

THE UNITED STATES' FOREIGN POLICY AND INTELLIGENCE GATHERING: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

JOSEPH C. EBEGBULEM*
AUGUSTINE B. ABOH**

Abstract. *During the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the U.S. adopted foreign policy strategies whose objective was to meet the challenges of Soviet Communism. In the early years of the Cold War, the use of intelligence gathering and covert operations rested on a general consensus regarding the nature of the competition with the Soviet Union. Driven by the apparent urgency of the competition, U.S. policy makers increasingly turned to covert interventions. The CIA which was created in 1947 by the National Security Act has often been accused of interfering in the internal affairs of other nations, especially the third world nations. These interventions were prevalent during the Cold War. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the United States defined its foreign policy in relation to the Soviet Union, as the two countries battled for supremacy. In other words, American foreign policy was profoundly shaped by the international war which ended in 1945. This paper will therefore have a panoramic view of American foreign policy with emphasis on the instruments of the country's foreign policy and intelligence gathering. The role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in intelligence gathering and covert activities will also be examined critically.*

Keywords: *Foreign Policy, National Security, Covert Operations, Intelligence Gathering, Communism*

Overview of American Foreign Policy

The foreign policy of the United States is considered to be profoundly shaped by the two international wars that took place in the 20th century, i.e., the First and Second World Wars. The international community experienced global contests for power and positions with unimaginable consequences. With this experience,

* PhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Calabar, Nigeria; jcebegbulem@yahoo.com.

** Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Calabar, Nigeria.

therefore, the United States was forced to confront its role, as its political, economic and military importance grew (Wittkopf et al., 2008).

The Presidents of the United States during these contests shared a common vision for America's foreign policy. This vision was founded in liberalism and idealism. Woodrow Wilson, under whose leadership the United States entered the First World War in 1917 and fought to create "a world safe for democracy", called for an association of states that he envisaged would guarantee the "political independence and territorial integrity of great and small states alike".

Harry Truman, who succeeded Roosevelt, carried much of Roosevelt's vision forward, eventually adapting its principles to his own definition of the post-Second World War world order. The third twentieth century contest for power and position was the Cold War which ended in November 1989 when the Berlin Wall was brought down (Wittkopf et al., 2008).

The aforementioned wars, especially the Second World War, not only propelled the United States to the status of an emergent superpower, it also transformed the way the country responded to the challenges of the post-World War international system. Isolationism gave way to internationalism – a new vision predicated on political assumptions derived from their experience on the Second World War and the turmoil that preceded it.

As soon as the Second World War ended in 1945, the United States entered a global conflict of the 20th century. This conflict was called the Cold War because it never led to direct military confrontation between the principal antagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union. During the most part of the twentieth century, the United States defined its foreign policy in relation to the Soviet Union, as the two countries battled each other for supremacy during the Cold War. Each of the two superpowers tried to influence the balance of power in its favour by recruiting allies beyond its borders through its foreign policy (Hook, 2005). Most of the foreign policy instruments adopted by the United States evolved during the early stages of the Cold War and were adapted to meet the challenges of Soviet communism.

Instruments of American Foreign Policy

In conducting foreign policy, countries make use of various instruments. The United States is not an exception. In the United States, the authority to conduct foreign policy is more centralized in the office of the President who is free to conduct foreign policy more or less as he chooses. As government is organized, the President has both the responsibility and power to conduct foreign policy as he deems necessary for the interest of the United States.

