Soviets shift military strategy; relationship to Germany emphasized

by Konstantin George

The Soviet Union is responding to the Anglo-American plunge toward war in the Persian Gulf with both a short-term policy for the immediate crisis, and a simultaneous strategic military shift to deal with the “Pandora’s box” of wars and crises now threatening to erupt over the coming months.

Moscow’s short-term policy is exemplified by a blitz of last-minute mediation diplomacy to prevent or at least postpone an attack on Iraq by London and Washington. More significantly, the Soviet leadership is positioning itself, based on the Anglo-American commitment to early war in the Gulf, and is devising a strategy for the first half of the 1990s.

This Soviet view of the global situation was presented by President Mikhail Gorbachov in an Aug. 17 speech to officers and troops on maneuvers in the Odessa Military District. The speech, possibly the most important foreign policy statement he has made to date, was reprinted in full in the Aug. 19 Pravda, Izvestia, and the military daily, Krasnaya Zvezda. But its most important parts received no coverage in the Western news media.

Soviet diplomacy over the Gulf

Before turning to that speech, a review is in order of the array of Soviet moves to stop or put off war commenced immediately after the Odessa speech.

On Aug. 20, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister and Revolutionary Council member Sadoun Hammadi arrived in Moscow for two days of urgent talks, labeled by Moscow as “consultations,” with Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Belousov, who is in charge of the Soviet government task force working out the withdrawal of Soviet citizens from Iraq and Kuwait, and Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov. Aware that time was running out before the Anglo-Americans began hostilities, the Soviet military daily Krasnaya Zvezda carried a Gulf crisis commentary on Aug. 19, ominously entitled “On the Brink of War.” “One careless step . . . is separating the world from a new war in the Middle East,” it warned. The blame for the new war was placed squarely on Britain and the U.S.A.: “Some hot-heads support carrying out a preventive strike against the Iraqi forces.” That same day, all Soviet press carried front-page pictures, of a type never seen before, of President Gorbachov in the Odessa Military District, with Defense Minister Marshal Dmitri Yazov at his side, reviewing and talking to the troops.

Both Shevardnadze and Ryzhkov told Hammadi, as reported by TASS Aug. 21, that the only way to avoid early war was for Iraq to comply with the U.N. Security Council resolutions and withdraw its forces from Kuwait and end the annexation. Ryzhkov was quoted as “having insisted on the peaceful recreation of the relations” as they had existed “prior to Aug. 2,” i.e., before Iraq had invaded Kuwait. A press briefing by Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Yuri Gremitskikh stressed the same point, that Hammadi had been told “in all clarity” that “the only honorable way out of the crisis” was for Iraq to comply with the U.N. Security Council resolutions and allow foreigners to leave the country.

On Aug. 21-22, as Hammadi was leaving Moscow, special envoy Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi ambassador to Washington, arrived in Moscow for urgent talks with Shevardnadze and Ryzhkov. In the midst of these talks, Shevardnadze rushed to meet U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock to pass on a letter to U.S. Secretary of State James Baker only hours before Bush began his Kennebunkport session with Defense Secretary Richard Cheney and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After Matlock, Shevardnadze saw the Egyptian ambassador, and then resumed talks with Prince Bandar.

While all these Moscow talks were going non-stop, Soviet Foreign Ministry special Middle East envoy Mikhail Sitennko was touring the Arab world, feverishly trying to put together a joint Soviet-Arab mediation effort that could at least postpone the outbreak of war in the Gulf.

On Aug. 22, Moscow, apparently convinced, following the Bush speech in Kennebunkport, that war was close and that all Soviet appeals to the U.S.A. had fallen on deaf ears, stepped up pressure on Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait as the only means, given the U.S. attitude, of stopping war. Ryzhkov issued a decree to all Soviet ministries to cease all financial and economic activities with Iraq.

The Ryzhkov decree was followed by a joint statement issued by Yuri Gremitskikh, for the Foreign Ministry, and by a spokesman for the Soviet Defense Ministry, that the Soviet Union will send no more military advisers to Iraq; that the current number of Soviet “military experts,” whom Moscow vehemently denied are advisers, stands at only 193,
and that these will be withdrawn and not replaced as their contract terms end.

The Soviet Defense Ministry was responding to a hysteric­
barage in leading Western newspapers, such as the Brit­
ish Daily Telegraph, which alleged that Russia has “3,000-
4,000 military advisers” in Iraq. In fact, the 193 remaining
represent less than 10% of the original total of some 3,000
present in Iraq as recently as 1987.

This joint statement also introduced the next plank in
Moscow’s attempt to buy more time before war erupts. The
two spokesmen disclosed that the evacuation of all Soviet
citizens from Kuwait had been completed, and that the evacu­
ation of the 9,000 Soviet citizens remaining in Iraq is to
commence Aug. 26. The unspoken hope was that Washing­
ton would at least refrain from military action while Soviet
citizens were being evacuated, and thus put off military ac­tion until September.

On Aug. 23, Moscow announced that its Middle East special
envoy, Sitenko, would be arriving Aug. 24 in Baghdad. Here
again, the hope was that with Sitenko in Baghdad, the United
States would refrain from attacking.

Odessa speech: a turning point

The Gorbachov speech to officers and men of the Odessa
Military District announced a strategic shift in Soviet policy
to deal with the North-South wars in the 1990s that a Gulf
war would unleash. Only a tiny portion of the speech, where
he condemned Iraq’s invasion and occupation of Kuwait as
“creating a dangerous chain reaction for the entire world”
and for having committed a “breach of trust” against the
Soviet Union, was reported in Western media.

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