

Soviets bid to become the sole superpower in the Middle East

by Rachel Douglas, Soviet Union Editor

On April 24, when the British flotilla was at sea and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon still weeks ahead, the veteran Soviet television journalist Valentin Zorin advised against preoccupation with the South Atlantic war: "What is happening . . . in the Near East region is not only very acute, but cannot be pushed aside by any, even the most urgent, sensational and acute events." By June 6, the Soviet government daily *Izvestia's* authoritative commentator A. Bovin was talking about "a new balance of power" in the Middle East, and on June 14 came a Soviet Government declaration to "warn Israel" that "the Middle East is an area lying in close proximity to the southern borders of the Soviet Union and developments there cannot help affecting the interests of the U.S.S.R."

But the opinion emerged in Washington and London with impressive uniformity that Soviet warnings and assertions of a stake in the Middle East were "hollow." "That and 35 cents will get you a cup of coffee," said one former National Security Council staff member about the Soviet government statement. If the *Washington Post* reported euphoria in the capital about the United States gaining influence in the Middle East "at the expense of any aspirations the the Soviet Union may have had," in London the excitement among British Arabists was over picking up the shards of shattered American policy in the region. In neither case was trouble anticipated from Moscow.

It is hard to say whether there was more of delusion in such estimations, or of amnesia. Making firm predictions of Soviet military action following Soviet verbal warnings has been a dubious endeavor for NATO analysts; the widespread conviction that the Soviets *would* invade Poland in 1980 demonstrates that as well as did the belief that they would *not* enter Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The eventual Moscow decision in these cases depended not only on the situation in the given country, but on the strategic geometry in which it took shape. The De-

ember 1979 dispatch of troops into Afghanistan was not only a show of force in a neighboring country where the Soviets had voiced a security interest, but it answered two American policies considered unacceptable by Moscow: the so-called China card and the Dec. 12, 1979 NATO decision to prepare the deployment of Pershing II nuclear-armed missiles in Europe, within several minutes' striking range of Soviet territory.

In mid-1982, the signals from Moscow indicate an evaluation of the world situation as far more set on a track of superpower showdown than it was two and a half years ago. Now that the Chief of Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces is talking about a live master plan of the West against the U.S.S.R., "encompassing all aspects of struggle, right up to balancing on the brink of war," and Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov a long-time ally of Leonid Brezhnev in the pursuit of trade-based detente, is telling his Eastern European counterparts to rally forces for "economic and technological independence" in the face of "an open offensive against socialism," it is folly to exclude Soviet military action in any area of strategic concern to Moscow.

It is even more wrong to suppose that Soviet effectiveness in the Middle East begins or ends with military assistance to Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The perception in the Soviet Union is different, as it is in the Middle East itself. A June 1 propaganda sheet from the Israeli Consulate in New York made the point, useful for the Israeli message to anybody listening in the United States, but also true: "Against the background of the overriding physical survival interests which preoccupy . . . all Arab leaders, there is the growing image of the U.S.S.R., as if it is in a uniquely superior position to meet many of the security concerns of these regional leaders. . . . While some Western observers expect 'moderate Arab leaders' to share a 'strategic consensus' against the Soviet threat . . . it is the potentially pro-Western Arab leaders who are the first to refute that

expectation.”

The Soviets are positioning themselves to be arbiters or allies for practically every state in the region. Traditional Soviet diplomacy, military presence, networks of Russian intelligence that historically interlock those of British intelligence—all of these capabilities of diverse Soviet factions come into play in today’s mode of building assets. They are making headway, not because of endearing themselves to Middle Eastern nations by skill or virtue, but because the U.S.S.R. is recognized as a power in the region in a way that the United States—Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) and all—increasingly is not.

A precedent for some of what the Russians are doing is the late Aleksei Kosygin’s mediation of an India-Pakistan conflict, at Tashkent in 1966. Today, Soviet diplomacy has an open field. The Soviets are moving where the U.S. lacks even semblance of a policy.

