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THE SOVIET UNION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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As befits a discussion paper, the main intention here is to raise questions (though most of the points are put in declarative form) rather than provide answers. In any case, one can hardly do otherwise, given the limited evidence and the state of uncertainty about the Soviet leadership, its priorities, and the directions of its thinking on the Middle East.

In the 15 months of Andropov we saw no particular Andropov stamp on Soviet policy in this region. There were various tactical moves (e.g., the resumption of arms deliveries to Iraq, the turning away from Iran, and the placing of more advanced weapons in Syria), but those were responses to changing conditions rather than a change in fundamental policy from that of the Brezhnev era. One can predict, from the choice of Chernenko as party leader, more of the same. But as this is a transitional regime, we should be alert to signs of change.

Long-term strategy

Here some remarks on continuing strategy may be useful as a framework for discussing present and future policy. The strategy is long-term. It goes back to Khrushchev, and in some respects to Stalin and Lenin and to imperial Russian. In an elementary and abbreviated series of points it can be described as follows:

1. It is expansionist, not necessarily in the sense of a plan to seize territories and incorporate them in the USSR, but at the least in the sense of the assertion of Soviet power, expansion of the Soviet presence, and the bringing Soviet influence to bear on the decisions of local governments whenever Soviet interests (as defined by Moscow) are at stake. A

southward push has existed, over many years, by the mere weight of a huge empire bordering on small, weaker states.

2. It is both defensive and offensive. There is no real distinction, since the aim of guarding Soviet security and preventing rival powers from using Middle East territory to threaten or attack the USSR is pursued by means which threaten Middle East states and seek to limit their independence of foreign policy. The Soviets see the region both as a shield against attack or encirclement and as an avenue of access to continents and seas beyond, important to the global reach of Soviet power.

3. Soviet strategy gives particular importance to the adjacent countries, Turkey and Iran, but their reduction from the status of Western allies through neutralism to alignment with the USSR is a long-term process to be steadily pursued without provoking war with the West. The Arab states, one step farther south, are less vital to the USSR but constitute a zone of opportunity for winning allies and clients and gaining military positions useful for regional and global strategy.

4. On the Arab-Israel question the USSR is on record in favor of a settlement, one based on Israel's withdrawal to the 1967 lines and the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state, and backed by great-power guarantees. That position is intended to deal the Soviets into the game, but it is doubtful that it represents their long-term strategy, because the absence of a settlement is Moscow's door to the Arab world. Conservative states like Saudi Arabia have not opened the door, but others have, and as long as the conflict goes on and the U.S. remains closely tied to Israel, the trend is

toward (a) radicalism and anti-Americanism in the Arab world, and
(b) a turning to the USSR as the countervailing superpower.

5. Soviet successes in Ethiopia, the PDRY and Afghanistan indicate a new type of client relationship based on a strong Soviet (or proxy) military presence, tighter security ties, ideological conformity and movement toward a Soviet-type political system. We may assume a Soviet strategy aimed at making these connections irreversible and at extending the pattern from these peripheral states to the core countries of the Middle East such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

6. Oil, in addition to geopolitics, draws the USSR toward Iran and the Gulf. Newly acquired military positions in Afghanistan bring Soviet power near. The Soviets, however, feel no compulsion to seize the Gulf oilfields, as they do not need that oil for their own supply--not yet anyway--and they know that the West, vitally dependent on it, would resist. Their strategy is to develop cooperation with oil-producing states, to encourage conflict between them and the West, to exploit the West's oil vulnerability, and to split Europe and Japan from the United States.

7. The Soviets constantly assert the USSR's status as a global superpower and right to recognition as such. In the Middle East, because of its location, they see this right as entitling the USSR to a more influential position than that of the U.S., and, at a minimum, to equal participation in all international efforts to deal with conflicts and crises of the region. Many a Soviet action is taken for the specific reason of showing that nothing of significance can be done by other powers without

the concurrence of the USSR.

