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THE NATURE OF GROWING SOVIET POWER  
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

15 October 1973

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THE NATURE OF GROWING SOVIET POWER  
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

by

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

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## ABSTRACT

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There has been a numerical increase and qualitative improvement in Soviet naval units in the Mediterranean in recent years. There is disagreement, however, over whether or not the Soviets have upset the military balance in the Mediterranean. In examining the relative power of the opposing alliances in the Mediterranean, this paper considers all the forces which would probably be available to NATO and to the Soviet Union in that area. In addition, it considers geopolitical factors including the Montreux Convention, opposing naval strategies, and the current political situation in the area. The data was gathered using a literary search. The paper concludes that Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean are heavily outnumbered and subject to isolation, and that the trend in force development in that area is decidedly against the USSR. However, the current Arab-Israeli conflict does offer the Soviets the possibility of upsetting the balance on NATO's southern flank.

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## THE NATURE OF GROWING SOVIET POWER IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

In 1968, the Chairman of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives requested a study be made on the changing strategic naval balance between the USSR and the US. The study, conducted under the chairmanship of Admiral H. D. Felt, USN (Ret.), concluded that the leaders of the Soviet Union had made a far-reaching decision to enormously increase the USSR's strategic mobility and that within five years the Soviets would have the capability for naval intervention in the most distant regions of the world.<sup>1</sup> In discussing the growing Soviet power in the Mediterranean, the study noted that in 1964 there were no more than three or four Soviet naval vessels in the Mediterranean and that in four years that number had grown to forty. The growing Soviet Mediterranean Squadron (SOVMEDRON) was then already regarded as powerful enough to influence weak and unstable nations, to support Egypt and Syria directly, to threaten oil shipments to Western Europe and to expose Greece and Turkey to pressure. Furthermore, the study suggested that the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean was becoming a less credible deterrent.<sup>2</sup>

Five years have now passed, and the strength of the SOVMEDRON continues to be trumpeted by official<sup>3</sup> and unofficial sources.<sup>4</sup> The US Sixth Fleet has even been described by a former Commander, Admiral Isaac Kidd Jr., as walking "the tightrope" of adequacy.<sup>5</sup> However, a contrary view appears to be held by Secretary of Defense Elliot L. Richardson, who stated before the House Armed Services Committee recently that:

Although the Soviets have made significant improvements in their Navy, there remain some basic deficiencies . . . . The Soviets must contend with a paucity of all-weather ports, a lack of air cover when the surface fleet operates far from the Soviet homeland, and insufficient open-ocean replenishment.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to examine the current status of the Soviet power in the Mediterranean in order to determine whether their capabilities have significantly increased over the past five years, as anticipated by the Felt study, or whether their position is still so deficient, as suggested by Secretary Richardson, that intervention by their forces in local disputes might only invite their destruction. The subject will be approached from the point of view of the "total force concept." Not only will US forces be considered but also those of our Allies in the Mediterranean. This approach will conflict with many past comparisons in which only US and USSR forces were considered. It is soundly based, however, on current US strategy as expressed in the Nixon Doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

#### GEOPOLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout history the Mediterranean has been a stage for conflict. The powers who have dominated it have enjoyed easy access to both raw materials and markets and have prospered.

During the past decade, the Mediterranean has again become a focal area for contending powers. The NATO sea lines of communication are threatened by an increasing Soviet naval presence. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Andrew J. Goodpaster, has identified the threat as of great strategic importance to the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>8</sup>

Several compelling reasons have been advanced to explain why the Soviet Union chooses to confront NATO in the Mediterranean. The most well known explanation is that, historically, the Russians have sought to secure warm-water ports and free exit to the world's oceans. But, perhaps a more relevant reason for Soviet interest in the Mediterranean, and one completely compatible with the Soviet ideological commitment to the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary struggle, is that the Mediterranean washes the shores of some eighteen sovereign nations with a population of over 300 million people.<sup>9</sup> It is a sensitive area characterized by widespread economic under-development, intermittent war between the Arabs and Israelis, friction between Greece and Turkey, political instability in Italy, French indecision over participation in the NATO military structure, and the lure of vast oil deposits.