Other arms of the government such as the legislature and the judiciary may criticize his approach or method, but they have no power to conduct foreign policy or prevent him from doing so, unless the Senate chooses not to ratify a treaty, if Congress decides to cut the funding for a specific endeavor, and, more recently, within the limits of the War Powers Act. The President may consult or inform Congress of his actions in relation to foreign policy from time to time. It

is therefore imperative to look at various instruments used by the United States through the instrumentality of the Office of the President for the conduct of its foreign policy. The United States carries out its foreign policy objectives using three main instruments, which are:

- (i) Covert operations
- (ii) Foreign economic and military assistance
- (iii) Public diplomacy

Covert Operations

As regards instruments of American foreign policy, it is the covert operations of the United States government that provide a major means of affecting events and policies of other nations around the world. The United States persistent covert involvement in the affairs of other states contributed immensely to the interventionist label attached to post Second World War American foreign policy. Prior to the Second World War, covert operations by the United States were very limited, usually involving efforts to collect information. After the Second World War and in the early years of the Cold War, the use of covert operations became prominent in American foreign policy (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008).

Covert operation or activity, as it applies to America, is a clandestine activity undertaken against foreign governments to influence political, economic or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the American government will not be apparent or acknowledged. Early in the Cold War, American policy-makers embraced covert operations as a veritable instrument of American foreign policy because it is less risky than direct military action, but more aggressive than diplomatic pressure. In the years after the Second World War, the United States has relied on several such operations in its foreign policy enforcement (Berkowitz and Goodman, 1998).

A 1954 National Security Council directive quoted in Gaddis (1982) identified the breadth of such operations.

...propaganda; political action; economic warfare; escape and evasion and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states or groups, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas and liberation groups; support of indigenous and anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world; deception plans and operations; and all activities compatible with this directive necessary to accomplish the foregoing (Gaddis, 1983: 158).

In the early years of the Cold War, the use of covert operations as an influential instrument of American foreign policy rested on a general consensus regarding the nature of the competition with the Soviet Union. Driven by the apparent urgency of the competition, American foreign policy formulators increasingly turned to covert operations. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which was created in 1947 by the National Security Act of that year, became the major agency or instrument for the execution of these covert operations. Two of the CIA's boldest and most spectacular operations – the overthrow of Premier Mohammed

Mossadegh¹ in Iran in 1953 and the coup that ousted President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954 resulted in the quick and bloodless removal of two allegedly pro-communist leaders (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008).

Consequently, both the agency and the US policy makers acquired a sense of confidence in the CIA's capacity for operational success. Eventually, this reputation for results led to an enviable situation in which the CIA provided information, recommended policy options, and even implement them.

Although engineered along the lines of the successful 1954 Guatemalan operation, the defeat suffered by the Cuban exiles tarnished CIA's reputation and cost the CIA Director, Allen Dulles, his job (as a pretext for John F. Kennedy to replace the Republican Dulles). Still covert operations remained an accepted policy option (Carr, 1994).

The catalogue of proven and alleged CIA involvement in the internal affairs of other states could be broadened extensively, but we cannot understand the reliance on either covert or military forms of intervention without recognizing how much the fear of communism and the drive to contain it, or during some periods, roll it back, motivated policy makers. In their book, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, Victor Marchetti and John Marks argued that "covert intervention may seem to be an easier solution to a particular problem than to allow events to follow their natural course or to seek a tortuous diplomatic settlement."

During the 1970s, covert operations which have been described earlier as those secret activities designed to further American policies and programmes abroad, were extended to Chile. Beginning in the 1950s, the United States mounted a concerted effort in Chile to prevent the leftist politician Salvador Allende from first gaining and then exercising political power. By the 1970s, American efforts included covert operations; a close working relationship between the government and giant United States-based multinational corporations doing business in Chile, whose corporate interests were threatened; and pressure on multilateral lending institutions to do America's bidding. Anti-communist thinking contributed to the eventual overthrow of the Allende government.

However, as the Cold War came to an end, serious questions about the nature and desirability of covert operations were being raised in many quarters. This is because the end of Cold War took with it the basic rationale for most of the intelligence activities-cum-covert operations in which the United States had been engaged. Many wondered what role such activities would play in the absence of the Soviet threat.