Tactics

These seven points, obviously, do not give us the key to explain or to predict Soviet policy decisions, for the range of tactics is wide indeed. Policy is pulled in various directions by domestic pressures and priorities, by the state of global relations with rival powers, and by local and regional events. All these factors contain elements of opportunity, cost and risk. Soviet policy is pragmatic rather than determined automatically by ideology or by a fixed plan; and it tends to be reactive, not necessarily to each move by a rival power or a local ruler, but to a complex set of considerations which make clearcut policies in pursuit of established strategy difficult to find. There may be times for a positive decision to move forward (as in Afghanistan), times for living indefinitely with an unsatisfactory situation (as with both the Shah's and Khomeini's Iran), and times when it is necessary to accept setbacks and losses (as in Egypt).

Certain considerations, concepts and methods, however, offer some guidelines on Soviet tactics. One is the desire to avoid situations and conflicts that could lead to nuclear war. That does not mean the Soviets will not back up their diplomacy with military power; or can be counted on to back down in the face of American military power; or that they will not gamble on America's reluctance to risk war. It means that they themselves will not lose sight of the risks.

The Soviets have been cautious in making commitments to take military action in future contingencies. Their security treaties with Egypt, Iraq and Syria left open precisely what the USSR would do in case its ally became

involved in war. Moscow's record in the Arab-Israel wars of 1967, 1973 and 1982 is one of unwillingness to commit Soviet forces even to save a client from defeat. Would it be the same with the new-type allies like Ethiopia and the PDRY? Would Moscow intervene militarily to save those regimes from being overthrown by domestic or foreign enemies? Probably not, unless two conditions, which were present in the case of Afghanistan, were met: (a) the heavy engagement of Soviet prestige, and (b) the near certainty that there would be no counteraction by the U.S. The likely political setbacks in the Middle East and the third world generally, a factor underestimated in the case of Afghanistan, might be an added reason against using Soviet forces. Methods of lower risk (e.g., use of Cuban troops) might do the job at lower political cost and military risk.

Another thread running through the Soviet approach in the Middle East is that the two superpowers, although deadly rivals, can at times act together, without war, to deal with a crisis, more or less disregarding what the rest of the world thinks about it. This idea flourished in the Brezhnev period of detente, even though it cannot be said to have worked in practice, and could appear again. Nor is the idea of agreed, though not necessarily permanent, spheres of influence foreign to Soviet thinking.

The concept of control, which for Stalin was absolute and for his successors more relative, remains a key to Soviet conduct. In developing relations with Middle East states the Soviets are always seeking to get levers of control into their own hands, so that these states will not act contrary to Soviet interests. The effort goes forward continuously: though military aid and training programs, internal security systems, economic

ties, covert activities, and dealings with individual local leaders. Where control is imperfect, as is the case with most Soviet allies and clients in the region, not only may Soviet policies be ignored or thwarted; those of the allied partner may give the USSR real risks and hard choices. The Soviets are wary of committing their government unreservedly to the support of allies whose policies they do not control (for example, Syria), but have the dilemma that if they do not give such commitments and support, they run the risk of losing the ally, either by a change of policy or a change of regime.

A related question concerns instruments. Communist parties are the most reliable instruments, but the Soviets learned long ago that in the Middle East the local Communist parties were too weak to be of much use in exerting influence or gaining access to power. Under Khrushchev the preferred approach was to establish a working alliance with cooperative or complaisant non-Communist movements or regimes on a basis of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism. Thus, nationalism or "Arab socialism" or Islam might be harnessed to Soviet aims, at least until real ideological solidarity could develop. Sometimes the local Communists were accepted as minor partners in nationalist regimes; sometimes they were persecuted and outlawed, sacrificed by Moscow on the altar of reasons of state. But a real dilemma remained. In the absence of control by Moscow, nationalist regimes could turn against the Soviet connection just as they could turn against local Communist parties. Hence the unwillingness of the Soviets entirely to abandon the latter. In some situations where persecution of communists has been a sign that governments were drifting away from the Soviet connection, or stressing their independence of it, as in Iraq and

Iran, the Soviets have made known their displeasure. They do wish to preserve Communist parties as assets for the future.

The regional picture

When we look at current issues on which the USSR will be making decisions, we see three overlapping zones: Iran and the Gulf, including the Arabian peninsula and Red Sea area; the Levant, including the ramifications of the Arab-Israel conflict; and the Mediterranean. The Soviets are aware of the interconnections. They try to exploit the Palestine question to their advantage in the Gulf, just as they try to exploit unrest in the Gulf to further their aims in the Levant and the Mediterranean. It is not apparent, however, that they have at this stage a coordinated regional strategy. For the present and near future they are dealing with two separate clusters of problems which center on relations with two individual states, Iran and Syria.

