

focus

Libyan distractions

American harassment of Libya, intensified this March and April by the naval and air manoeuvres off the Libyan coast and the subsequent bombing raids, is part of the comprehensive new Third World strategy now being implemented by Washington under the banner of 'the Reagan Doctrine'. Although the elements of this Doctrine were put into operation as soon as Reagan came to office in 1981, it was only in 1985, in his 'State of the Union' address, that it was spelt out in clear and official terms.

In essence, it has at least four components. One is the increased supply of arms and financial support to Third World regimes facing revolutionary insurgencies. US military aid to the Third World has increased at twice the rate of economic aid since 1981, and its use in countries like El Salvador has been for directly counter-revolutionary endeavours.

The second component is aid to groups seeking to overthrow revolutionary regimes in the Third World, particularly those allied to the USSR. Of the eight anti-communist insurgencies now taking place, four at least receive US support: those in Cambodia, Afghanistan, Angola and Nicaragua. The



four others – in Laos, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Surinam – could be candidates in the future.

The third component of the Reagan Doctrine is the active manipulation of revolutionary situations, in such a way that last-minute political changes are used to dam popular advances. The lesson drawn from the fall of the Shah in Iran and of the Somozas in Nicaragua was that the US should intervene behind the scenes to remove the dictator but save the regime, and in particular the army. This is the ploy which has now been tried in Sudan, Haiti and the Philippines, and, in a different way, in El Salvador.

These three elements of the Reagan Doctrine constitute a wide-ranging counter-revolutionary strategy, but one that does not directly involve US forces in combat. In a situation where the US public and Congress are not yet willing to sustain serious combat casualties in Third World situations, this is a policy of counter-revolution on the cheap.

But the problem with it is that it relies on some objective factors to be put into operation. Libya does not provide such conditions. While Gadafy is an easy enough figure against whom to mobilise Western opinion, there is no active insurgency within Libya for the CIA to back, and the obvious regional ally to substitute for the USA in harassing Libya, namely Egypt, has till now been reluctant to do so. There is an opposition inside Libya, of a radical Islamic variety, and the unspoken irony of the situation is that if the Libyan regime as a whole were overthrown it would in all probability be replaced by one more like that of Iran.

Faced with the compulsion to show pugnacity in the Third World, and the lack of appropriate surrogates, the USA has had to steam in itself. But this leaves open the question of what harassing Libya is meant to achieve. It may be that the US naval manoeuvres and direct military strikes will set in train a process that will culminate in the removal of Gadafy. But such actions on their own will not unseat Gadafy, who has a well-organised security system: the under-publicised side of the whole story is that in the first years after he came to power in 1969 Gadafy received protection from the CIA itself.

Like many of Reagan's other Third World initiatives, the campaign against Libya has political as much as military functions. For it provides an ideal opening for the playing out of the fourth component of the Reagan Doctrine, namely 'anti-terrorism'. This now fashionable activity provides a spurious legi-



timisation for attacking any Third World opponents that the USA dislikes, and serves as a suitable cover for the fact that the CIA under William Casey has now become the largest promoter of terrorism in the world through its aid to counter-revolutionary insurgencies.

One nefarious consequence of this US campaign is that it has cast Gadafy in the light of progressive anti-imperialism and enhanced his status in the Third World. The point that all the right-wing propaganda about him obscures is that Gadafy is of greatest danger not to the USA but to the revolutionary forces in the Middle East itself. He it was who aided the Sudanese counter-revolution in 1971, promoted the invasion of South Yemen in 1972, and fostered the split in the PLO in 1983.

Gadafy has been a thoroughly unreliable ally for progressive forces in the region, and has done more than any other contemporary Arab leader to confuse and discredit the Palestinian cause by the brazen anti-semitism of his opposition to Israel. Perhaps the greatest indictment of all is that he has done so little to provide a credible alternative to the increasingly oppressed population of Egypt, his neighbour on the east. Gadafy's vicious campaign against 'stray dogs', his term for political opponents, and the assassinations at home and abroad, are all part of

his grotesque and dangerous politics.

Herein lies the real truth of Gadafy's confrontation with the USA. The verbal hype and posturings over territorial waters are of no practical significance whatsoever, and indeed provide an ideal excuse for US actions in the region. Like Khomeini in the hostages crisis, Gadafy practises an 'anti-imperialism of fools', one that diverts energies and attention from the real problems facing the Middle Eastern peoples and channels them into theatre and demagoguery.

It seems as if, for reasons of naive idealism, or mercenary attachment, sections of the European Left have taken Gadafy seriously. The time to do so is when he makes a contribution to the liberation of the Arab peoples on land and ceases his diversions on the waves of the Gulf of Sirte.

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