

Encyclopedia of American Military and Diplomatic History

Contributor Name: David Ekbladh

Contributor Affiliation: Tufts University

Contributor email: david.ekbladh@tufts.edu

MODERNIZATION THEORY

Modernization is one segment of a longer history of development ideas in U.S. foreign relations.

“Development” and “modernization” are closely related terms that defy simple definition.

Development is a broad concept that can be defined as a positively evaluated process of change across social, political, economic, and cultural spheres of life. Closely related to development, modernization is more easily defined. According to the approach that held sway in the twentieth century, modernization refers to an attempt to foster modernity—and modernity was typically defined by Western ideas, outlooks, and institutions, which were contrasted against traditional ideas and structures within the society being modernized. Modernization put great stock in ability science and technology to transform economies and societies. It also demanded profound cultural, social, and political change on the part of those nations and individuals targeted by the modernization process.

Modernization’s heritage is long. Antecedents can be found in the urge to “civilize” those seen as “backward” during the European colonization of North America. Modernization became a mission for the United States that easily mated with the country’s national pride in its mastery of science and technology. Indeed, technological capacity became a sign for many in the United States and the West that they had a right, if not an obligation, to direct and to share its accomplishments with those who lacked it. Groups outside the U.S. government often took the

lead in applying these ideas in the world. In the late nineteenth century, American missionaries increasingly integrated science and technology into their activities abroad. The urge to change societies to meet the challenges of modern, industrial society also motivated American Progressives, who as part of an international community of reformers sponsored programs at home and abroad to improve health, agriculture, urban life, and public affairs in ways that later informed modernization activities.

Such aspects were present both in the U.S. government's imperial "civilizing mission" in the Philippines after 1898 and also in a slate of early twentieth-century American military occupations in Central America and the Caribbean. In fact, these activities often drew upon the expertise of many nongovernmental groups that were already working abroad. However, these activities were not seen as part of a global program, and no permanent mechanism within the U.S. government was established to promote development.

Development in Depression and War. A critical turn came during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Liberal ideas that the United States supported were under threat from the ideological challenges of both Fascism and Communism, which had their own visions of global development. New approaches were sought that could promote development to secure the legitimacy of a liberal world order. These were found in the New Deal—itsself a hybrid of domestic and international reform ideas—and particularly in the large-scale economic and social development embodied by programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority. These programs offered a liberal brand of development that promised to be comprehensive, successful, and politically palatable, and they showed a willingness to accept significant state intervention and central economic planning. At the same time, the programs put great stock in the ability of technology to produce rapid, extensive, and invasive social and economic change. Key American

officials and institutions integrated these emerging ideas into new visions for global development to contain the appeal of Fascism and Communism and to buttress a liberal world order.

Altogether it was an approach that some began to call “modernization.”

By causing them to be employed to foster reconstruction and development worldwide, World War II helped refine these modernization ideas. Modernization became a mandate of both the nascent United Nations and one of its prominent specialized agencies, the World Bank. Modernization policies were in play during the transition from world war to cold war. In strategically important places like South Korea and Nationalist China, Americans attempted to bring stability through extensive programs of social, economic, and agricultural change. As the Soviet Union emerged as the primary global threat to a U.S.-led liberal world order, modernization increasingly came to be seen as an important means to contain its influence.

Modernization and the Cold War

President Harry S. Truman’s Point Four Program, so called because it was the fourth foreign-policy goal given in his 1949 inaugural address, promised U.S. technical aid to promote global modernization. A codification of policies that had been gestating since before World War II, the program led to initiatives that were instrumental in creating what had not existed before: formal and permanent foreign-aid bureaucracies within the U.S. government that had a global mission. These eventually grew into the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other supporting organizations.

During the Cold War, as at other historical moments, U.S. government efforts were complemented by the contributions of nongovernmental groups. With their long traditions of overseas work on development, American foundations, universities, businesses, voluntary groups, and missionary organizations brought considerable resources and expertise that were

often integral to larger U.S. government efforts to modernize poorer countries. By the 1950s, as decolonization accelerated and the confrontation with the Soviet Union deepened, modernization had a central importance in American foreign policy. The expansion of the activity of nongovernmental groups in the 1950s and 1960s mirrored increasing investment by the U.S. government in modernization activities worldwide. Programs that blended state and nonstate activity grew ever-more extensive, encompassing—to name only a few—agricultural assistance that supported the so-called green revolution; infrastructure assistance, especially for building large hydroelectric dams; assistance in constructing new institutions, ranging from militaries to legal systems; assistance for a variety of education programs; and sponsorship of aggressive population-control projects.