In other countries Soviet policy is likely to be in the nature of a holding action, waiting for more favorable opportunities. In the Mediterranean they will maintain their naval power, attempt to repair relations with Egypt, take advantage (with due caution) of Khaddafi's nuisance value, keep up a combination of blandishment and pressure on Turkey, exploit the incipient neutralism of Papandreou's Greece, and try to draw Yugoslavia closer to the Soviet block. But until some of these prospects look better, a forward policy in the Mediterranean is not likely. The same is true, in general terms, in the westward-leaning or "moderate" Arab countries (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Gulf states) where Moscow has to get a foot in the door before it can accomplish anything. For the present the

major decisions will come in the context of the Iran-Iraq war and the Syria-Lebanon-Israel-Palestine complex; there, even if the Soviets do not contemplate initiatives of their own, the need for decisions will be forced upon them by events.

The Gulf region

The salient fact about Iran has been the inability of the Soviet Union to get a foothold in that country. The revolution of 1978-79 itself, of course, brought rewards to the USSR in the form of the elimination of American influence. But the Soviets hoped for more. From the start they made known their approval and support of the Khomeini regime, since it was in power, had kicked out the Americans and was humiliating America, and might be drawn closer to Moscow the more it was shunned by the West. The rationale for supporting Islamic fundamentalists, for Communist and third-world consumption, was that they were anti-imperialists and were expressing the revolutionary aspirations of the masses.

This Soviet position did not change while the triumphant clericals were consolidating their grip and eliminating the secular, nationalist and Marxist-Islamic leaders and movements which had been their allies in the revolution. It has not been entirely abandoned despite strong measures by the regime that were clearly anti-Soviet (open support of Afghan rebels and tolerance of Afghan demonstrations in Tehran, expulsion of Soviet diplomats and closing of consulates and cultural institutions, shifts in position on the price and transport of Iranian gas to the USSR, and especially the outlawing of the Tudeh party and the persecution and prosecution of its leaders).

The policy of playing up to Khomeini, however, has obviously failed. Public criticism has been escalating on both sides, and Soviet publications have revised earlier estimates of the nature of the Iranian regime. Are there alternatives? No doubt Moscow has worked on the possibility of using other elements in Iran that might dilute or supplant the present clerical regime (mujaheddin, oil workers, military men, Kurds or other national minorities), looking toward a situation of uncertainty and struggle for power after Khomeini. But Khomeini seems to be immortal, and there is no early prospect that the regime will give way to such elements even when he is gone. As long as a sovereign Iran fiercely asserts its independence, the Soviets have no easy way to exploit its anti-American stance or to acquire a strong or dominant influence. The one unpredictable factor, with a prospect both of dangers and of possible gains for Moscow, is Iran's war with Iraq.

In the past year and one half the USSR has shifted its position somewhat on the Iran-Iraq war. The initial thinly disguised tilt to Iran's side, based on the greater importance of that country to Soviet geopolitical interests, has been abandoned. Delivery of arms to Iraq, halted in the early stages of the war, were resumed in 1982. The Soviets are clearly trying to limit Iraq's rapprochement with the West, without cutting ties with Iran. But the significant fact is that, with all this maneuvering, the USSR has not profited by the war, has not been called upon to play a mediating role on the Tashkent model, would like to see the war ended but has not been able to do anything about it.

One possibility, perhaps an outside one, is worth considering.

Suppose that Iran wins a decisive military victory and brings on a panic in the Arab world; or that Iraq makes desperate all-out attacks on Iran's oil installations, and Iran tries to close the Gulf to oil shipments; and that the U.S. is drawn into military action against Iran to protect Saudi Arabia or to keep the Gulf open. The Soviets might well send military forces into Iran, either in answer to an invitation or on their own, in order to counter U.S. military moves in the south. In doing so they would be following historic precedent and also would be carrying through on Brezhnev's warning issued in November 1978.

