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Regime Change, Major Powers, and the Prospects for Venezuela, Cuba, Iran

Part I: A Very Brief History of What Makes Regime Change Operations Successful

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In recent months the media has been full of talk about regime change in Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran, but very few attempts to understand the post-World War II history of regime change operations, when regime change works, when it does not work, and why. This two-part article starts to correct the mistake. Part I (this Part) provides a very brief history of regime change operations and identifies the four factors that make regime change most likely to succeed in the long term. Part II uses the four factors to assess the prospects of successful U.S.-sponsored regime change in Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran. For the purposes of both parts, regime change operations are defined as operations by a major outside power to change the personnel and/or structure of a foreign regime.

This essay starts with the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War because from ancient history through the end of World War II territorial expansion through conquest was a routine part of statecraft. Since the end of World War II, however, virtually every nation in the world has signed the United Nations Charter. The Charter has its limitations, but it virtually ended thousands of years of territorial expansion through conquest. In the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, ambitious nations turned instead to regime change operations within the boundaries of existing states rather than territorial expansion to incorporate defeated states into the conquering state.

Regime Change During the Cold War

The U.S. and the Soviet Union conducted scores of regime change operations during the Cold War, but the extraordinary fact is that almost all successful regime changes took place inside each bloc, to maintain bloc discipline, and not against adversarial regimes in the opposing bloc. Consider, for example, Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979. Hungary and Czechoslovakia were allies of the Soviet Union and members of the Warsaw Pact when they were invaded. Afghanistan was a Soviet client with Soviet combat forces stationed inside the country when it was invaded. Likewise, the U.S. supported a number of successful coups and military interventions in Latin America and in virtually every case the U.S. was managing events inside a historically friendly country rather than overthrowing a member of the Soviet bloc.

There are at least four factors that made within-bloc regime change relatively easy and regime change in the opposing bloc nearly impossible.

The first factor is relationships and access. Compare the rapid Soviet success invading Hungary in 1956 and Afghanistan in 1979 with Russia's catastrophic failure in its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It is hardly a coincidence that the USSR had close relationships with Hungary and Afghanistan, and had troops stationed in those countries before those invasions whereas Ukraine was very hostile to Russia in 2022, and Russian troops had to fight their way into Ukraine.

The 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama likewise benefited from the thousands of U.S. troops already in country when the invasion began, and the long history of close U.S.-Panama relations. The Soviet troops in Hungary and U.S. troops in Panama that made Soviet and U.S. invasions easier also made invasion by the other bloc prohibitively expensive.

Coups and other less violent regime change operations, i.e., regime change via irregular warfare rather than conventional invasion, were also easier inside friendly countries where U.S. or Soviet officials had easy access and extensive networks of close relationships. These networks gave Soviet and U.S. officials routine contact with thousands of influential local figures inside countries that were members of their own bloc. In hostile countries from the other bloc, every interaction with the locals was closely monitored by government security forces, which made it much more difficult to plot a coup or support a rebellion.

The second key is geography. With rare exceptions like Cuba, Soviet bloc countries were physically close to the USSR and proximity to the USSR made it easier to exercise Soviet influence while distance from the U.S. made it harder for the U.S. to exercise influence. U.S. Naval power allowed the U.S. to extend its bloc further from the U.S. homeland but this had limits as well. For example, access to Korean ports allowed the U.S. to maintain a large army in far-off Korea, but the U.S. could not have maintained a similar force in landlocked Mongolia.

The third factor driving the prevalence of within-bloc regime change is loss aversion. Loss aversion refers to the fact that people and nations generally feel the pain of losing something more acutely than they feel joy from gaining something of equal value. Loss aversion explains why the U.S. and the USSR tried harder to retain nations already within their blocs than they did to gain control of nations in the other bloc. The Korean War, fought in the early days of the Cold War, provides a helpful illustration.

The U.S. sent an army to prevent the loss of South Korea, and China sent an army to prevent the loss of North Korea, but neither side was willing to do what was necessary to conquer the client of the other. The major powers were content to end the fighting roughly where it began, i.e. to sacrifice potential gains in order to prevent potential losses. This demonstrated that each bloc could, and usually would, prevent hostile regime change within its bloc. During the Cuban Missile Crisis the USSR even threatened global nuclear war to prevent the loss of Cuba. Loss aversion became the official policy of each bloc in the form of the Truman Doctrine (1947) and the Brezhnev Doctrine (1968). These documents announced that each superpower would prevent regime change that moved a nation from its bloc to the opposing bloc.

The fourth factor is that small changes are much easier to achieve than large changes. Almost by definition, regime change that kept a nation within its current bloc was smaller, and hence easier to achieve than regime change that caused a nation to switch blocs.

The Exceptions

There were exceptional cases when regime change moved a nation out of its bloc and into the opposing bloc, but the exceptions reinforce, rather than challenge the power of the Truman and Brezhnev Doctrines. For example, Soviet-sponsored North Vietnam successfully conquered U.S.-sponsored South Vietnam, but only after the U.S. made extraordinary efforts to save its client. The number of U.S. troops fighting for South Vietnam reached a peak of more than 535,000 and U.S. aircraft dropped more bombs protecting South Vietnam than in all of World War II. The U.S. chose not to sustain this support indefinitely, and Saigon fell, but the enormous U.S. investment in South Vietnam demonstrates how seriously the U.S. took the Truman Doctrine.