Foreign Economic and Military Assistance

Another major instrument of American foreign policy is foreign assistance which comes in form of economic and military assistance. The United States is

¹ Mossadegh was not seen as pro-Communist, but as a new "Kerensky" under whom the Tudeh (Communist) Party would become more powerful and eventually seize power. See for a further discussion, Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (second edition) (Wiley, 2008); Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S. – Iranian Relations* (2nd ed.) (The New Press, 2013).

driven by both power and principle to use foreign assistance to pursue and achieve its national interest globally. However, since the Cold War ended in the late 80s, the logic that sustained these programmes is no weightier and their importance as foreign policy instruments has been under scrutiny.

Economic assistance

The United States has, over the years since the end of the Second World War, provided billions of dollars in loans and grants to other countries through what is called Foreign Economic Aid. Foreign economic aid is a combination of low interest loans and grants provided by the United States to developing countries.

During the Cold War, a period after the Second World War, most Americans, especially policy makers accepted the need and utility of economic assistance as an important instrument of American foreign policy. During this period, economic assistance rested on the premise that it contributed to American security by supporting friendly allies, providing markets for American goods and containing communist influence globally. According to Lancaster (2000), the security rationale for the United States economic assistance provided a general and often compelling justification for the country's foreign aid because aid for development and other purposes, it was argued, also supported United States security.

Bobrow and Boyer (2005) also argued that, in addition to supporting United States security and promoting its national interest, the United States aid policy was also built on the belief that helping poorer countries develop and providing humanitarian relief in times of disaster and crisis were principled actions on their own merits. In recent times, United States economic policy towards other nations, especially the developing nations, has been linked with antiterrorism policies around the world, as donors try to address the roots of terrorist causes by promoting development and increasing political stability. Considering the arguments put forward by Lancaster and Bobrow and Boyer, it was evident that during the Cold War, America's foreign aid programmes satisfied both the realists who would focus on national interest and security concerns and idealists who would stress humanitarian concerns (Tisch and Wallace, 1994).

Hence, if the security and humanitarian values ran parallel, most American policy makers supported economic assistance; but when they diverged, security concerns became the primary objective of the United States foreign aids. At the end of the Cold War, uncertainty over the contribution of foreign aid to American security interests and economic development destroyed the consensus and raised doubts about the continued utility of foreign economic aid tools. But even without the Cold War rationale, recent research, according to Lai (2003), still shows that security concerns are important drivers of foreign aid. To accomplish the purpose for which the United States foreign economic aid is provided, the United States has relied on several different agencies since the Second World War. The most prominent has been the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which since 1961 has been responsible for administering most American economic assistance programmes.

Military Assistance

Like economic assistance, military assistance or aid has always been a standard instrument of American foreign policy. Political realism which focuses on power and national interest is the dominant underlying rationale for the adoption of military assistance as an instrument of American foreign policy. Beginning with the Korean war, grants of military aid to other countries became an essential element of Cold War defence and security and a tool used to pursue several national security and foreign policy goals. "Sales of military equipment would later join grants, and then surpass them, as the major elements of American arms transfer programs" (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008: 123).

United States foreign military grants and economic support funds comprise a broad category called "security assistance", whose purpose is related to a multitude of United States policy objectives. The objectives of security assistance which are clearly stated in the "Strategic Plan of the Defence Security Corporation (DSCA)" published in 2002 are to:

- (i) identify, development and advocate programs that strengthen America's alliances and partnership;
- (ii) strengthen defence relations that promote U.S. access and influence;
- (iii) promote interoperability with allies and friendly states while protecting sensitive technologies and information;
- (iv) develop the security cooperation workforce and give it the tools to succeed;
- (v) identify and incorporate best business practices and deploy systems that save time, energy and money (DSCA 2002 cited in Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008: 124-125).