A further question concerning Iran should be addressed. Does the USSR encourage, support or gain from Iran's revolutionary and terrorist activity in the Arab world and elsewhere? It is difficult to give a clear answer. Moscow may have an interest in the destabilization of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf countries, and in undermining U.S. policy in Lebanon. On the other hand, while Soviets applaud acts which discredit the U.S. and its clients, they believe in controlled violence, not in violence per se or the random spectaculars of Shiite fanatics, and they have no reason to feel satisfied with what they have seen of militant Islam in action, in Iran or Afghanistan or elsewhere.

The Levant

In the eastern Mediterranean area the United States, since the war of 1973, has been the primary great-power actor, mover and mediator, although it can scarcely be said to have been in control of events in the Arab-Israel zone or in Lebanon. Its position has been superior to

that of the USSR, especially since the shift of Egypt from one camp to the other. The U.S. has had three main aims: (a) to build and maintain a barrier against the Soviet Union through maintenance of a strong military posture and through bonds of military and political cooperation with key states of the area, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel; (b) to bring about negotiated settlements between Israel and Arab neighbors, in order to bring greater stability to the area; and (c) to solve the crisis of Lebanon on the basis of the withdrawal of foreign forces (Syrian and Israeli) and establishment of a viable, independent Lebanese government.

Current Soviet aims are, crudely put, the frustration of those American aims. The Soviets condemn the Camp David accords and the Reagan plan for negotiations on Palestine, back the Arab rejections, and wring all the advantages they can out of the themes of American imperialism and Israeli aggression. In Lebanon it is not clear what they want other than to discredit America and to get U.S., other Western and Israeli forces out of the country and out of a position to influence developments there.

Propaganda, however, is not policy. The Soviets' problem in recent years has been a paucity of allies and of effective instruments. They have been patrons of Syria and of the PLO, without being able to control, coordinate or direct their leaders or the various factions. The PLO has been battered by Israel and by Syria, with the USSR in the role of distressed but important spectator. Syria's action has confirmed Syrian control over a substantial part of the PLO and pushed the other (Arafat) part toward the Arab moderates and the West. Syria itself, which for years has had a special place in Moscow's plans, has now taken on even greater importance in view of the defection of Egypt, the drifting away of Iraq, and the

failure to make headway with Saudi Arabia or Iran. Syria is the only effective ally, the one state on which and through which the USSR can make its influence felt in the Middle East. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the Soviet-Syrian relationship, to see its advantages and its limitations for the advancement of Soviet aims.

In the security field the two states cooperate, but Syria is no puppet on Soviet strings. There is not an automatic and binding military alliance. The treaty of 1980 provides that, when a critical situation arises, the parties will consult on what should be done and take steps to remove the threat and restore peace. In other words, each retains its freedom of decision. What the two states have is a working arrangement which serves some of their respective interests. The USSR provides Syria with arms, military advice and training, some economic help, and general political and propaganda support. Syria provides the USSR with air and naval facilities and with a fulcrum for exercising political and military power in the region. Ideology in the form of anti-Western and anti-Zionist themes gives a semblance of common faith, but Soviet communism has no attraction for Syria's ruling Ba'th party, which does not share real power with the local Communist party.

The USSR and Syria consult frequently. The degree to which they coordinate strategy varies according to time and circumstance. Both have opposed practically every aspect of U.S. and Israeli policy in the region. But the Soviets have not liked Syria's splitting of the PLO, they accept the existence of Israel as an independent state, and they have not agreed with all of Syria's moves in Lebanon. The Lebanese affair, indeed, has

tested the relationship and may provide a means of judging Soviet policy and commitments.

What is the Syrian game in Lebanon, and what is the Soviet game in relation to the Syria game? The general view from Damascus is that Lebanon is part of historic Syria and was artificially carved out of it by the French; independence was the legacy of the French mandate. That does not mean that Syria is bent on annexation, but at the least it seeks a preponderant influence or de facto protectorate. Because those who oppose Syrian ambitions (Christians and others in Lebanon, Israel, America, France, rival Arab states) have been unable individually or in combination to thwart them, Assad appears to be able to set the conditions under which a Lebanese government will be formed and will function. The Syrians accept a de facto partition, with autonomy for the Maronite heartland and an indefinite Israeli occupation in the south. But theirs is the decisive voice now and perhaps for some time. These gains, moreover, should increase Syria's clout in dealing with the Palestine question, whether the script being written there is for negotiation or for continued conflict.

