

Oil and Turmoil

Directions for US Middle East policy

The Atlantic Council in Washington published on 5 November a policy paper entitled Oil and Turmoil: Western Choices in the Middle East. The paper, which was produced by a special working group including some 30 experts from the American political and military establishment, has been compared with the report published by the Brookings Institution in December 1975. The Brookings report influenced the shaping of US policy under the Carter administration which came into office in January 1976. The Atlantic Council paper is likely to have a similar influence on the Middle East policy of whatever administration emerges from the election campaign now under way in the US. We reproduce here extracts from the summary with which the Atlantic Council introduces the new policy paper.

The Middle East is of the utmost importance to the US and its allies for three principal reasons that can be briefly denoted as oil, security, and conflict settlement. The region's oil, which is essential to the economy of the advanced industrial democracies, must remain available to them. Its territory, people, and resources, which are crucial to the global balance between the Soviet Union and the West, cannot be allowed to fall under Soviet domination. The conflict between the Arab world and Israel, which remains a source of dangerous instability in the area and a threat to world peace, requires the most intensive efforts to bring about a just settlement.

The primary requirement of American policy is to maintain a position in the Middle East, in cooperation and good relations with key Middle East countries, that will ensure the availability of oil over the coming decade, prevent the extension of Soviet control, and bring about sufficient stability in the region to make possible the achievement of these aims. The report's conclusions and recommendations focus on five major areas of policy:

Availability of oil — The key lies in national and international energy policies on the part of the industrial countries that will gradually reduce dependence on imports of Middle East oil and, in the interim, will make possible a working bargain between producing and consuming countries. Both share a common long-term interest in the development of alternatives to Middle East oil and in maximum feasible conservation of energy use.

Arab-Israeli settlement — the working group reiterates the urgency of a negotiated settlement, going beyond the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, to include agreement on the Palestinian question and agreements between Israel and its other neighbours, Syria and Lebanon. The American role will remain central, for the US is committed to Israel's independence and security, is the only power with influence over Israel, and at the same time has vital strategic and economic interests in the Arab world. The US should make clear its conviction that Israel's security will be better served by real, firmly-based peace with the Arabs, including the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, than by continued war and terrorism.

With respect to the peace process, we urge (1) serious negotiations under the Camp David framework for a Middle East settlement, (2) efforts to bring Arab parties other than Egypt into the negotiations, especially Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and (3) association of Palestinian Arabs in the process. While this is not the moment to bring the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) into active negotiations, the US should maintain informal contact with the PLO.

Strengthening of Turkey — the working group stresses the critical importance of a strong and stable Turkey. The

security of NATO and vital western interests in the Middle East are now jeopardised by Turkey's economic crisis. The international aid package presently under consideration (August 1979) by the OECD members and international financial institutions should be agreed upon and made available to Turkey as soon as possible. Turkey's economic health and continuing association with the West over the long term require not only the necessary emergency economic measures but a broader and deeper relationship based on respect for past performance and confidence in future common interest.

Political relations — the key to the protection of American and allied interests in the Middle East lies in a broad understanding of trends there and the creation of constructive relations with the governments and peoples of the region. As an outside great power, America is inevitably an object of suspicion in the eyes of many. There has also been a loss of confidence in America on the part of many who look to her for cooperation and support. The remedies are not easy to find, but they lie partly in the field of better information, understanding and cultural interchange, partly in that of political attitudes and action.

The continuance of good relations with Turkey, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia is essential. The importance of Saudi Arabia, highlighted by recent events in Iran but existing before those events and continuing into the future, is obvious: because of its oil supply and role in OPEC, the need for its assistance in the process of negotiating Arab-Israeli settlements, and its central place in the maintenance of security on the Arabian peninsula and in the general areas of the Red Sea and of the Persian Gulf.

In conclusion, the working group reiterates its keen sense of urgency. Time is of the essence with respect to the three sets of recommendations on energy, on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and on the situation in Turkey. In all three of these areas, we are convinced that the US should be prepared to make hard decisions, and to make them soon.

In stressing these issues we do not wish in any way to minimise the need to cope with Soviet activism and expansionism in the Middle East. The refusal of the Soviet leadership to moderate its policies or even to talk or negotiate about doing so attests to the seriousness of the problem. Soviet forward policy in the Middle East and Africa is, of course, a part of the overall Soviet-American and Soviet-western relationship and should be dealt with in the global context. It is also, however, a part of the Middle East scene, where it has to be countered both directly, by various means including the building of a stronger western military posture, and indirectly, through the improvement of the political and economic position of the US and its allies within the region.