‘An austere ostrich of awesome authority was lecturing younger ostriches one day on the superiority of their species to all other species.’ These are the first words of one of James Thurber’s *Fables for Our Time*, about a conference of ostriches called to find out why they couldn’t fly. One impatient young ostrich, Oliver by name, was commenting bitterly that while man—an animal—could fly sitting down, ostriches—birds—couldn’t fly at all. The old ostrich looked severely at Oliver, first with one eye and then with the other. ‘Man is flying too fast for a world that is round,’ he said. ‘Soon he will catch up with himself in a great rear-end collision, and man will never know that what hit man from behind was man.’ So far, we’ve avoided this rear-end collision, but we shouldn’t be too complacent about our escape.

We have been very slow—I hope not fatally slow—to recognise the revolutionary nature of the changes that have taken place in the world in these last 50 years. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the world—or at least the dominant western part of it—was held together by a balance-of-power system which was rough and often inequitable, but which worked. The European powers who largely ran that world had an underlying mutual interest in making the system work, not as a means of avoiding war, because it didn’t avoid war, but at least of avoiding the chaos which seems to follow our wars of this century. They even observed certain rules of conduct, certain restraints and the acceptance of certain limitations in the way they fought each other. There was always the possibility —indeed the likelihood—of the dynastic enemy of today becoming the dynastic ally of tomorrow. The primary object of this kind of war was peace and policy. Victory was a means to an end. The people were supposed only to fight and die, which they did usually without ‘reasoning why’.

All that ended for ever in August 1914, when we entered on the wars of political religion in this 20th century, passionate democratic and national crusades; wars of unconditional surrender, of squeezing the vanquished until the pips squeak, in Lloyd George’s rousing phrase. So today, instead of a pluralistic, conventionally armed balance-of-power world, we have a bipolar nuclear world. Most of the powerful, though not necessarily the most populous, nations of the world, are grouped in two blocs, centred on two super-powers. The earlier forces of balance that made for at least some degree of restraint and order no longer operate. We are now groping for other forces to take their place which will be adequate to keep the peace. But all we have at the moment is a balance of mutual, nuclear deterrence between two superpowers.

A good illustration of the nature of today’s bipolar system, and of the relationship between and within the two blocs, is found in the position of two countries: one in Nato, Greece, and the other in the Warsaw Pact, Czechoslovakia. Let us suppose—and this I assure you is purely hypothetical—that there were a successful communist
coup in Greece, and that the new Greek government wanted to align itself with the Warsaw Pact. Greece is now in the American, or, if you want to make it more acceptable, in the Nato sphere of influence. If Greece tried to withdraw from Nato, not by a free vote of the people, but by a *coup d'etat* engineered with outside support, the United States might feel an international crisis had been created sufficiently serious to warrant a threat of force to stop it; as it did in Cuba, a country very much closer to home. But any threat of force would have to include the possible use of nuclear force, because that is the only way in which it could have the desired deterrent effect on the other bloc so much stronger in conventional forces. Moscow, on the other hand, would, in a parallel situation, have conventional armies strong enough for effective use against any conventional force that might be opposed to it. It is in a position to impose its will on non-nuclear nations by conventional force alone; even if the USA helped with ‘conventional’ military aid. If that aid included the use of nuclear force, then the United States would have to take the responsibility for converting the war into a nuclear one and destroying both the aggressor and the victim and perhaps everybody else.

So there is a great political difference between the position in which the United States would find itself if an allied country —after a revolutionary change of regime.— decided to move over to the other camp, and the relative ease with which the Russians could call a satellite to heel, as we have just seen them do in Czechoslovakia. The summer’s crisis made perfectly plain the attitude of the USSR towards even the possibility of a move away from Warsaw totalitarianism. The notorious Warsaw letter to the Czech Communist Party last July stated: ‘We will never allow “imperialism”, by peaceful means or by force, to change the balance of power in its favour.’ Brezhnev made the new ‘Monroe Doctrine for Socialist states’ official when he told the Polish Party Congress on 12 November last: ‘When a threat emerges to the cause of socialism in any socialist country, this is no longer a matter only for the people of the country in question but it is also a common problem, which is a matter of concern for all socialist countries. It goes without saying that such an action as military aid to a fraternal country can be caused only by the direct actions of the enemies of socialism inside the country and beyond its boundaries—actions which create a threat to the common interests of the socialist camp.’. The new doctrine may be somewhat ambiguously worded but in the case of Czechoslovakia the USSR has given it a clear and unambiguous interpretation. The Czechs are to be anchored in Warsaw.

