Dwight D. Eisenhower: Foreign Affairs—Miller Center

Dwight D. Eisenhower brought a "New Look" to U.S. national security policy in 1953. The main elements of the New Look were: (1) maintaining the vitality of the U.S. economy while still building sufficient strength to prosecute the Cold War; (2) relying on nuclear weapons to deter Communist aggression or, if necessary, to fight a war; (3) using the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to carry out secret or covert actions against governments or leaders "directly or indirectly responsive to Soviet control"; and (4) strengthening allies and winning the friendship of nonaligned governments. Eisenhower's defense policies, which aimed at providing "more bang for the buck," cut spending on conventional forces while increasing the budget for the Air Force and for nuclear weapons. Even though national security spending remained high—it never fell below 50 percent of the budget during Eisenhower's presidency—Eisenhower did balance three of the eight federal budgets while he was in the White House.

Nuclear Diplomacy

Nuclear weapons played a controversial role in some of Eisenhower's diplomatic initiatives, including the President's effort to end the Korean War. As promised, Eisenhower went to Korea after he was elected

but before he was inaugurated. The trip provided him with no clear solution for ending the war. But during the spring of 1953, U.S. officials attempted to send indirect hints to the Chinese government that Eisenhower might expand the war into China or even use nuclear weapons. Some historians think that these veiled threats may have encouraged the Chinese to reach a settlement. An increase in conventional U.S. military pressure during the spring of 1953 may have had a greater effect on the willingness of the Chinese and North Koreans to negotiate a settlement. There is also reliable evidence that the Soviet leaders who came to power after Stalin's death in March 1953 worried about U.S. escalation and pressed for an end to the war. Both sides made concessions on the question of the repatriation of prisoners of war, and the armistice went into effect in July 1953. Korea remained divided along the 38th parallel, roughly the same boundary as when the war began in 1950.

One of the legacies of the Korean War was that U.S.-Chinese relations remained hostile and tense. Like Truman, Eisenhower refused to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC). Instead, he continued to support Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai-shek's) Nationalist Chinese government in Taiwan. After PRC guns began shelling the Nationalist Chinese islands of Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu) in September 1954, Congress granted Eisenhower the authority to use U.S. military power in the Taiwan Strait. The President knew that these specks of territory had no real strategic value but that they had symbolic importance, as both the PRC and the Nationalists claimed to be the only legitimate ruler of all of China. The crisis escalated when Eisenhower declared at a news conference that in the event of war in East Asia, he would authorize the use of tactical nuclear weapons against military targets "exactly as you would use a bullet." Eisenhower privately deplored Jiang's stubbornness, but his own actions contributed to a crisis that seemed increasingly dangerous. The bombardment finally stopped in April 1954, although it is by no means certain that Eisenhower's nuclear warnings accounted for the PRC decision to end the crisis. Mao Zedong often questioned the credibility of U.S. threats and insisted that the Chinese could withstand any losses that came from a nuclear attack. U.S. and PRC negotiators met in intermittent negotiations, but a second Taiwan Strait crisis occurred in 1958.

U.S.-Soviet Relations

Just weeks after Eisenhower became President, Stalin's death brought what appeared to be significant changes in Soviet international policy. Stalin's successors began calling for negotiations to settle East-West differences and to rein in the arms race. Nikita Khrushchev, who established himself as the main leader in the Kremlin in 1955, called his policy "peaceful coexistence," yet Eisenhower remained skeptical of Soviet rhetoric. He used a sexist metaphor to explain his thinking to Prime Minister Winston Churchill: "Russia was . . . a woman of the streets and whether her dress was new, or just the old one patched, there was the same whore underneath." The President insisted on deeds that matched words, and in 1955, the Soviets changed their position and ended a prolonged deadlock in negotiations over a peace treaty with Austria. Eisenhower then agreed to a summit of Soviet and Western leaders in Geneva, Switzerland, in July 1955, the first such meeting since the Potsdam Conference in 1945.

The "Spirit of Geneva" eased tensions between the Soviets and the United States, even though the

conference failed to produce agreements on arms control or other major international issues. Khrushchev rejected Eisenhower's proposal for an "Open Skies" program that would have allowed both sides to use aerial air surveillance to gather information about each other's military capabilities. The president was hardly surprised by Khrushchev's decision; Eisenhower had made the Soviet leader an offer that would be difficult to accept while knowing that the proposal, whatever the Soviet reaction, would make a favorable impression on international public opinion. A year later, the President authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to begin top-secret intelligence flights over the Soviet Union by using the brand-new high altitude U-2 reconnaissance planes.