Rostow, Kennedy, and Vietnam. To explain this expansion of activity, the school of modernization theory emerged in the American social sciences and gained considerable influence over scholarship and policy. Although the school was diverse, a basic assumption was that all societies were converging on the sort of modern, industrial life that was exemplified by the West and by the United States in particular. One of the more famous exponents of modernization theory was Walt W. Rostow, an economist whose leading work, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), posited an evolutionary track for countries to follow to become modern, high-consumption societies. Rostow's book was meant as an explicit counterpoint to Marxist theories of development and displays the ideological competition at the heart of much U.S. modernization activity. Modernization was criticized (particularly on the political right), but many in the United States and around the world accepted its general framework of intensive, state-led programs to produce far-reaching economic, political, and social change.

President John F. Kennedy placed considerable emphasis on modernization as a means to compete with and contain the rising influence of Communism in what had become known as the Third World. Modernization was instrumental to the Alliance for Progress, a massive aid program to contain Communist influence in Latin America. Modernization ideas were most prominently and controversially enlisted to build a modern, anti-Communist nation in South Vietnam. There, counterinsurgency efforts by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who was advised by Rostow and other modernization devotees, put great stock in the ability of development programs to quell the conflict and show the international community that otherwise controversial American involvement in the region would be positive. Enormous resources were invested in South Vietnam, and it hosted the single-largest contingent of USAID staff anywhere in the world at the time. However, the war exposed the limits of the prevailing approaches to modernization, strained relations with nongovernmental groups, and soured opinion toward the type of large-scale technological programs that the United States advocated.

Modernization in Crisis

Vietnam exposed many limitations of the theory, but modernization faced other, broader problems in the 1960s. Other major U.S.-sponsored modernization programs—such as efforts around the Indus River in South Asia and in the Khuzistan region of Iran, as well as the Alliance for Progress—experienced significant difficulties and failed to deliver on promises. Frustrations with modern life were coupled with an increasingly vocal environmental movement that scrutinized the ecological consequences of massive technological programs, consequences that too often were unintended and negative. Others questioned whether large-scale projects best met the needs of people in poorer areas. Voices across the U.S. political spectrum and from around the globe interrogated many of the assumptions behind mainstream modernization theory. Part of

the shift was a growing distrust of the state and its role as the primary agent behind development projects.

New Concepts. Out of this crisis of modernization theory new concepts emerged. Perspectives that emphasized environmental needs and poverty gave rise to the idea of so-called sustainable development. Numerous nongovernmental groups reconsidered their approaches to development. Within the U.S. government, the Nixon Doctrine was enacted: its “New Directions” policy on foreign aid fundamentally restructured and shrank USAID and the official American approach to development. To lower its political profile and financial commitments, the United States pushed international institutions, especially the World Bank, forward into leading roles in development. Out of the tumult the World Bank emerged as the central institution in a chastened international development community.

By the 1970s the sort of modernization cultivated by the United States had been shattered. Modernization as a term, a school of scholarship, and a set of polities fell into disuse and disfavor. The statist programs, central planning, and large-scale transformations that had characterized modernization were further challenged in an era in which neoliberal politics, with its emphasis on the free market, came to predominate in economic and policy discourse. Foreign aid to promote development continued but had a reduced role in U.S. foreign policy and increasingly was directed toward a few key recipients, particularly Israel and Egypt. By the 1980s the World Bank was the dominant donor and Japan the single-largest national contributor to development activities.

New Developments After the Cold War

With the end of the Cold War, foreign aid to promote development further declined in importance. Development in general was fractured and lacked a clear rationale and set of

approaches to guide its implementation. The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the war on terror that followed shoved development back into the spotlight. Many ideas that had been dormant in foreign policy found their way back into American strategy and the agenda of the international community. Development resumed its strategic role in U.S. foreign policy: U.S. foreign aid increased, and new initiatives were announced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, including the Millennium Challenge Corporation, with the explicit hope that development would stifle the appeal of extremist movements. Nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq further emphasized development's attractiveness as a tactical tool. With USAID still stunted by the cuts of the 1970s, the U.S. military often took the lead in integrating development ideas into on-the-ground operations. The counterinsurgency doctrine that was belatedly adopted by U.S. forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan made development approaches instrumental to the goals of pacifying populations and stabilizing client regimes—and the results were often as uncertain as they had been for similar undertakings during the Cold War. Nevertheless, early in his administration, President Barack Obama made a firm commitment to development as a mechanism to achieve basic strategic goals, thus continuing a long trend in U.S. foreign relations.

See also AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT; ALLIANCE FOR PROGRESS; COLD WAR (1945–1991); CONTAINMENT; COUNTERINSURGENCY; FOREIGN AID; FOUNDATIONS, PHILANTHROPIC, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY; HUMAN RIGHTS, INTERNATIONAL; IDEOLOGY AS A FACTOR IN U.S. FOREIGN RELATIONS; KENNEDY, JOHN F.; MISSIONARY MOVEMENTS; POINT FOUR PROGRAM; ROSTOW, WALT W.; SOFT POWER, CONCEPT OF; *and* WORLD BANK.

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