend its remaining months doing the preparatory work for such a conference that could be convened in 2009—using the anniversary of NATO’s expansion as inspiration—and then leave the plan front and center for action by the next U.S. president.