"Peaceful coexistence" did not extend to eastern Europe. In November 1956, Soviet tanks ruthlessly suppressed Hungary's efforts to follow an independent course free from Soviet domination. Administration officials had advocated the liberation of Soviet satellites, and propaganda agencies such as Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America had encouraged Eastern Europeans to resist. Eisenhower, however, decided not to take action to aid the Hungarian freedom fighters since any intervention carried the risk of starting a U.S.-Soviet war that could lead to a nuclear exchange. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the administration toned down its rhetoric about liberation and instead emphasized hopes for gradual—and peaceful—progress toward freedom.

During his last years in office, Eisenhower hoped to achieve a détente with the Soviet Union that could produce a treaty banning the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere and oceans. Hopes rose after Khrushchev visited the United States in September 1959 and met with Eisenhower at the presidential retreat in the Maryland mountains. This summit produced no arms control agreement, but it did lead to good will and optimism known as "the spirit of Camp David." Eisenhower and Khrushchev agreed to meet again, along with the leaders of France and Britain, in Paris in May 1960.

The summit collapsed, however, in acrimony and bitterness in a dispute over the U-2 incident. As the meeting with Khrushchev approached, Eisenhower authorized another U-2 flight over Soviet territory. Damaged by a surface-to-air missile, the U.S. plane crashed on May 1, 1960, during the Soviet celebration of May Day. Not knowing that the Soviets had captured the pilot, the State Department and the White House issued a series of cover stories that the Kremlin exposed as lies. Despite his embarrassment, Eisenhower took responsibility for the failed U-2 mission and asserted that the flights were necessary to protect national security. Khrushchev tried to exploit the U-2 incident for maximum propaganda value and demanded an apology from the President when they met in Paris. Eisenhower refused, Khrushchev stormed out of the meeting, and the emerging détente became instead an intensified Cold War. Eisenhower was so distraught that he even talked about resigning.

Covert Action

Eisenhower prosecuted the Cold War vigorously even as he hoped to improve Soviet-American relations. He relied frequently on covert action to avoid having to take public responsibility for controversial interventions. He believed that the CIA, created in 1947, was an effective instrument to counter Communist expansion and to assist friendly governments. CIA tactics were sometimes

unsavory, as they included bribes, subversion, and even assassination attempts. But Eisenhower authorized those actions, even as he maintained plausible deniability, that is, carefully concealing all evidence of U.S. involvement so that he could deny any responsibility for what had happened.

During his first year in office, Eisenhower authorized the CIA to deal with a problem in Iran that had begun during Truman's presidency. In 1951, the Iranian parliament nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British corporation that controlled the nation's petroleum industry. The British retaliated with economic pressure that created havoc with Iran's finances, but Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh refused to yield. Eisenhower worried about Mossadegh's willingness to cooperate with Iranian Communists; he also feared that Mossadegh would eventually undermine the power of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a staunch anti-Communist partner. In August 1953, the CIA helped overthrow Mossadegh's government and restore the shah's power. In the aftermath of this covert action, new arrangements gave U.S. corporations an equal share with the British in the Iranian oil industry.

A year later, the CIA helped overthrow the elected government of Guatemala. Eisenhower and his top advisers worried that President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was too willing to cooperate with local Communists, even though they had only a limited role in his government. Recent scholarship has shown that Arbenz was a Marxist, although he revealed his political convictions only to a few confidants. Arbenz also believed that Guatemala, because of its low level of economic development, required significant reform before it would be ready for Communism. Arbenz's program of land reform was a step toward modernizing Guatemala as well as creating the conditions for an eventual Marxist state. The land reform, however, produced strong opposition, as it involved confiscating large tracts from the United Fruit Company and redistributing them to landless peasants, who made up a majority of the Guatemalan population. American fears reached new heights when Arbenz bought weapons from Communist Czechoslovakia after the administration cut off Guatemala's access to U.S. military supplies. Eisenhower was not prepared to risk American security or credibility in an area where the United States had long been the dominant power. The CIA helped counterrevolutionaries drive Arbenz from power in June 1954. Guatemala appealed in vain to the United Nations, and administration officials denied that the United States had anything to do with the change in government in Guatemala. The new President, Carlos Castillo Armas, reversed land reform and clamped down on the Communists, and he also restricted voting rights and curtailed civil liberties before an assassin murdered him in 1957.

Guatemala was the base for another covert action that the Eisenhower administration planned but did not carry out before leaving office. Eisenhower decided that Fidel Castro, who came to power in Cuba in 1959, was a "madman" who had to be deposed. In 1960, the CIA began the training in Guatemala of anti-Castro exiles who would invade Cuba. The CIA hoped for a success similar to the Guatemalan intervention of 1954. What they got instead, soon after John F. Kennedy became President, was the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961.