It is estimated that in 2005, the United States provided its allies and friends with \$5 billion in military training and equipment, which accounted for nearly a quarter of all U.S. foreign assistance that year (Tarnoff and Nowels, 2005). During the Cold War, American military aid flowed chiefly to Europe for the first decade, and then in subsequent decades to East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Central America. By the late 1960, United States military aid had shifted from the industrial world to the developing world. The driving purposes of military assistance were the securing of allies, cementing alliances, rewarding patrons, and renting overseas bases (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008).

The containment policy of the United States provided a rationale for military aid to others, justified by claiming it augmented the capabilities of American allies to resist Soviet and Soviet-backed expansionism. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) alliances thus received special attention, as did those with bilateral defensive arrangements with the United States (Frank and Baird, 1975).

Some critics have however argued that military aid is the "slippery slope" that leads eventually to an over-extension of commitments and to a greater likelihood of military involvement in the affairs of other nations (Frank and Baird, 1975).

Others have argued that American military assistance might have contributed to the maintenance of authoritarian regimes throughout the world, since, regardless of their intentions, the consequences of such assistance included a greater chance that military groups in recipient countries would intervene in or maintain their grip on the politics of those states (Rowe, 1974).

Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is the use of information and ideas by the United States to intervene in the affairs of other nations. It has been, and it is still a part of the broad interventionist strategy employed by the United States to penetrate other states in the international system. Public diplomacy seeks to inculcate others in other societies with American values, and to promote mutual understanding between the United States and other societies. It reduces the potential for conflict and dispels negative notions about the United States (Kramer, 2000).

According to Wittkopf (2008: 135), “from 1953 to 1999, the United States’ Information Agency (USIA) was in charge of U.S. public diplomacy efforts aimed at winning greater understanding and support around the world for American society and foreign policy.” The USIA carried out its tasks through a worldwide network using a variety of media tools, including radio, television, films, libraries and exhibitions.

The White House, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Department of Defence, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are also members of the U.S. public diplomacy community (Wittkopf, 2008). Information and cultural programmes are pursued in the expectation that specialized communications can be used to make the image of the United States in the world more favourable. However, opinion varies widely regarding the propriety and effectiveness of public diplomacy as a foreign policy instrument. Should such efforts be designed only to provide information? Should it be linked ultimately to the political contests in which the United States becomes engaged? In practice, each role has been dominant at one time or another, dictated largely by events and contemporary challenges to United States foreign policy objectives.

Intelligence Gathering and American Foreign Policy

Intelligence gathering is an inseparable element of American foreign policy. The agencies in charge of intelligence gathering are also sometimes responsible for covert or illegal operations designed somehow to affect the course of events or the fate of individuals outside the United States. The United States adopts different methods in intelligence gathering as part of her foreign policy tool.

Like in the cases of any other state, espionage is one of the methods that the United States employs to obtain intelligence. Espionage is a clandestine effort by states, including the United States, to obtain information. The espionage agent works surreptitiously or on the basis of false pretense or in disguise; he or she conceals his or her identity or the true nature and purpose of his or her activity.

He or she pries into the guarded secrets of one power for the benefit of another power. The all-important task of the agent who goes abroad to spy for his or her government is usually the recruitment of others who actually obtain and deliver the desired information or documents (Dyke, 1973).

Through espionage, government structures of other states are penetrated, especially to get information concerning the military power and intentions of such states. Among the highest achievements of espionage services is the recruiting or planting of agents in the military or intelligence service of an unfriendly government.