The Iran-Iraq war

Fighting broke out between Iran and Iraq on Sept. 22, 1980, just days before Brezhnev signed a 20-year Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with Syria. Was Moscow gaining one closer ally, but forced to choose between two other Mideast countries where it had large economic and political investments? In the first weeks of the war, intelligence sources reported that Soviet arms were going to both sides. Then, as months passed, Soviet relations with Iraq cooled.

A year and a half later, however, it was to the Iran-Iraq war that A. Bovin pointed as evidence for “a new balance of power now being established” in the region. Here were Syria and Libya, Iraq’s erstwhile “hardline” companions, backing Iran, while “moderate, conservative” Jordan and Saudi Arabia sided with Baghdad and Iran received Israeli armaments, observed Bovin.

As for the Soviets, they are once again working on both sides of the conflict, aiming to be guarantors of its eventual resolution.

On June 4, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz arrived in Moscow for the highest-level open diplomatic contact since shortly after the war broke out. He met not only Boris Ponomarev, the old Communist International official who oversees Soviet ties to foreign communist parties and liberation movements, but also Deputy Prime Minister Ivan Arkhipov, of the southern Ukraine heavy-industry faction which produced Brezhnev’s closest associates. Arkhipov had paid a call in Damascus, which is chronically at loggerheads with Iraq, just a week earlier. Also in the first week of June, the Soviet-Iraqi Friendship Society was revived, with expressions of good will from Iraq’s new ambassador to Moscow, a relative of President Saddam Hussein and a man with a background in intelligence.

In Iran, the Soviets have added to their leverage among the mullahs, and other entities like the famed communist Tudeh Party, in the tangle of Iranian politics (leverage based largely on the British-related networks of triple-spy Kim Philby and his ilk), by activating the economic projects begun with Iran under the Shah. In recent months, upgrading of roads and influx of technicians from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have established an infrastructure to expand Iran’s trade with the Soviet sector as much as threefold.

The Soviets have assigned a new ambassador to Iran, the long-time desk chief at the Foreign Ministry for the “northern tier”—Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkey.

Afghanistan and its neighbors

As the Mideast crisis exploded in Lebanon, the Soviets reportedly directed warnings to Pakistan’s military leaders not to pursue its alliance with “the United States and China.” According to informed sources, Foreign Minister Gromyko himself told Pakistani Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan that the U.S.S.R. was ready for friendly relations with Pakistan, including more economic aid, if Pakistan moved away from its military axis with the U.S.A. Gromyko also encouraged the Pakistanis to be serious about talks with the Soviet-backed Afghan regime, and, indeed, Yaqub Khan went from New York (where he saw Gromyko) to Geneva for a round of United Nations-mediated talks with Afghan Foreign Minister Dost. It was the closest Pakistan has come to recognizing the Babrak Karmal regime of Afghanistan.

What was involved was not only military victories by Soviet forces against Afghan rebels, reported at the end of May. Gromyko’s diplomacy is also effective because it intersects the pressure brought to bear on Pakistan, independently, by India and by Pakistan’s Arab backers, particularly Saudi Arabia, who fear Pakistan’s opening the door to RDF bases in the region. After Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s trip to Saudi Arabia in April, according to Indian newspapers, the Saudis summoned Yaqub Khan and Bangladesh President Gen. Ershad to tell each, in turn, to “resolve their differences” with India.

Jordan and the gulf

In June 1981, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud said of the Soviet Union, with which Saudi Arabia does not have diplomatic relations, “We recognize the Soviet Union and acknowledge its superpower status.” He asserted that there were ongoing Soviet-Saudi contacts through their embassies in third countries.

In 1980-1981, the Soviets and Saudis each advanced partial Mideast peace plans; neither flatly dismissed the other’s, and some sources hinted about their comple-

mentarity. Brezhnev's plan was a proposal for demilitarization of the Persian Gulf and international guarantees of safe trade in that area; he presented it first in a December 1980 speech to the parliament of India. Months later came the "Fahd plan," the eight points for Middle East stabilization formulated by then-Crown Prince, now King Fahd. Soviet official media declined to condemn the Fahd plan, calling it rather evidence of an independent impulse in Saudi foreign policy.