So far the Soviet Union has not been able to significantly exploit this seemingly chaotic situation. However, her economic aid, military assistance, and moral support for the Arabs all seem to be designed to maintain tension in the area. Simultaneously, she continues to build up the strength of her Mediterranean Squadron.

But putting historical and ideological reasons aside, the economic vulnerability of NATO's southern flank would easily justify a strong Soviet effort in the Mediterranean. Some 2,600 merchant ships are in the Mediterranean on any one day, and they move some 160 million tons of cargo each year.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, some ninety percent of the total quantity of goods moving into and out of the three countries on NATO's southern flank (Italy, Greece and Turkey) is transported via Mediterranean sea lanes.<sup>11</sup>

A widely-held formula for describing the balance of power in the Mediterranean simply equates the combat units of the SOVMEDRON and the US Sixth Fleet and either ignores the political geography of the region or shrugs it off. One high NATO authority has stated:

Admittedly, Gibraltar and the Sea of Marmara would be under NATO control in the event of hostilities, and the Suez is, for the time being, closed. But these choke points have diminished in importance from the defensive point of view in that there are now powerful Russian forces in being continuously on either side of them.<sup>12</sup>

The make-up of the Soviet forces in the Mediterranean will be examined in a later section. Here, however, it is important to fully appreciate the severe limitation that the Turkish, as well as the Gibraltar, Straits place on Soviet operations.

It is difficult to imagine a more ideal site for an anti-submarine warfare (ASW) defense than at the Straits of Gibraltar. Britain still retains its base there, and the US maintains a large naval base 50 miles west of the Straits at Rota. At their narrowest point the Straits are only  $8\frac{1}{2}$  miles wide. All the NATO navies have modern ASW systems, and the Soviets do not have any bases within thousands of miles. To exploit just such situations, the US in the current fiscal year will spend almost a billion dollars on equipment for three different under-sea surveillance systems and two new types of ASW aircraft.<sup>13</sup> In time of war, it would be extremely hazardous for the Soviet submarines to even approach the Gibraltar Straits.

The problem posed to Soviet naval movements by the Turkish Straits is more complicated but equally as discouraging for the Soviets. A glance at a map is sufficient to understand the severe disadvantage

which the Soviet Union would be under in any conflict in the Mediterranean area. Not only must her Black Sea Fleet and merchant marine pass through the 200 mile long Straits (Straits of Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus), but, having done this, it would still be subject to attack while threading through the Aegean Sea. Obviously, seizure of the Straits would not achieve egress to the Mediterranean. A long and bitter land, sea, and air campaign would have to be fought to clear Greek and Turkish Thrace, Western Anatolia, the Greek Mainland, and the Aegean Islands to include Crete. The geography of the region would present the Soviet Union with a war-time nightmare. In peacetime, the situation is equally handicapping because Soviet ships can pass through the Straits only under the conditions of the Montreux Convention of 1936. The effect of the 1936 Convention on Soviet power and flexibility justifies a brief summary of its restrictive provisions.

#### MONTREUX CONVENTION<sup>14</sup>

The stated purpose of the Montreux Convention is to regulate transit and navigation in the Straits within the framework of Turkish and Black Sea States security. However, the history of the Straits, from the signing of the first Straits Convention in 1841<sup>15</sup> and continuing today when NATO, in fact, guarantees Turkish security, clearly shows the guiding principle to be that no state hostile to European (now including the US) interests should control the Straits.

Although only ten nations, including the USSR, were signatories to the 1936 Convention, it is universally observed. Also, none of the

signatories has ever used the provisions of the treaty for holding a new conference for the purpose of drawing up a new Convention. Even the Soviet Union, which has made unofficial demands over the years, has remained silent on the matter since 1966 when she protested that missiles aboard US destroyers entering the Straits violated the arms limitations of the Convention. It is, perhaps, an indication that the Soviet Union does not regard herself as strong as some in the West imagine her to be. In fact, she may be perfectly content to use the Convention for its stated purpose - to safeguard her security as a Black Sea Power - and not to risk a new conference on the Straits and the possibility of non-Black Sea naval elements of NATO being stationed on the Black Sea.