The whole international community—and that includes socialist states like Yugoslavia, Algeria or even Cuba—will be deeply concerned about the extension of this doctrine to justify aggressive intervention in the affairs of other states. That concern must be made clear, but not by threats which are unclear insofar as carrying them out is concerned. I have never been much of a believer in the iron glove over the velvet hand type of diplomacy. Today diplomacy—in its major manifestations for peace and security—revolves around the two blocs I have been talking about. The most dangerous aspect of this two-bloc system is its rigidity. The old political alliances, because they were alliances between governments, were flexible arrangements. States could escape from them without too much difficulty. New leaders would emerge, and the groupings were constantly shifting. Now, because there are still only two powers that have the capacity to destroy the world and destroy themselves, the two super-powers, the others circle uneasily around them, as satellites or as free allies. The peripheral members haven’t the mobility to play a game of shifts
and balances even if they wished to. This kind of relationship may be inevitable in a bipolar world of the kind we live in, but it doesn’t constitute a solid and enduring foundation for peace or for a genuinely collective international organisation to preserve peace.

A few years back, when we seemed to be in greater immediate danger of nuclear war than now, there was a feeling among the smaller nations in the Atlantic alliance that the determination whether there was to be such a war or not was in the hands not so much of a group of allied states as of a group of men in Washington. This feeling expressed itself in the slogan: ‘No annihilation without representation.’

I remember once, before a meeting of the Nato Council in Paris at that time, 1954, the late Mr John Foster Dulles, the American Secretary of State, was dining with four or five of the members of the Council, of whom I was one. He was telling us, politely but frankly, that the smaller members of the alliance complained too much about lack of consultation; that the situation was so serious that we should rally round the USA in unity and strength, and not worry too much if we did not seem to be given enough chance to influence policy. In reply to a question from the Foreign Minister of Denmark, he said, among other things: ‘Denmark will have to take more risks for peace.’ You can imagine our reaction to a statement of that kind. Denmark, a small neighbour of the mighty Soviet Union, was taking a supreme risk for peace by its very membership in Nato. If there had been war, she would have been one of the first countries overrun and destroyed. Denmark was almost a hostage to fortune by being in Nato at all: Denmark was in Nato because her people rightly believed in collective action as the only way to maintain peace and security and prevent war. My European colleagues reframed from suggesting that Mr Dulles should go out to the US Mid-West and tell the farmers there that they should take more risks for peace. The incident has remained in my mind as an indication of the difficulty in building up a genuine collective-security system on a free democratic basis when one country is so much more powerful than the others, even when the desire of that country is to act as only one member of a free coalition, which of course is the United States’ desire.

In those early days there were people—there may still be a few—who talked about a pre-emptive war as the only way by which we could remove this danger; to strike first. There’s less panic talk like that now. There is even less talk—or there was before Czechoslovakia—about the policy of containment. I don’t want to be unfair to Mr Dulles—he is not here to defend himself—but there was once a very real anxiety that his policy of containment would be applied in a way to perpetuate animosity between the two blocs and remove any chance of a détente: because containment seemed to be based on a dogmatic, inflexible stand: ‘Thus far and no further. If you move beyond a certain line, we will take the necessary action.’ We hear less now of this kind of talk. Collective policy for effective defence—which remains necessary—requires strength but not such rigidity.

There is also another threat to our democratic system: in the appeal of communism to the emerging nations of the developing and uncommitted world: the appeal that might seem to them to be a short cut to prosperity and a means of security against the return of imperialism, as they called it, but an appeal that could cause conflict on a new front between the blocs. When you have to compete against this kind of communist appeal, you can only hope to show by policy and example that your kind of society offers a
better model to emulate: you can only try to give the people who need assistance greater help and a deeper understanding than communism can ever do, while making sure there are no inadmissible political strings attached to your sympathy and help. I think we’re more aware now of the need for this kind of counter-appeal, but we’re still not making a good enough job of it. But then neither are the communists, whose mid-Victorian frame of reference is notoriously inapplicable to the middle of this century.

