

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 Sitenko 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 hysterical barrage in leading Western newspapers, such as the British *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 evacuation of the 9,000 Soviet citizens remaining in Iraq is to commence Aug. 26. The unspoken hope was that Washington 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 Mideast 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.

Gorbachov, however, stressed in the strongest terms that only the Arab states themselves, their "regional organizations," and/or the U.N. had the right to impose a solution. Thus, he indirectly, but emphatically, attacked any Anglo-American-led unilateral move.

Gorbachov, with Marshal Yazov standing beside him, announced that a "military reform" had "already begun" to change the structure of the Soviet Armed Forces to deal with the 1990s prospect of wars along the entire southern periphery of the Soviet Union, given that because of "the deep, positive changes in Europe," the "Cold War has subsided." He introduced this section of his speech by saying, "We are heading toward a new quality of mutually connected military policies of governments, out of which will be decided, to a certain degree, whether there will be a world war." Gorbachov was giving the perspective of danger over the medium term, as was made clear in a following passage: "The immediate danger of war being conducted against the Soviet Union has gone. At the same time this does not mean we don't have to have powerful, modern military forces."

Gorbachov asked rhetorically what the new restructuring means, giving a prompt answer: "For this we need up-to-date facts to evaluate the military doctrine and military activities

of the U.S.A., other NATO countries, Japan, China, Iran, Pakistan, India, Arab states, Israel, and countries of South-east Asia. . . . We have to know exactly the plans of these countries" in developing their military forces "during the 1990s, and from that we have to define the tasks and goals for securing the defense of the U.S.S.R."

He stressed that the answers to these questions will determine the size of the Soviet Armed Forces and the strategic direction of their deployment.

The fact that this speech has received no attention in the West underscores the future danger of miscalculation by the Anglo-Americans. While Gorbachov was clearly ruling out any knee-jerk military response to war in the Gulf, he was stating that Moscow would not hesitate to defend its vital interests, to use military forces in wars, begun by others, in the developing sector close to home.

Gorbachov emphasized this point in the concluding part of his speech where he announced that "in September" (and given the imminent pre-war situation in the Gulf, one can assume he meant Sept. 1 at the latest), the Soviet Defense Council, which he leads as Commander-in-Chief, would be in constant session to "evaluate and discuss all questions of military activities and structures of the Armed Forces." Gorbachov's stress of the "renewed role of the Council," gave away a sense that there is a vast increase in the military's influence on policymaking.

Marshal Yazov's speech in Odessa, printed in *Krasnaya Zvezda* Aug. 19 alongside Gorbachov's, directly blamed the United States for the hot spots erupting or about to erupt: "We don't have the right to become weak. On the planet are not only remaining, but appearing new hot spots, which under certain conditions can turn into a global conflict. Today, such a point appears in the region of the Middle East. And, one should not forget Grenada and Panama."

Germany: key to war avoidance

The Gorbachov speech made it clear that the Soviet leader views the new cooperative relationship with a united Germany as the key to war avoidance. He announced that "On the European continent, as I have already said, are taking place deep, positive changes." Gorbachov stressed the unification of Germany and "our positive attitude towards this." He added: "We are looking with optimism at the future of German-Soviet relations . . . [to] have normal, good-neighborly relations with this great nation in the interests of the people of both countries, of Europe, and of the whole world."

No other country was singled out for such total praise. The new relationship with Germany was clearly presented as the war avoidance counterpoint to the deadly perils emanating in the Gulf and future hot spots.

These statements also disclose the most crucial component of the new Soviet strategy. Anglo-American attempts to sabotage the new relationship to Germany will mean crossing a trip-wire.