Simply stated, the relevant provisions of the Convention are:

1. Merchant vessels enjoy complete freedom of transit in time of peace. However, to facilitate collection of taxes or charges by Turkey, merchant ships must provide their name, nationality, tonnage, destination, and last port of call. (Art. 2)

2. In time of war or threat of war, Turkey being a belligerent, the passage of warships is left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish Government. Also, only merchant ships not belonging to a hostile country would then still enjoy freedom of transit. (Arts. 5, 20, and 21)

3. Black Sea Powers will provide the Turkish Government eight days notice of the intent to move warships through the Straits. In the case of non-Black Sea Powers, it is "desirable" that fifteen days notice be given. (Art. 13)

4. Not more than nine vessels of all foreign navies may be in

transit through the Straits at any one time, and their aggregate tonnage shall not exceed 15,000 tons. However, Black-Sea Powers may send capital ships greater than 15,000 tons through the Straits singly if they are escorted by not more than two destroyers. (Arts. 11 and 14)

5. The aggregate tonnage of non-Black Sea naval forces in the Black Sea may not exceed 45,000 tons, and non-Black Sea Powers are limited to two-thirds of that aggregate. Warships of non-Black Sea Powers may remain in the Black Sea not more than 21 days. (Art. 18)

6. Submarines of Black Sea Powers may be sent through the Straits if constructed or purchased outside the Black Sea but only then for the purpose of joining their base in the Black Sea. Also, submarines are entitled to pass through the Straits for the purpose of being repaired outside the Black Sea. In any case, submarines must travel by day and on the surface. (Art. 12)

7. Warships may not make use of aircraft while in transit. (Art. 15)

The effect of the Convention on peacetime Soviet power in the Mediterranean is to deny them the possibility of surprise and massive reinforcement and to make the SOVIEDRON entirely dependent on the Northern and Baltic Fleets for submarine support. In wartime, with the Gibraltar Straits effectively closed by NATO ASW activity, the SOVIEDRON would be trapped in the Mediterranean.

#### NAVAL STRATEGY

Having discussed some of the geopolitical aspects of the Mediterranean area, and before examining the characteristics of the NATO and Soviet forces in that area, it will be useful to consider the opposing

naval strategies which would be employed in the event of a conflict.

NATO strategy, in general, is an open book for all, including the Soviets, to read. It is based on sufficient conventional and nuclear forces to deter attack and, should this fail, to defend as far forward as possible while further efforts are made to bring hostilities to an end. Ultimately, however, the defense of Alliance territories is dependent on NATO's ability to mobilize its vast resources and reinforce the forward defense. Crucial to the strategy is the requirement to maintain sea lines of communication both to sustain the defensive forces and to insure that further reinforcements arrive where and when needed. The strategy pays particular attention to the Mediterranean, focusing on the importance of the Turkish Straits and the dependence of Western Europe on the oil resources of the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>16</sup>

Admiral Horacio Rivero, former Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe, provides us with a guarded indication of what the salient points of the naval strategy in the Mediterranean would be. He observes almost scornfully:

. . . the Soviet naval squadron is substantially inferior to that of NATO's naval forces. Furthermore, I am confident that the NATO naval and air forces could effectively neutralize major units of the Soviet surface fleet in reasonably short order . . . .<sup>17</sup>

However, he views the strong Soviet submarine fleet in the Mediterranean more soberly and sees a war of attrition in which losses would be sustained until the submarines are neutralized. Airpower, both carrier and land based, is regarded by the Admiral as the margin of superiority, and he recognizes the danger that the Soviets might secure air bases

on the North African littoral.<sup>18</sup>

With the Gibraltar and Turkish Straits closed to Soviet use (as discussed above under Geopolitical Considerations), it appears that the NATO naval strategy in the Mediterranean would be to sweep the SOVMEDRON from the seas, to reestablish an Allied mare nostrum, to encourage the nations of the Middle East and North Africa to, at least, remain neutral, and to continue the flow of oil to Western Europe.