The catalogue of proven and alleged United States involvement in the internal affairs of other states through intelligence gathering could be broadened extensively, considering how much the fear of communism and the drive to contain it motivated American foreign policy makers to embark on intelligence gathering through this means (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008). As earlier indicated, states have always gathered information about one another through espionage. The United States is no exception. Dyke has recorded that every American diplomat who goes abroad, and every member of his staff, is an intelligence agent. This is so because one of his principal assignments is intelligence gathering that may be useful to his home government. According to Dyke:

The military attachés connected with diplomatic missions are normally thought of as overt intelligence agents, and it is common knowledge that one or more of the other members of the major diplomatic missions work for their home intelligence services rather than their foreign offices, using diplomatic status as a cover. (Dyke, 1973: 479)

Those who formulate American foreign policy have consistently relied on accurate and timely information on conditions and developments in other countries that might affect U.S. interests. According to Hook (2005: 176),

Intelligence gathering, the “first line of defence” in foreign policy, has been especially vital since World War II and the United States’ arrival as a global superpower. Failures of intelligence, from the Pearl Harbour attacks of 1941 to the terrorist attacks of 9-11, have had devastating effects on the nation. In contrast, sound intelligence gathering, as during the Cuban missile crisis, has provided an invaluable service.

Hilsman (2000) has noted that many government officials in the United States and experts in International Relations believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union would lessen the need for United States intelligence gathering. However, the outbreak of regional crises in the early 1990s made it clear that intelligence gathering would remain a critical task.

Defection which is closely related to espionage is another method of intelligence gathering used by the United States. Defection takes the form of physical flight which has occurred in East-West relations since the end of the Second World War. At one time or another, the United States and several other states have had their own intelligence efforts seriously compromised by the defection of personnel who gave important information to the side to which they fled.

The CIA in Intelligence Gathering and Covert Operations

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was created by the National Security Act of 1947. The Agency, which began operation in Virginia, employs approximately 20,000 intelligence officers and administrative personnel. Its Intelligence Directorate is divided among eight regional and functional offices. The Operations Directorate, similarly organized along regional and functional lines, oversees covert operations abroad. Other directorates in the CIA focus on science and technology, the security of CIA agents, and administrative matters (Hook, 2005). The CIA and other intelligence agencies in the United States, according to Hook, have played vital roles in achieving the central goals for which they were created during the cold war: “containing” communism and contributing to the demise of the Soviet Union.

According to a U.S. Congressional Report on Intelligence Activities cited in Hook (2005: 109),

The CIA has been accused of interfering in the internal political affairs of states, ranging from Iran to Chile, from Tibet to Guatemala, from Libya to Laos, from Greece to Indonesia. Assassinations, coups d'état, vote buying, economic warfare – all have been laid at the doorstep of the CIA. Few political crises take place in the world today in which the CIA involvement is not alleged.

The United States government have since the era of the Cold War acquired a sense of confidence in the CIA's capacity for operational success. This has led to an enviable situation in which the CIA provided information, recommended policy programmes anchored on national security and then implemented them. The invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 by a band of CIA-trained and financed Cuban exiles stands out as a classic case of CIA prominence in policy making. The CIA saw the Bay of Pigs operation as a way to eliminate the problem posed by Fidel Castro (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008).

Describing the role of the agency in the invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, Van Dyke noted that “the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 is the most notorious of the covert American operations” (Dyke, 1973: 482). The whole scheme was the work of Cuban refugees, but the United States Central Intelligence Agency was in control. The CIA selected the refugees and provided them with weapons and military training.

Through the CIA's activities, the United States have affected events and policies of other states around the world. The United States' persistent covert involvement in the affairs of other states contributed measurably to the interventionist label attached to the post-World War II American foreign policy (Wittkopf *et al.*, 2008).

It is therefore not strange to say that the CIA has a history of involvement in the affairs of other nations. This assertion is corroborated by Edwards *et al.* (2002: 626), who posited that “after the end of World War II, when Eastern European nations had fallen under Moscow's shadow and Western European nations were teetering, the CIA provided aid to anti-communist parties in Italy and West Germany”. They went further to say that the CIA was no less busy in the developing

countries, where, for example, the agency nurtured coups in Iran in 1953 and in Guatemala in 1954.

