

Holbrooke: Insensitive Choice for a Sensitive Region

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Obama's choice for special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, arguably the most critical area of U.S. foreign policy, is a man with perhaps the most sordid history of any of the largely disappointing set of foreign policy and national security appointments.

Richard Holbrooke got his start in the Foreign Service during the 1960s, in the notorious pacification programs in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. This ambitious joint civilian-military effort not only included horrific human rights abuses but also proved to be a notorious failure in curbing the insurgency against the U.S.-backed regime in Saigon. This was an inauspicious start in the career of someone Obama hopes to help curb the insurgency against the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan.

In Asia

In the late 1970s, Holbrooke served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. In this position, he played a major role in formulating the Carter administration's support for Indonesia's occupation of East Timor and the bloody counterinsurgency campaign responsible for up to a quarter-million civilian deaths. Having successfully pushed for a dramatic increase in U.S. military aid to the Suharto dictatorship, he then engaged in a cover-up of the Indonesian atrocities. He testified before Congress in 1979 that the mass starvation wasn't the fault of the scorched-earth campaign by Indonesian forces in the island nation's richest agricultural areas, but simply a legacy of Portuguese colonial neglect. Later, in reference to his friend Paul Wolfowitz, then the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, Holbrooke described how "Paul and I have been in frequent touch to make sure that we keep [East Timor] out of the presidential campaign, where it would do no good to American or Indonesian interests."

In a particularly notorious episode while heading the State Department's East Asia division, Holbrooke convinced Carter to release South Korean troops under U.S. command in order to suppress a pro-democracy uprising in the city of Kwangju. Holbrooke was among the Carter administration officials who reportedly gave the OK to General Chun Doo-hwan, who had recently seized control of the South Korean government in a military coup, to wipe out the pro-democracy rebels. Hundreds were killed.

He also convinced President Jimmy Carter to continue its military and economic support for the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines.

At the UN

Holbrooke, as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in the late 1990s, criticized the UN for taking leadership in conflict resolution efforts involving U.S. allies, particularly in the area of human rights. For example, in October 2000 he insisted that a UN Security Council resolution criticizing the excessive use of force by Israeli occupation forces against Palestinian demonstrators revealed an unacceptable bias that put the UN "out of the running" in terms of any contributions to the peace process.

As special representative to Cyprus in 1997, Holbrooke unsuccessfully pushed the European Union to admit Turkey, despite its imprisonment of journalists, its ongoing use of the death penalty, its widespread killing of civilians in the course of its bloody counter-insurgency war in its Kurdish region, and other human rights abuses.

In the Former Yugoslavia

Holbrooke is perhaps best known for his leadership in putting together the 1995 Dayton Accords, which formally ended the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Though widely praised in some circles for his efforts, Holbrooke remains quite controversial for his role. For instance, the agreement allows Bosnian Serbs to hold on to virtually all of the land they had seized and ethnically cleansed in the course of that bloody conflict. Indeed, rather than accept the secular concept of national citizenship that has held sway in Europe for generations, Holbrooke helped impose sectarian divisions that have made the country — unlike most of its gradually liberalizing Balkan neighbors — unstable, fractious, and dominated by illiberal ultra-nationalists.

As with previous U.S. officials regarding their relations with Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Panama's Manuel Noriega, Holbrooke epitomizes the failed U.S. policy toward autocratic rulers that swings between the extremes of appeasement and war. For example, during the 1996 pro-democracy uprising in Serbia Holbrooke successfully argued that the Clinton administration should back Milosevic, in recognition of his role in the successful peace deal over Bosnia, and not risk the instability that might result from a victory by Serb democrats. Milosevic initially crushed the movement. In response to increased Serbian oppression in Kosovo just a couple years later, however, Holbrooke became a vociferous advocate of the 1999 U.S.-led bombing campaign, creating a nationalist reaction that set back the reconstituted pro-democracy movement once again. The pro-democracy movement finally succeeded in the nonviolent overthrow of the regime, following Milosevic's attempt to steal the parliamentary elections in October 2000, but the young leaders of that movement remain bitterly angry at Holbrooke to this day.

Scott Ritter, the former chief UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspector who correctly assessed the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and predicted a disastrous outcome for the U.S. invasion, observes that “not only has he demonstrated a lack of comprehension when it comes to the complex reality of Afghanistan (not to mention Pakistan), Holbrooke has a history of choosing the military solution over the finesse of diplomacy.” Noting how the Dayton Accords were built on the assumption of a major and indefinite NATO military presence, which would obviously be far more problematic in Afghanistan and Pakistan than in Europe, Ritter adds: “This does not bode well for the Obama administration.”

Ironically, back in 2002-2003, when the United States had temporarily succeeded in marginalizing Taliban and al-Qaeda forces, Holbrooke was a strong supporter of redirecting American military and intelligence assets away from the region in order to invade and occupy Iraq. Obama and others presciently criticized this reallocation of resources at that time as likely to lead to the deterioration of the security situation in the country and the resurgence of these extremist groups.

It's unclear, then, why Obama would choose someone like Holbrooke for such a sensitive post. Indeed, it's unclear as to why — having been elected on part for his anti-war credentials — Obama's foreign policy and national security appointments have consisted primarily of such unreconstructed hawks. Advocates of a more enlightened and rational foreign policy still have a long row to hoe.

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