Soviet naval strategy, not surprisingly, focuses on the weak points of NATO strategy. Marshal Sokolovskii observes in the Soviet publication Military Strategy:

. . . that up to three-fourths of all the material and personnel of the probable enemy are across the ocean . . . . 60 to 100 large transports should arrive daily at European ports and 1,500 to 2,000 ships, not counting escorts, would be en route simultaneously. . . . [Therefore,] among the primary missions of the Navy in a future war will be the disruption of enemy shipping and the interdiction of his communications lines.<sup>19</sup>

What the Soviet naval strategy would be in the Mediterranean, where reinforcement or escape would presumably be unavailable options, is not known. However, Sokolovskii suggests that because the aircraft carrier is the cornerstone of the US Navy it is essential to destroy them.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, with time and attrition on the side of NATO in the Mediterranean, it seems probable that the SOVMEDRON would attempt to do as much damage as it could before being swept away. Should the SOVMEDRON be able to achieve tactical surprise (perhaps in coordination with similar attacks elsewhere) NATO could find itself minus several carriers at the very outset of hostilities. However, as suggested above, even <sup>after</sup> this misfortune would not drastically <sup>^</sup> alter the immediate outcome in the Mediterranean.

Considering just such a situation, Admiral Arleigh Burke has asked, in the forward to a book on Soviet Naval Strategy, why the Soviets bothered to develop a navy at all. His answer is compatible with the information we have on Soviet strategy, the situation currently facing them in the Mediterranean, and the type of units that make up their Navy. In Admiral Burke's opinion, the mission of the Soviet Navy is:

. . . to defend the waters contiguous to her shore line. To support her ground forces. To conduct short-haul amphibious operations close to territory she holds. To destroy Free World merchantmen and naval ships in the event of a conventional war. To dominate the waters of her adjacent nation neighbors, and, thus, to intimidate them.

But probably primarily to provide tangible support to the psychological, political, and economic warfare, at which she has demonstrated so much adeptness under the umbrella of "peaceful coexistence." . . . The Soviet Union may hope the time will come when she can gain domination of the world in spite of not having the ability to control the seas.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE MILITARY BALANCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Growing Soviet strength in the Mediterranean has come to be regarded by many as resulting in a precarious balance between NATO and the Soviet Union in that region. The growth in the strength of the SOWMEDRON has been startling, having risen from a purely token force in 1964 to what appears now to be a normal strength of about 50 units.<sup>22</sup> When considered with the Soviet missile and air units previously based in Egypt, this force did indeed pose a serious threat to the US Sixth Fleet and other NATO Navies in the Mediterranean. However, even with the expulsion, in 1972, of the Soviet air and missile units and severe curtailment in the use of Egyptian naval facilities, the SOWMEDRON continues to be credited with remarkable destructive capability and

sustaining power.<sup>23</sup>

In the past, the usual comparison has been between the US Sixth Fleet and the SOVMEDRON. Depending on the time taken for the comparison, the figures vary from a high of 53 ships for the Sixth Fleet and 72 for the SOVMEDRON<sup>24</sup> to a low of 50 and 50, respectively.<sup>25</sup> Such a comparison is completely misleading. It does not consider the strength of other NATO fleets in the Mediterranean, the composition of the respective forces, nor the isolation of the Soviet Squadron.

A more useful comparison of naval forces in the Mediterranean would consider all the forces immediately available and which could be sustained. On the Warsaw Pact side, such a comparison would have to exclude those Black Sea Fleet units not already deployed with the SOVMEDRON as well as the Roumanian and Bulgarian Navies which do not normally operate in the Mediterranean. It is a fair assumption that Turkey would close the Straits to foreign warships should war appear imminent. In any case, it is unlikely that the Soviets would want their Black Sea Fleet in the Mediterranean, isolated and unsupportable. On the NATO side, not only must all NATO naval units belonging to Mediterranean nations be counted but also the French forces, which after all, continue to carry out exercises with the Sixth Fleet.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the US use of air and naval bases in Spain suggests that the Spanish naval forces should also be included in the comparison.

A comparison, based on the above approach, shows quite dramatically how outnumbered the Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean actually are (see Figure 1). If one considers combat units down to and

including frigates and escorts, the SOVMEDRON is outnumbered by about eight to one.