The U.S. clients who fell to anti-U.S. forces without a foreign invasion fell because the U.S. quarreled with the local government over its domestic policies and did not see the rebels as Soviet proxies. In other words, the U.S. saw the situation as an unsatisfactory client challenged by legitimate domestic opposition rather than Soviet-sponsored regime change and therefore chose not to prevent the change. For example, the U.S. contributed to the fall of the Batista regime in Cuba by imposing an arms embargo on the regime. The U.S. withheld support because it disagreed with Batista's domestic policies and did not believe the anti-Batista rebels under Fidel Castro were communists. The U.S. likewise failed to protect the Shah of Iran from the 1979 revolution because the U.S. disagreed with the Shah's policies and did not believe the revolutionaries were agents of the USSR. The outcomes in Cuba and Iran might suggest that the U.S. was always wrong to allow a client to fall but this was not the case. For example, the U.S. government was clearly correct to allow and even facilitate the fall of the Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines in 1986, so withholding support from problematic U.S. clients was not always a mistake.

On the other side of the iron curtain, no nation left the Soviet bloc due to regime change until Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev revoked the Brezhnev Doctrine. After Gorbachev announced that the USSR would no longer fight for its client regimes in Europe, they all experienced radical political transformations proving that Soviet power was what prevented revolutions earlier, and that Soviet force could have kept its client regimes in power for decades longer, if Gorbachev had wanted to.

As the paragraphs above demonstrate, Cold War regime change operations were routinely successful within each bloc, but almost never when they attempted to move a nation from one bloc to another, especially if the bloc under attack chose to defend itself.

Regime Change in the Post-Cold War Era

When the Soviet Union abolished itself in 1991, the Soviet bloc disappeared and the U.S. began operating globally the way it had operated inside its own bloc during the Cold War. Some U.S. regime-change operations were conducted through direct military intervention in places like Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. Others were conducted without U.S. military force such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2005 Orange and 2014 Maidan Revolutions in Ukraine. The nonviolent 2000 Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia followed soon after the 1999 U.S.-led bombing campaign against Serbia and thus used a combination of military and non-military operations to achieve regime change.

If the Cold War had continued into the twenty-first century, the Soviet Union would probably have prevented the seven successful U.S. regime change operations listed above, so the U.S. did take advantage of the opportunities created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, despite significant support for regime change inside each target country listed above, the U.S. had great difficulty achieving long-term success with the new regimes.

In Afghanistan, the post-Taliban government lasted for twenty years, but eventually, and partly due to Pakistani support, the Taliban returned to power. In Iraq, Saddam's Baathists were permanently removed from power, but the new Iraqi regime improved relations with Iran as well as the U.S. and post-regime change Iraq has become an arena of intense and violent competition between the U.S. and Iran. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi's idiosyncratic regime was utterly destroyed, but fifteen years after Gaddafi's death, Libya still has two competing governments and significant Russian and Turkish military involvement preventing unification. In Georgia, Russian hybrid warfare successfully shifted the government to a pro-Russia stance. In Ukraine, Russia reversed the Orange Revolution by getting Victor Yanukovych, the man deposed by the Orange Revolution, elected President again in 2010. When Yanukovych was deposed a second time by the 2014 Maidan Revolution, Russia responded with a small-scale invasion in 2014 followed by a full-scale invasion in 2022. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic and the regime that launched a decade of vicious wars in the former Yugoslavia are long gone, but Serbia is the most pro-Russia country in Europe west of Belarus and it remains one of the few parts of the former Yugoslavia that has not joined NATO.

The USSR was gone but regional powers like Pakistan, Iran, and Russia played the role of spoilers against the new regimes and the four factors that explained Cold War regime change help explain the challenges of achieving lasting U.S. success with the new regimes after the Cold War. In the cases listed above, regional powers had excellent access and close relationships in the target countries, and they used their access and relationships to thwart U.S. success. The regional powers were also much closer geographically and were often neighbors which facilitated their efforts to undermine U.S. goals. Loss aversion was another factor driving hostile actions by regional powers. For example, Pakistan saw the fall of the Taliban as the loss of a country where Pakistan had great influence and Pakistan worked hard to regain that influence. The Russians likewise reacted badly to losing influence in Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia, which they previously dominated. Finally, the enormous changes that were attempted in places like Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq made success more challenging than the less extreme changes the U.S. attempted within its bloc during the Cold War.

One additional feature of post-Cold War regime change operations needs to be mentioned, and that is the enormous jump in financial cost and reputational risk when conventional military force is involved. The enormous financial costs of U.S. operations to achieve and sustain regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq are well known as is the astronomical cost of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to attempt regime change there. U.S regime change in Libya was much less expensive financially than the larger military interventions, but President Barack Obama still described the outcome in Libya as the worst mistake of his presidency. The decision to use military force is what sets Libya apart from myriad other disappointments of Obama's eight years in office (such as the establishment of the ISIS caliphate) and highlights the way employing military force in regime change operations increases reputational risk.

Conclusion

The first Part of this two-part essay identified the four factors that made Cold War era regime change operations easy within each bloc and nearly impossible in the competing bloc. The four factors are: access and relationships; geographic proximity; loss aversion; and the extent of the change in governance that regime change hopes to achieve. These same factors determined the ability of regional spoilers to undermine the long-term success of U.S. regime change operations in the post-Cold War world.