A. Bovin's June 6 broadcast defined the late King Khalid's reported request, through Jordan, to Iraq's Saddam Hussein to step down, if necessary, "to clear the way for peace" as part of the shift to a "new balance of power."

Jordan not only buys arms from the U.S.S.R., but maintains frequent diplomatic contact, up to the level of King Hussein's May 1981 trip to the U.S.S.R. (another visit is scheduled for late June 1982). On April 26, Soviet Communist Party daily *Pravda's* senior Middle East editor, Pavel Demchenko, interviewed King Hussein and published his statement that, "I think the climate for the international conference [on the Middle East] proposed by the Soviet Union is ripening, and we are drawing nearer to its convocation."

In the Persian Gulf, however, the most active channel for Soviet diplomacy has been a very English one—the small Gulf states, especially Kuwait. The biggest promoter of opening diplomatic relations between the U.S.S.R. and the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia, is Kuwait, whose foreign minister boasted after Kuwaiti Sheik Jaber al Ahmed's tour of the Balkans last year that "definite progress is being made" towards these relations. Kuwait and the U.S.S.R. already have exchanged ambassadors. Under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council, formed in 1981, the Kuwaitis are also active in negotiations for reconciliation or even unity between North and South Yemen, a project which the Soviets also have a perennial eye on, for their own purposes.

Syria and the military presence

Some of the most dubious Soviet assets are, ironically enough, the Middle Eastern states with which Moscow has treaties and close military relationships. In Syria, as with the other "Steadfastness Front" members like Libya, Moscow is counting on individuals—Syria's Assad or Libya's Qaddafi—who have commitment to little else than their own status as potentates, certainly not to the stability or the development of the region.

These are assets delivered to Moscow by the British or by European oligarchs' intelligence services in hopes of having a lever of control over Soviet policy in the Middle East. The Soviets are quite game to take the assets with the troubled region and run.

Regardless of the origin of Moscow's relationship with these countries, they have provided an opportunity for increased Russian military presence, which has been well exploited. Shortly after the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Syria and the U.S.S.R. was signed in October 1980, Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam secured large new consignments of Soviet weaponry. In July 1981, when Israel was warning about the newly stationed Syrian surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon, the Soviet navy held its largest maneuvers ever in the Mediterranean Sea, involving 50 ships and a landing operation. One year later, when Israel bombed those installations, the First Deputy Chief of Soviet Air Defenses was hastily dispatched to Damascus for consultations.

The Friendship Treaty itself contains a clause identical to those that codify Soviet relations with its close non-Warsaw Pact military allies in the developing sector. Article 6 specifies that, "In cases of . . . situations jeopardizing peace or security of one of the parties or posing a threat to peace or violating peace and security in the whole world, . . . the parties shall enter without delay into contact . . . with a view to coordinating their positions and to cooperation in order to remove the threat . . . and restore peace."

Relations with Israel

The Russians omit nobody in their cultivation of relationships that could be useful in the Middle East, especially if they might detract from the fading American presence. Early 1982 saw a flurry of diplomatic activity, involving Romania, that augmented ongoing, covert Soviet-Israeli intelligence contacts. Vasile Pungan, the frequent emissary of Romania's President Nicolae Ceausescu to the Middle East, traveled to Israel, Egypt, and Lebanon at a moment when there were reports of new Soviet-Israeli arrangements about emigration of Soviet Jews. Ceausescu has as many ties to the Venetian-origin oligarchy as he does to the Warsaw Pact, but he represents a channel for Soviet overtures without overt Soviet involvement.

Karen Brutents, a deputy of Ponomarev who, like Bovin, sometimes speaks frankly about the exigencies of power politics, said on an April Soviet TV discussion show that "contradictions and divergence of interests" in U.S.-Israeli relations were coming into sharper focus. Prime Minister Begin has complained that the United States treats Israel "like a banana republic," Brutents noted. To this, his interlocutor, think tanker Yevgenii Primakov, rejoined, "However, it also happens that Israel treats the United States like a banana republic. This also happens!" Which goes to emphasize that the erosion of U.S. power is a central premise of Soviet policy in the Middle East today.