SOVIET<sup>27</sup> AND NATO<sup>28</sup> MEDITERRANEAN COMBATANTS

	SIXTH FLEET	FRANCE	ITALY	GREECE	TURKEY	SPAIN	NATO TOTAL	SOVMEDRON
Aircraft Carriers	2	2					4	
Helicopter Carriers		1				1	2	
Helicopter Cruisers		1					1	1
Cruisers, SSM & SAM	2	1	3				6	1
Cruisers		1				1	2	1
Destroyers SSM, SAM & ASW	16	17	6	8	10	13	70	10
Frigates & Escorts		29	10	4	6	8	57	
Submarines	3	19	9	3	10	4	48	10
Grand Total							190	23

FIGURE 1

On the other hand, there is certainly room to argue that the SOVMEDRON units are generally more modern, with most being SSM and SAM equipped. However, the SOVMEDRON is without any air support, ship-borne or land based. In this respect Admiral Rivero has written:

Our carrier aircraft enable us to exercise this necessary control of the air over the areas of naval operations and would also be most effective for neutralization of the opposing surface fleet which does not include a tactical air component.<sup>29</sup>

Sea power does not necessarily rest with the side possessing the most modern units. In 1940, after the fall of France, superiority in the Mediterranean passed to the Italian Fleet, large and modern, but with no aircraft carriers. The British Mediterranean Fleet, though older and inferior in numbers, possessed modern aircraft carriers and were able to drastically reduce the Italian Fleet and thus assume sea superiority.<sup>30</sup>

There are valid and sound arguments for modernizing the aging US, as well as NATO, fleets, and this is going on to the actual disadvantage of the Soviet Union. During the ten years from 1962 to 1971, naval deliveries of all classes of combatants have totaled 346 to NATO (excluding France) and 268 to the Warsaw Pact (in fact the Soviet Union). And a ratio similarly favourable to NATO continues even if deliveries for only the most recently reported five year period are considered - 176 for NATO and 140 for the WP.<sup>31</sup>

The balance in the Mediterranean goes even more heavily against the Soviet Union when planned new construction is examined. During the early and mid-70's, NATO Mediterranean nations alone (including France) will construct more new combatants (1 helicopter carrier, 2 nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines, 12 conventional submarines, 2 guided missile destroyers, 6 guided missile frigates, and 5 other frigates)<sup>32</sup> than the Soviet Union has in its entire SOVFLOT. If

Spanish construction is included. three more guided missile destroyers and two fleet submarines can be added.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, the equation for determining the future balance in the Mediterranean must account for new US construction. Of course, newly constructed US ships may not be committed to the Mediterranean. It is sufficient, therefore, to note here that the 1972 and 1973 US construction programs (11 nuclear powered attack submarines, 1 nuclear powered guided missile frigate, 14 ASW destroyers all larger in size than the USSR's Kresta II cruiser, and a number of smaller combatants and support ships) also far exceed the combatant strength of the SOVMEDRON. And, finally, the US continues to maintain and modernize its 15 active aircraft carriers and will receive its second and third nuclear powered carriers in 1974 and 1975.<sup>35</sup> The Soviet Union has yet to put into service even its first conventional aircraft carrier.

In 1971, Admiral Rivero observed that ". . . the power of the Soviet Naval Squadron [In the Mediterranean] is substantially inferior to that of NATO's naval forces."<sup>36</sup> That optimistic estimate continues to be fully justified.

#### THE POLITICAL BALANCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The key to the political balance in the Mediterranean is the Arab-Israeli dispute. Since the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, the surrounding Arab nations have been intent on its liquidation. Even though they number only 3 million, the Israelis have created an excellent army of 25,000 regulars and 52,000 conscripts and can mobilize an

additional 225,000 troops within 72 hours.<sup>37</sup> With such a potent force, and in self-defense, the Israelis have occupied relatively vast areas of former Arab land thus providing the Arabs with a unifying cause. The Soviet Union, after initially backing the new Israeli state, has strongly supported the Arab cause with military equipment, economic aid, and political influence. Should the dispute continue indefinitely, the Soviet Union, as the great-power friend of the Arabs, will be in a position to greatly influence Arab actions and to enjoy Arab support. However, should the dispute somehow be miraculously settled, the Soviet Union would lose its leverage.

