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OF LIONS, LAMBS AND OSTRICHES

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HIGHLIGHT: THE CURRENT controversy about President Bush's Middle East peace diplomacy brings to mind an old Soviet story about a foreigner who visits the Moscow Zoo: "And here in this cage," the Communist guide announces, "you see a lion reclining next to a lamb."

THE CURRENT controversy about President Bush's Middle East peace diplomacy brings to mind an old Soviet story about a foreigner who visits the Moscow Zoo: "And here in this cage," the Communist guide announces, "you see a lion reclining next to a lamb."

"That's an astounding accomplishment!" the visitor exclaims. "Actually," the guide confides, "it really isn't that difficult. Every few hours, we just have to put in a new lamb."

The U.S. Administration seems to think this is a good time to urge lions and lambs in the Middle East to recline together. For over two decades, every incoming U.S. administration has reviewed Arab-Israeli diplomatic options, concluded (on the advice of the State Department's Near East Affairs Bureau) that the problem requires urgent, high-level U.S. diplomatic attention, and devised a "plan," invariably implying that Israel's continuing hold on the territories captured in 1967 is a - perhaps the - principal impediment to peace in the region. That these plans invariably fail has never shaken the confidence of their proponents.

The Nixon Administration in 1969 promulgated the so-called Rogers Plan, named after the then secretary of state. It advocated a virtually total withdrawal by Israel from the territories. Every U.S. peace plan since then has been, in essence, a variation on the Rogers theme. The Bush Administration has jumped into the same rut in which our diplomacy has floundered for so many years.

This is symptomatic of a failing that reaches beyond Middle East policy. When it comes to the role of peace diplomacy in international affairs, many of our policy makers learn nothing and forget nothing. Not even the stunning upheavals in Europe's Communist bloc have stimulated a proper reappraisal.

LET US CONSIDER the ongoing political upheaval in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and its implications for the Arab-Israeli conflict. For years, the conventional wisdom held that the key to enhancing our security lay in peace diplomacy aimed at producing arms control agreements. Dissenters from the conventional wisdom - the "hardliners" - argued that arms control would at best make a marginal contribution to security. The key to peace, they said, is the demise of the aggressive totalitarian ideology of our antagonists.

The "hardline" prescription for peace was strong defences combined with pressure on the Soviet bloc in the spheres of human rights and economics. For this they were denounced as unwilling "to give peace a chance."

As day after day, Communist leaders confess their oppressions and aggressions and admit their treaty violations, the "hardliners" in the West have reason to feel vindicated. Recent changes in the Eastern bloc have yielded enormous security benefits for the West, none of them to the credit of arms control or peace diplomacy. None resulted from "restraint" in our defence programmes or our making "concessions for peace."

The Communist governments of Poland and Czechoslovakia were a security threat. But no one in the West views the Solidarity government of Poland or the Havel government in Czechoslovakia as a threat. And this is not because we have peace agreements or arms control agreements with them. It is because of what we know of their leaders' philosophies and popular support. We feel secure regarding these countries not because of any formalities but because they wish us no harm.

At no time in the last 40 years would an arms control or peace agreement with these East European countries have been more easily attained and more likely to have been implemented in good faith than at present. Yet such an agreement, which the conventional wisdom deemed highly significant and urgent just a few months ago, now appears superfluous (or in any event no big deal).

VARIOUS PARTIES have for years urged Israeli governments to adopt the view that the key to Israel's security is concluding peace agreements with its Arab neighbours. This diverted attention from the issue of whether those neighbours actually have peaceful intentions to the issue of what Israel might give them to induce them to join negotiations.

Peace, to be sure, is a many-splendoured thing. But the formalities of agreements are overrated. Moreover, there is danger in confusing the promotion of peace with the promotion of peace treaties.

Recent events in Eastern Europe remind us that it is not the job of the would-be victim of an aggressive ideology to offer concessions for peace. The interests of peace would not have been served if, in negotiations with the Soviets, Nato countries had chased after agreements by making concessions that would have weakened Western defences. We now see clearly that Western armaments have not been the cause of tension and conflict in Europe. They were a reflection of, and proper reaction to, the tension and conflict resulting from Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.

By the same token, the interests of peace in the Middle East would not be served if, in negotiations with its neighbours, Israel made concessions that weakened its defences. Israel's control of the territories is not, in my view, the cause of Arab hostility toward the Jewish State any more than Western troops and arms in Europe were the cause of East-West tensions.

The paeans to democracy sung by the liberated East Europeans should help bring value judgments back into fashion in Western national security circles. They should make it easier to understand that international conflicts are not necessarily the product of mutual distrust or mutual grievances. Making distinctions between aggressors and defenders is not just moral arrogance.

The real enemy of peace is not the military resources of a country defending itself, but the unjust ambitions of the aggressor. These are concepts of great practical significance, even if they sound abstract and platitudinous, because they underlie one's sense of right and moral self-confidence. And this moral component is a critical element of the national security of democratic countries like Israel that must, at high cost, defend themselves for the indefinite future against serious military threats.

IF ANTI-ISRAEL ideology were tossed into history's dustbin, formal Arab-Israeli peace agreements would be both attainable - and unnecessary. But the converse of this proposition has more immediate relevance: If Israel's neighbours still want to see Israel eliminated, then Israeli concessions may produce negotiated agreements, but they will not produce peace.

The essential question is not who should negotiate or where or about what, but the intentions of the relevant

powers. The Egyptian-Israeli negotiations produced a treaty because Sadat succeeded in convincing Israel that the Egyptian government no longer aspired to destroy the Jewish State. He made the case that Egypt wanted to recover Sinai, but would not use the land to launch aggressions against Israel. Egypt, as the most populous and powerful Arab state, was in a position to ensure that no other state could exploit Israel's territorial concession.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's efforts to promote negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs lack the ingredients of success the Sadat-Begin talks had. The gravest deficiency is that the PLO has the ability to dominate, directly or indirectly, the Palestinian Arab participants - and the PLO does not pass the good intentions test.

For many reasons - the terms of its so-called Covenant, its history of targeting children and civilian men and women, and recent incidents (that is, since Arafat's putative renunciation of terrorism) of murder of Jews and assassinations of Arab political opponents in the territories - the PLO has, shall we say, a credibility problem.

The German strategist Von Clausewitz made the famous observation that war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means. The Israelis have grounds to suspect that, for the PLO, the so-called peace process is the continuation of war by other means.

The Arabs have seen their military attacks fail time and again. They have seen their "oil weapon" exposed as a wooden sword. They have seen their intifada lose steam and evolve toward what is called the "intra-fada" - the killing of Arabs by Arabs. They have seen Israel renewing diplomatic relations throughout Africa and now in Eastern Europe.

They are now seeing a demographic shift of strategic proportions in Israel's favour. One can only hope that at some point, the great mass of people throughout the Arab world will reject the failed and costly ideology of war against Israel, the way the people of Eastern Europe have rejected their own failed and costly ideology.

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