THE AUSTRALIAN

US comeback from Kabul harder than Saigon

HENRY ERGAS
Follow @HenryErgas

By **HENRY ERGAS**, COLUMNIST
12:00AM SEPTEMBER 3, 2021

With the last American soldiers having left Afghanistan, the pall that hangs over this week's celebration of the ANZUS Treaty's 70th anniversary is as thick as it is unmistakeable. Perhaps the only, however feeble, ray of sunshine is the claim made by several highly respected commentators – including Paul Kelly and Greg Sheridan on these pages – that the US's international standing recovered quickly from its humiliating defeat in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, the analogy is misplaced and historically inaccurate. At the heart of the error is a simple fact: in stark contrast to today's situation, in which the West faces an increasingly powerful and aggressive China, the Soviet Union – which was undoubtedly the West's principal adversary in the period that followed the fall of Saigon – was beset by weaknesses that severely limited, and ultimately crippled, its ability to benefit from America's loss of credibility.

Late in 1974, Leonid Brezhnev's longstanding health problems, which were compounded by an addiction to barbiturates, became acute, drastically undermining his authority and deepening the factional conflicts that plagued the Soviet governing caste. But just as the Soviet Union's gerontocracy lost its capacity for cohesive action, the regime's economic problems deepened, threatening the fragile social consensus that Brezhnev's commitment to improving the living standards of ordinary citizens had secured.

Nowhere were the failings clearer than in agriculture. While Joseph Stalin's taboo on importing wheat had already been broken in 1963, successive harvest failures increased purchases of foreign grain from 2.2 million tonnes in 1970 to 29 million in 1982 and then to 46 million in 1984, eroding the Soviet Union's foreign exchange reserves.

At the same time, worsening shortages of consumer goods, which forced workers to spend hours searching for basic necessities, and widespread alcoholism – fuelled by a near doubling over the preceding 20 years in per capita alcohol consumption – had devastating effects on absenteeism and labour productivity, aggravating central planning's perennial inefficiencies and contributing to a more than halving in economic growth.

The picture was even grimmer in eastern Europe, where the satellite regimes, in an effort to prevent slowing growth rates from turning into falling real wages and mass discontent, sustained consumption levels by borrowing from Western banks, which were flush with recycled petrodollars.

Across the bloc, total hard currency debt soared from $US6bn in 1970 to $US56bn by 1980, before climbing to $US90bn in 1989, with no end of escalation in sight. As tottering regimes funded rising interest payments by borrowing even more, the capitalists, to paraphrase Lenin, had sold the communists the rope with which to hang themselves.

All that brought sharply home the conflict between guns and butter, strengthening Brezhnev's determination to salvage the detente he had painstakingly put in place with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Already during the Nixon years, Brezhnev's emphasis on detente had caused him to repeatedly rebuff defence minister Andrei Grechko, who believed agreements with the "imperialists" were dangerous and unnecessary; under the administrations of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, it led him to spend scarce political capital on fruitlessly pursuing further rounds of arms limitation talks.

Of course, the search for agreement didn't prevent the Soviet Union from pushing ahead with far-reaching weapons development and deployment plans. Nor was the Soviet Union dissuaded from fulfilling what Brezhnev termed its "revolutionary internationalist duty" with regard to "progressive regimes" in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

But in each of the main flashpoints that emerged after the fall of Saigon – Angola, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan and Nicaragua – the archival evidence overwhelmingly suggests Soviet involvement did not reflect a deliberate strategy of global expansion; it was instead largely reactive and often reluctant, responding to a hodgepodge of opportunities that local forces, perceiving a vacuum created by US weakness, had seized, in many cases with what the Kremlin considered Fidel Castro's reckless encouragement.

Every bit as important, where those efforts succeeded, it was mainly because of the limitations, hesitations and inconsistencies of the US's post-Vietnam administrations. In a pattern that makes the 1970s perhaps the most erratic decade in US foreign policy, the 12 years between Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's inaugurations witnessed dramatic shifts from Kissinger's realpolitik to Ford's extreme caution and then to Carter's idiosyncratic idealism, before ending with Carter's conversion to an equally idiosyncratic brand of utopian hawkishness.

As those gyrations played themselves out, the positive outcomes of American diplomacy – such as the Camp David agreements – were flanked by catastrophic failures, including the entrenchment of Ruhollah Khomeini's regime in Iran and Carter's fateful decision to fund Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the fringe republics of the Soviet Union.

It would be wrong to blame those failures on the calibre of the presidents, though that certainly played a role. Rather, the difficulties in steering a new course at least partly reflected deep divisions within successive administrations about the lessons of Vietnam.

For some, the defeat proved the necessity of avoiding activism of any sort in the Third World; for others, the lesson was to combine redoubled boldness with clearer, more realistic objectives. Events in the international arena compounded the uncertainty, as the reordering of relations among the great powers – including the opening to China and the outbreak of war between China and Vietnam – carried ambiguous implications.

Challenged by those uncertainties, it took at least a decade for American foreign policy to project a coherent view of the world – and even then it was never truly tested, as the Soviet Union collapsed largely under the weight of its own contradictions and of Mikhail Gorbachev's policy choices.

Now, as the fall of Kabul reverberates around the globe, we have all the difficulties the West faced in the wake of Vietnam with none of the luxuries. Rather than an adversary that is poorly led, overstretched and running out of steam, China's able, ambitious and assertive leadership is systematically accumulating the military capabilities and strategic relationships required to project power beyond its frontiers. As it advances on that path, the allies we need if there is to be an effective counterweight will, quite rightly, question the West's commitment and reliability.

And in an environment rendered even more fraught by mounting threats from Russia and Iran, Joe Biden's inability to articulate a convincing sense of global purpose can only make that questioning especially insistent.

Back in 1998, when the Clinton administration was seeking a new characterisation of its international role, then secretary of state Madeleine Albright perceptively termed America "the indispensable nation". With Afghanistan proving to be the graveyard not just of empires but of illusions, whether the United States is as dependable as it is indispensable must, on this 70th anniversary of ANZUS, be shrouded in doubt.