The Arab leaders are anti-communist in character and intensely nationalistic; also, the markets for Arab oil are in the West. Without Arab need for Soviet support, it is unlikely that the Arabs, specifically Egypt and Syria, would continue to allow the Soviets the use of naval shore facilities. Suggestive of what could occur was the expulsion, in 1972, of the Soviet air and air-defense units and many advisors and technicians from Egypt by President Sadat, in anger over what he felt was insufficient and inadequate Soviet support.<sup>38</sup>

At the time of this writing, the Arab-Israeli dispute has again erupted into open warfare. Initial reports indicate that the Israelis will again rout the attacking Arab forces and maintain the positions achieved during the 1967 war. If this should occur, and no compromise acceptable to both sides can be reached, then, perhaps, leftist Arab leaders more sympathetic to the slower and longer range Soviet solutions might come to power. This, in turn, could lead to the expansion

of Soviet use of Egyptian and Syrian naval facilities, and to the reintroduction of Soviet air and air-defense units. Conceivably, and particularly should the Arabs suffer an especially humiliating defeat at the hands of the Israelis, facilities in Libya (the former US Wheeler Air Base) and in Algeria (the former French naval base at Mers-el-Kebir and the nearby air base at Bou-Sfer) might be made available to the Soviets.<sup>39</sup>

As Arab oil becomes more in demand by the West, such a course of action will become politically and militarily more inviting to the Arabs. Should such an expansion of Soviet base rights in North Africa occur, the worst fears expressed above by the former Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces Southern Europe would come to pass. The Soviets would have widely based air support for its SOVMEDRON, and port facilities would allow a several-fold increase in the SOVMEDRON submarine strength.

The current Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean considers the submarine threat to the region already serious:

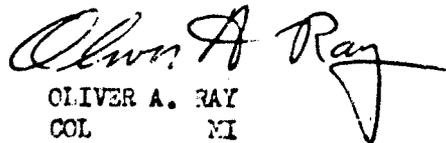
Many of the important supplies on which the Southern Region depends must transit the North Atlantic to and from America, or the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean before they even reach the Mediterranean. In these waters the Allies face in the Soviet Navy a submarine fleet many times the size of the German U-boat force at the outset of World War II. What is more, the USSR is producing new high speed nuclear submarines at a greater rate than any other power in the world.<sup>40</sup>

The Arab-Israeli dispute could provide the Soviet Union with the key to the balance of power in the Mediterranean. What geography and NATO military might have denied her may come through exploitation of the politics of the region.

## CONCLUSIONS

During the last five years, Soviet military power in the Mediterranean has continued to decline relative to NATO's. Although the average strength of the SOVMEDRON has crept up from 40 to 50 ships, and a vigorous Soviet ship construction program has provided a steady improvement in quality and capability, the SOVMEDRON continues to be outnumbered by the West in the Mediterranean by a ratio of eight to one. NATO naval ship construction programs are producing significantly more new ships than the Soviets. Furthermore, the SOVMEDRON continues to be without air support and depends on Egypt and Syria for limited shore facilities. However, perhaps the most damaging deficiency in Soviet power in the Mediterranean is the potential isolation hanging over the SOVMEDRON. Even in peacetime, its submarines must come thousands of miles from the North or Baltic Fleets; in wartime or in a time of crisis, both the Gibraltar and Turkish Straits could be sealed off thus ending any chance of rapid reinforcement or escape.

There is one bright spot in the Soviet situation, however. The Arab-Israeli dispute continues and has again recently erupted into open conflict. Vocal support and considerable military aid place the Soviet Union firmly on the Arab side, but only sufficiently, it seems, to insure a protracted conflict. If the Soviet Union can exploit this situation to the extent that the Arabs offer her unrestricted use of air and naval bases along the North African coast, then NATO might very well find the balance of power upset on her southern flank.

  
OLIVER A. RAY  
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#### FOOTNOTES

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