Middle East Rivalry

The intense rivalries in the Middle East brought Eisenhower into a confrontation with his most important

allies, Britain and France. The origins of the Suez crisis of 1956 lay in the difficulties of the western powers in dealing with Gamal Abdel Nasser, the nationalist President of Egypt who followed an independent and provocative course in his dealings with major powers. Nasser bought weapons from Communist Czechoslovakia, and he sought economic aid from the United States to build the Aswan High Dam on the Nile. The Eisenhower administration was prepared to provide the assistance, but during the negotiations, Nasser extended diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China. Already tired of the Egyptian leader's playing off of "East against West by blackmailing both," the Eisenhower administration halted the negotiations over aid. Nasser retaliated by nationalizing the Suez Canal.

The British, French, and Israelis decided to take military action. The British, especially, considered the canal a vital waterway, a lifeline to their colonies in Asia. Both the British and French disliked Nasser's inflammatory, anticolonial rhetoric. The Israelis, who faced constant border skirmishing because of Egypt's refusal to recognize the right of their nation to exist, had powerful reasons to join the conspiracy. The three nations did not consult—or even inform—Eisenhower before the Israelis launched the first attacks into the Sinai Peninsula on October 29, 1956.

Eisenhower was outraged. He thought the attacks would only strengthen Nasser, allowing the Egyptian leader to become the champion of the Arab world as he opposed the aggressors. Eisenhower quickly condemned the attacks and used U.S. diplomatic and economic power to force all three nations to withdraw their troops. United States prestige in the Middle East rose. But Eisenhower hardly made good use of this advantage, as he announced a new program, known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, to provide economic and military aid to Middle Eastern nations facing Communist aggression. Yet it was nationalism, not Communism, that was by far the dominant force in the region.

Difficulties with Nasser also influenced Eisenhower's decision two years later to send Marines to Lebanon. For months, an internal political struggle had made Lebanon unstable. Then in July 1958, what appeared to be pro-Nasser forces seized power in Iraq. To protect Lebanon from a similar threat—one more imagined than real—Eisenhower sent in the Marines. The troops stayed only three months and suffered only one fatality. U.S. diplomats probably made a more important contribution by participating in negotiations that allowed the Lebanese factions to solve their political conflicts.

Intervention in Indochina

In Southeast Asia, Eisenhower sent U.S. weapons and dollars instead of troops. Like Truman, Eisenhower provided military aid to the French, who had begun fighting a war in 1946 to regain control over their colonial possession of Indochina, which included the current nations of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. By 1954, the Eisenhower administration was paying more than 75 percent of the French costs of the war. Yet the French were unable to defeat the Vietminh, a nationalist force under the leadership of the Communist Ho Chi Minh.

A crisis occurred in early 1954, when Vietminh forces surrounded a French garrison at the remote location of Dienbienphu. The French asked for more than weapons: they talked about a U.S. air strike,

even with tactical nuclear weapons, to save their troops. Eisenhower considered the possibility of military action; indeed, he seemed prepared to authorize it under the right circumstances. Congressional leaders, however, would not provide their support unless any U.S. military action was part of a multilateral effort. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, however, could not persuade the British or any other major ally to take part in what he called United Action in Indochina. The President decided against an air strike, and the French garrison surrendered after weeks of brutal siege. At an international conference in Geneva, the French government granted independence to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Eisenhower hoped to salvage a partial victory by preventing Ho Chi Minh from establishing a Communist government over all of Vietnam. In 1954-1955, U.S. aid and support helped Ngo Dinh Diem establish a non-Communist government in what became South Vietnam. Eisenhower considered the creation of South Vietnam a significant Cold War success, yet his decision to commit U.S. prestige and power in South Vietnam created long-term dangers that his successors would have to confront.

A Memorable Farewell

In his Farewell Address, Eisenhower concentrated not on the threats he had confronted abroad but on the dangers of the Cold War at home. He told his fellow citizens to be wary of the "military-industrial complex," which he described as the powerful combination of "an immense military establishment and a large arms industry." Defense was a means to an end, and the American people had to be careful that they did not allow special interests to absorb an ever-increasing share of national wealth or to "endanger our liberties or democratic processes."

Eisenhower at times had difficulty balancing means and ends in protecting national security. He authorized covert interventions into the internal affairs of other nations and provided aid to dictators in the interest of protecting "the free world." He spent half or more of the federal budget on the armed services, even as he proclaimed that "every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired" was "a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed." Yet Eisenhower knew that real security meant preserving fundamental values. His Farewell Address summarized principles that had guided a lifetime of service to his country.