We may know this, and know that Karl Marx is as dead as Queen Victoria. What we would like to be sure of is that the Russians also know it; that they are not playing the game with new managers but according to the old rules. So we ask ourselves: does communist imperialism represent primarily a messianic urge to spread a new religion, or a Russian desire to win dominance for a nation-state? Or is it simply a defensive conviction that the capitalist states, unless they are faced with unconquerable military power, will plot to destroy the communist states, and in particular the Socialist Fatherland? I don’t find it easy to make up my own mind whether the motive is more offensive than defensive. I didn’t have so much difficulty 15 years ago. I was satisfied that it was offensive. Now it’s not so easy to be sure.

In my view, communist leaders have not abandoned the ideological desire to establish communism throughout the world. How could they? It’s their religion. Mr Khrushchev used to insist on this ad nauseam: ‘We don’t have to fight you, because your grandchildren will all be communists anyway.’ But his reaction suggests that the threat is not the same as we considered it to be in the early days of the Cold War. For one thing, there are more members of the ‘Establishment’ in the Soviet Union now, and an Establishment, I’m told, is never dynamic, let alone revolutionary. The truth is almost certainly that both offensive and defensive motivations are all mixed up in the Soviet people, as they’re all mixed up in everybody. They may not want war—they should have had enough of that—but they want to spread communism for their own protection, because Western capitalist behaviour, ever since the interventions on the side of the White Armies against the Bolshevik revolution, has persuaded them that their gospel was right when it insisted that capitalism would not cease to attempt to destroy communism.

In the process of creating a strong state and a strong army for these purposes, Russian chauvinism has also been aroused, just as racial Chinese arrogance has been aroused by national revolutionary emotions. As always, there are men willing to exploit these emotions, to advance their own political power. But it doesn’t make much sense to talk about a common communist purpose as something solid and monolithic, even inside the Soviet Union. The motivations of a Red Air Force technician, a Leningrad chemist, a Moscow bureaucrat dedicated to increasing the production of cotton or refrigerators, a Communist Party secretary—all these are likely to vary widely. Public opinion may not have full sway over the Soviet government, but the varying motives of Soviet citizens are increasingly reflected in the pressures that do get through to their leaders. There has been an example of this in the recent Czech crisis: 20 years ago there would have been no restraint, no limitations on the use of power necessary to crush and destroy Czechoslovakia.

Once, in Stalin’s time, I had a very private and confidential discussion with a highly placed Russian. I told him that I was very interested in some questions that we never
seemed to talk about in our discussions. ‘How do your processes of government work?’ I asked. ‘When does the Politburo meet? Who draws up the agenda? And what kind of arguments do you have?’ I’ve never forgotten his reply, ‘well, we usually meet around midnight. There’s lots of talk. Everybody has an opportunity to express his views. But whatever view is expressed, and though it may conceivably have some influence on the leader, when the time comes he says, “It will be done this way,” and it’s done. There’s no nonsense, there’s no further discussion.’ You may say that this is not too far removed from the procedure in some democratic cabinets. But my friend made the difference clear to me when he indicated that it was not wise to be on the opposition side of an argument too often. If you were, it was likely to be Siberia, or perhaps worse; not the back benches or the Chiltern Hundreds. I don’t think the Russian system is operating in quite the same despotic Stalinist way at the present time, but it remains a totalitarian dictatorship.

Externally, too, there have been some chips off the communist bloc; in fact, there’s been a deep split in the old bloc. This division, which has reduced the threat of total aggression, has given a greater feeling of assurance to the non-committed countries, and more flexibility to their policies and more general assurance to us all. If, however, there is to be any significant improvement in coexistence between Washington and Moscow, it will have to be on some other basis than mutual regard. We Anglo-Saxons always like to feel that whatever we do is based on some ennobling and worthy emotion. But no real progress in détente with the Soviet Union and its allies can be made on that basis. It will be made only by seeking and finding areas of mutually profitable co-operation: based on mutual self-interest and on any confidence and good faith that may develop from it. For example, the Soviet Union has, on occasion, been just as determined as the United States not to be dragged into a war rashly or by an accident, or by policy on the part of an ally: that’s mutual self-interest.

Again, the two super-powers have found a common interest in trying to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. They have worked together quite constructively in this field. There is also a dawning recognition of a community of scientific interest, which has increased as we have begun to move out of our own planet. A common political concern has been shown at the United Nations on certain matters—though usually it has been disguised from the uninitiated; and in any event, it’s not given the publicity that the more customary bitter verbal conflicts always managed to secure.