In the 1980s, a major controversy surrounded the activities of the CIA in Central America, particularly in Nicaragua, where the dominant Marxist government developed close ties with the Soviet Union and Cuba and embarked on massive military build-up. Determined to undermine the regime, the Reagan administration aggressively supported armed rebels (contras). The CIA, no doubt, was quietly involved in cover operations to assist the rebels (Edwards *et al.*, 2002).

With these and other activities by the CIA, the agency is no doubt an integral part of the United States' foreign policy formulation and implementation.

Conclusions

The foreign policy of the United States is an aggregation of choices and decisions that affect its relations with other states in the international community. The aftermath of the two international wars, especially the Second World War, witnessed a transformation of the United States' response to challenges of the post-World War international system.

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in an ideological war called the Cold War. During this period, the United States often employed intelligence gathering and covert activities to influence policies and actions in other nations. In addition to economic and military assistance, covert operations have also formed a veritable instrument of American foreign policy.

Through intelligence gathering and covert activities, the United States has been able to influence policies in other countries of the world in order to promote and protect its national interest. It was the fear of communism and the drive to contain it that instigated the United States' policy makers to rely on the covert activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to achieve this foreign policy objective. The interventionist label attached to the US foreign policy after the Second World War is as a result of its persistent involvement in the internal affairs of other nations, most times through covert means. Because of its activities around the world, the CIA is seen as an integral part of the US foreign policy formulation and implementation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abia, V., *Contemporary Issues in International Relations*. Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd, 2003;
- Alade, C. A., *Theories, concepts and principles in the study of International Relations*. Lagos: Eleme Educational Limited, 1997;
- Asogwa, F. C., *Anatomy of Foreign Policy*. Enugu: John Jacob's Classic Publishers Limited, 2009;
- Berkowitz, B. and Goodman, A., "The logic of covert action, in *National Interests* 5 (Spring), 1998, pp. 38-46;
- Bobrow, D. B. and Boyer, M. A., *Defensive Internationalism: Providing Public Goods in an Uncertain World*. Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan Press, 2005;

- Carr, C., "Aldrich Ames and the conduct of American Intelligence," in *World Policy Journal*, 11 (Fall), 1994, pp. 19-28;
- Dyke, V., *International politics*. New York: Meredith Corporation, 1973;
- Edwards, M. and John, G., (eds.) *Global citizen action*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002;
- Ervand, A., *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the roots of modern U.S. – Iranian relations* (2nd ed.). New York: New York Press, 2013;
- Frank, C. and Baird, M., "Foreign Aid: Its Speckled Past and Future Prospects". *International Organisation*, Vol. 29, 1975, pp. 133-167;
- Gaddis, J. L., *Strategies of containment: A critical appraisal of postwar American National Security Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982;
- Hilsman, R., "After the Cold War: The need for intelligence", in *National Security: U.S. intelligence after the Cold War*, ed. Craig Eisendrath. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000, pp. 8-22;
- Hook, S. W., *U.S. Foreign Policy*. Washington: CQ Press, 2005;
- Kramer, D., "No Bang for the Buck: Public Diplomacy should remain a priority", in *Washington Times*, October 23, 2000;
- Lai, B., "Examining the Goals of U.S. Foreign Assistance in the Post-Cold War Period, 1991-96," *Journal of Peace Research*, January, 2003, pp. 103-128;
- Lancaster, C., *Transforming foreign aid: United States Assistance in the 21st century*. Washington DC: Institute for International Economics, 2000;
- Okoro, J., *Understanding Nigerian Foreign Policy*. Calabar; CATS Publishers, 2002;
- Tarnoff, C. and Nowels, L., *Foreign Aid: An Introductory Overview of U.S. Programs*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service/The Library of Congress, 2005;
- Tisch, S. J. and Wallace, M. B., *Dilemmas of Development Assistance: The What, Why and Who of Foreign Aid*. Boulder, C. O.: Westview Press, 1994;
- Wittkopt, U. R. et al., *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process*. Belmont: Thompson Higher Education, 2008.