As for the USSR, its influence reached a low point with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the losses inflicted on the Soviet-armed Syrians by the American-armed Israelis, and the exit of Arafat and co. from Beirut. The Soviet Union did nothing to help or save the PLO; it shared the humiliation of Syria; it seemed to have lost interest in doing anything positive as long as the conflict did not go beyond Lebanon, in which it had no vital interest. The eventual response, however, was the not unfamiliar one: to pour more and better weapons into the hands of Arab friends, in this

case Syria. To the extent that this support strengthened Assad's hand and contributed to his later political victory in Lebanon, the USSR gained in prestige and influence. It gained especially from the frustration of Israeli and American policies and the humiliating retreat of the U.S. Marines from Beirut.

A Syrian-dominated Lebanon, however, is not an unalloyed boon to the Soviets. They probably preferred the Lebanon in which they could play their own hand with the Lebanese and with the PLO. Now it all may depend on relations with Damascus.

This past year can have been no easy and comfortable passage for the Soviets. Their decisions on arms deliveries were intended to buck up the Syrians in a difficult moment, to keep Assad's loyalty to Moscow, and to deter military moves by the U.S. They chose to include in the package certain advanced weapons, such as SAM-5 and SSM-22 missiles, with extended range beyond Syria and Lebanon and threatening to high-flying U.S. aircraft, to vessels of the 6th Fleet, and to Israel. In a situation where civil war was going on in Lebanon, with Syrian and Israeli troops facing each other on an active front there, with American and European forces stationed in Beirut and American naval power off shore, these were bold Soviet decisions. They could have brought about escalation of hostilities and great-power involvement through the decisions of others. The Syrians might wish to flex their new muscles. Israel might decide to take out missile batteries (even though manned by Soviet personnel) deemed an intolerable threat to national security. American sea and air power, to the accompaniment of strong U.S. statements about the Syrian-Soviet threat, was spraying fire into the

Lebanese hills held by Syrian force.

One can only guess about the Soviet's reasoning. It is highly unlikely that they were encouraging Syria to provoke hostilities with Israel or America or had offensive plans of their own. They were not about to abandon the time-honored axiom of avoiding situations of military confrontation with the U.S. in the Middle East. There was nothing, apparently, in the internal Soviet situation, in political or economic pressures or in the competition for leadership, to make for a policy of adventurism in the Middle East. The Soviet leaders undoubtedly knew the risks and found them tolerable. They evidently limited their own commitments to the defense of Syria proper, even though they had Soviet military personnel in Lebanon. One might reasonably conclude that they set a high priority on strengthening Syria's hand, had faith in Assad's caution or had means of assuring it, and counted on American ineffectuality and Israeli fatigue; and if that is so they were proved right.

The Soviet position in Syria, of course, has no guarantee of permanence. Friction has existed and will exist, because Soviet and Syrian interests differ. Assad could turn elsewhere. He could be thrown out, and the Soviet connection with him. As of the moment, however, the connection has paid off for both parties.

Conclusion

A year and some months ago Karen Dawisha assessed the Soviet position in the Middle East as weak and not likely to improve, in view of certain

basic changes that had taken place since the heady days of the 1960s, notably the rise of oil power in the hands of local states and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism as a powerful cultural and political force. The Soviet position, as we have noted, has recovered somewhat from the low point of 1982. The Soviets may now see a better chance of making good their claim to participate in international efforts to deal with Middle East affairs, partly because the U.S. has so little to show for its own efforts, partly because Soviet-supported Syria has managed to place itself at the center of Lebanese and Arab-Israeli issues. That is a tactically favorable situation. It may be no more than that.

The Soviet Union, as a global power, will never disinterest itself from the Middle East, and the persistence of regional conflicts there will inevitably offer new opportunities in the future. But new Soviet leaders may be more inclined to question the cost of trying to play the Arab card in the manner of the past. More and more the states of the region, rather than the superpowers, seem to hold the keys to the future. The Soviet Union may be able to cause plenty of trouble for Western interests. It may exercise a veto power on international efforts for political settlements and for greater stability. But unless the Soviet Union, with its weak economic and cultural appeal, finds a way to translate military power into political influence, it stands little chance of achieving the long-coveted position of preponderance.