This common concern between the Soviet Union and the United States has been shown in their similar attitude to certain bush fires which neither side wished to see spread: in the Congo, for instance. Most important of all, there is now a common fear of Communist China in Washington and Moscow, and there is nothing like a common fear to bring people together. The Soviet Union could have been a lot more difficult in Vietnam than they have been during the last three years or so, if they had not feared, not only the United States in Vietnam, but Communist China in Vietnam—and on their own borders.

If co-operation is to develop, if we are to make any progress, there will also have to be compromises on specific issues. As one who has been in domestic and international politics for many years, I know that while justice can never be divorced from the means of achieving it, sometimes we have to accept a settlement based on very rough justice, as the lesser of evils. That’s the only valid reason why we have
today two Germanies, two Koreas, two Vietnams; and, indeed, for accepting the temporary destruction of some national freedoms and some very old and civilised societies.

Another cause of tension between the two blocs has been economic, including the gap between their standards of life. But this also is changing for the better. The Russian people have reason to look forward to their economic future with far more confidence than some years ago. Their consumer tensions, if I may call them that, have been reduced. There is even the beginning of a perception of common economic interests between them and the West, as both sides modify their economic theories.

These are at least hopeful signs. But we would be very foolish to take for granted that this new international awareness in the Soviet Union, this new, if hesitant, move towards some very limited freedom, or at least less rigidity in totalitarianism —this growing sense of material well-being —will automatically subdue any aggressive national and ideological drive. A nation with enormous power at its call is always potentially dangerous. It always appears as a threat to somebody, especially when it believes it has a world mission. The Russians are a very gifted race, with qualities of intellectual brilliance and physical endurance that certainly qualify them to be leaders in the world. We may hope that they can find some satisfaction for their national emotions of pride and patriotism, in gold medals at the Olympic Games or in setting new records on the moon, and in catching up with the West in computers and Coca-Cola. If not, and if their intention should be the simple aggressive one of seeking out the first opportunity to destroy the Western world militarily, and plant their flag on all the continents as they plan to plant it on the moon—well, in its savage way this would at least be rational, and we could cope with it, even though everything and everybody might be destroyed in the process.

There are those who believe a greater danger lies in their obsession that we are going to strike them; and that out of this comes the drive to set up rocket bases and do other things that contribute to our sense of insecurity. This, in its turn, so goes the argument, leads our side to establish our bases near their borders, which intensifies their sense of insecurity. So the vicious and fatal circle is formed. We cut through it by stumbling into a war which we never meant to begin in the first place.

In all this, I am not advocating that we abandon our military defences whenever things seem to be improving politically; any more than that we should rush in panic to add to them when there is a set-back. Strong military power for defence will have to be retained as an agent of deterrence, as a basis on which you can give strength to your diplomacy and your negotiations, while avoiding its provocative or threatening display like the plague.

There are people in the Kremlin and in the Pentagon who believe in military power as an agent of the wrong kind of persuasion: not as something from which you negotiate for accommodation but something to be used as a threat to bring about the achievement of a political objective. This influence shows itself in another aspect, which President Eisenhower once went out of his way to refer to in the last broadcast which he made as President of the United States:

We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. This conjunction of an immense military establishment
and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. In the
councils of government we must guard against the acquisition of
unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-
industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced
power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this
combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.

President Eisenhower was in a good position to know how a military-industrial
complex of this kind can influence and may increasingly seek to influence national
policy. This would be all the more dangerous if, as part of a general disarmament
agreement, certain defence industries which give so much employment; and which
have become an important part of the national economy, had to be eliminated. The
men who control these industries often wield political and economic power to resist
change even more effectively than can men in uniform. When they are allied with
those men in uniform, you have a combination which could become a threat to
civilian supremacy and international progress.

Therefore, while we recognise that the Russian fear of a threat from outside its
borders may be basically a paranoiac fear, we also ought to understand that from their
point of view it is not baseless. Somehow we have got to persuade the Russians and
their satellites that with common fears we also have common interests; that the
greatest of all common interests is the avoidance of war, whether by calculation or, as
is more likely, by accident—war which could destroy us all. If that seems a policy for
Utopia, I’d like to know a better one.