

Soviets gain a new foothold in Europe

by Rainer Apel

"The biggest danger implied in the potential Gulf war is that it could provoke a military coup in Moscow," warned Gerhart Baum, vice chairman of the liberal Free Democrats in Germany, two weeks before war broke out in the Persian Gulf. Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher likewise warned in a commentary published Jan. 6 that the parallel escalation of the Gulf and Baltic crises was playing into the hands of "regressive forces" in the Soviet Union. This would have its effect on the political climate in Europe, and specifically on relations between the Soviets and Germans, Genscher declared.

Politicians in Bonn privately expressed fear that the increasing influence of the Soyuz group on Moscow politics would delay Soviet ratification of the treaty on German unification that was signed on Sept. 12, 1990. The restoration of full German sovereignty and the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops from Germany is directly dependent on the ratification of that treaty.

What can be witnessed now, indeed, is the start of a heavy Soviet blackmail campaign directed against the Germans, whose military status has been significantly weakened by the massive transfer of American, British, and French war-fighting resources from German bases to the Gulf war zone. Further, the states of Eastern Europe, because of the Gulf crisis, are at Moscow's mercy for oil deliveries now. The rise of anti-American tones in the growing anti-war movement in Europe, gives the Kremlin another free ride, to come a step closer to its old strategic aim of dominating Europe.

European defenses depleted

With the United States bogged down in a protracted war in the Gulf, Bush has handed Moscow a strategic windfall in the most important global theater of all. The crippling of the West's combat capabilities has created a nightmarish defense situation in western Central Europe.

The vast amounts of munitions of all sorts that have already been and will be transferred to the Gulf, were the stockpiles for keeping up deterrence against Soviet attack and blackmail. Half of the American ground combat forces based in Germany have been sent to the Gulf, nearly all combat helicopters, and about three-quarters of all combat aircraft. Maintenance crews, the air defense units, and other specialists have been redeployed to Saudi Arabia. The drawing-down of these stockpiles and manpower in the combat units to well below the minimal amount required to defend

Europe, has created a security vacuum in Germany most of all, singling that country out for Soviet political blackmail.

Will Russian troops stay?

Taking full advantage of this situation, Moscow has begun a blackmail game over the issue of troop stationing. The talks with Poland on the envisaged withdrawal of 50,000 Soviet soldiers were abruptly called off by the Kremlin, without explanation. A phony inspection tour of Soviet bases in eastern Germany was then arranged for Leonid Sharin, chairman of the armed services committee of the Supreme Soviet, who "discovered" that the withdrawal of the 360,000 soldiers of the Western Group of Forces from German soil would take more than the four years projected in the German-Soviet agreements on that issue. Seconded by Army General V. Grebenyuks of the WGF, Sharin told journalists in Potsdam on Jan. 15 that there were "problems difficult to overcome in the short run."

Next, the question of costs has been raised by Moscow. An "accelerated" withdrawal from Germany would cost more, and the burden had to be shared by the German government, the Soviets argued. This creates a trap for the Germans: If they don't pay, they risk a delay in withdrawal of Soviet troops; if they do, they free Moscow for its military buildup in the three Baltic republics.

The pain that situation caused in the German government was demonstrated in the unfortunate appeal Chancellor Helmut Kohl made to the Baltic leaders to "take 1,000 small steps and not provoke the central government in Moscow, instead of trying 10 big steps and risking a backlash." Naturally, the Baltic movements didn't pay any attention to this, because Moscow's aggressive actions are destroying all hopes of such slow and patient progress.

Also the Poles got a full blast of the chilly wind that is blowing from Moscow, in a declaration by Gen.-Col. Viktor Dubinin, commander of the Soviet Northern Group of Forces. Dubinin, as reported in the newspaper of the Northern Group, *Znamya i Pobeda*, said there was no justified reason to speed up the talks on Soviet withdrawal from Poland. "I want to stress that until there is a full withdrawal of the Western Group of Forces, there can be no question of the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the territory of the Republic of Poland."

The prolonged stay of Soviet troops in Poland, however, means immense leverage for additional blackmail on the front of Soviet economic relations with the Poles, especially as concerns crude oil and gas supplies from the U.S.S.R. on which the Polish economy is almost entirely dependent.

Further, the border between Lithuania and Poland, which once was designed to become an open gate for Baltic land trade into Europe, is being fortified by Soviet border troops and turned into an Iron Curtain again. With, according to Polish government estimates, 59 Soviet divisions massed on both sides of the Polish-Lithuanian border, the "Baltic gate" is now closed.