

United States foreign policy needs constancy and consensus

By Howard H. Lentner

The approaching mid-point of the Administration's term of office provides an occasion for assessing President Carter's foreign policy. Although one might draw up a balance-sheet of gains and losses, a more productive approach is to apply to discrete issues the general criterion of whether Carter has contributed to a new American foreign-policy consensus that will survive his term of office.

American foreign policy has never been remarkable for its constancy and consistency, but during the Cold War years there was a public consensus that gave support to the general direction, if not the details, of foreign policy. That consensus was shattered by the Vietnam war. As this conflict drew to a close, President Nixon, with the assistance of Henry Kissinger, developed some new directions for American foreign policy, notably *détente* with the Soviet Union and normalization of relations with China; but he failed to achieve a consensus, in large part because his style was one of commanding deference for unilateral and surprise-laden Presidential action.

In reaction against Nixon's style — as well as the substance of super-power collaboration to achieve world order — President Carter has tried to discover new directions. The most apparent of these have been his espousal of human rights, the renewed emphasis on allied collaboration in the economic realm, and opposition to nuclear proliferation. There are, however, a number of signs that indicate that Carter has not yet been able to achieve a foreign-policy consensus. Until it is achieved, United States foreign policy is unlikely to have the constancy that will attract and maintain the support of allies

and enable the United States to exercise effective leadership in the world.

President Carter came to the White House as an outsider. While there was a kind of fresh appeal in this fact, there were also liabilities that have had their effects on foreign policy. In general, it may be said that the inexperience of Carter led to a number of mistakes. The human-rights campaign was initiated with a naiveté that had important repercussions for *détente*, as well as for certain allied relations. The Carter opposition to nuclear proliferation was conducted, in the case of West German reactor sales to Brazil, without real understanding of the issue, and led to tension with two allies.

After nearly two years in office, there is more experience and more sophistication, but the lack of control and clear direction is also evident. Besides, these problems are made more severe by an eroding popularity recorded by public-opinion polls. To try to predict whether it is likely that President Carter will be able to contribute to the development of a new American foreign-policy consensus, it will be useful to examine the obstacles that stand in the way of such a development and the implements that Carter has to work with in that direction.

Formidable obstacle

One of the most formidable obstacles to the achievement of a consensus is the uncertain state of the international system. During the Cold War, when a consensus prevailed, Americans generally had a clear conception of a bipolar structure in the international system that, despite qualifications, was reasonably accurate for many years. With the international system in flux as it is today, however, Americans are uncertain what kind of structure it has. There have been a number of attempts to describe the system, but each has been shown to be flawed.

The pentagonal system of Nixon's state of the world messages has been demonstrated, particularly by Stanley

Nixon failed to achieve consensus

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